



safe food
CERTIFICATIONS

The Roadmap to GFSI Certification



safe food
ALLIANCE

Introduction

Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) certification. Where do we even begin? If you find yourself getting overwhelmed by all of the acronyms, regulations, and customer demands, don't worry you are not alone. GFSI certification is complicated. That's why we've created an easy guide to help you navigate GFSI certification.

In this guide you will find an introduction to GFSI, an explanation of HACCP, and guidelines to GFSI certification, all to assist you in determining which audit scheme is right for your company.

WHAT IS GFSI CERTIFICATION?

GFSI is a benchmarking organization that works to create consistency in food safety rules to allow for more effective food safety plans. The objectives of GFSI are to:

1. Reduce food safety risks by delivering equivalence and convergence between effective food safety management systems
2. Manage cost in the global food system by eliminating redundancy and improving operational efficiency
3. Develop competencies and capacity building in food safety to create consistent and effective global food systems
4. Provide a unique international stakeholder platform for collaboration, knowledge exchange and networking

GFSI stands for Global Food Safety Initiative and was created "in 2000 to find collaborative solutions to collective concerns, notably to reduce food safety risks, audit duplication and costs while building trust throughout the supply chain" <https://www.mygfsi.com/about-us/about-gfsi/what-is-gfsi.html> .



SCHEMES

Within GFSI certification, there are many “schemes” or “platforms” as they are now called to choose from. When choosing a scheme, it is important to pick the one that is going to work best for your company. Those offered under the GFSI umbrella are

- Primus GFS
- Global Aquaculture Alliance Seafood
- Global Gap
- FSSC 22000
- Global Red Meat Standard
- Canadagap
- SQF
- BRC Global Standard
- IFS International Featured Standards
- Japan Food Safety Management Association

UNDERSTANDING HACCP

THE FOUNDATION OF GFSI

HACCP, short for Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points are where it all begins. Without HACCP, you won't be successful in your food safety program, so make sure you take a class to get educated on everything there is to know about this fundamental piece of food safety. On top of being extremely helpful, HACCP training is required under many GFSI schemes.

Fun Fact *According to a study conducted by the Food Marketing Institute (FMI) and the Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA), food recalls cost companies an average of \$10 million per incident.



THE HISTORY OF HACCP

Shortly after NASA was established in 1958, the prospect of manned spaceflight raised an important concern: how could they be sure the food astronauts would be eating was safe? If food poisoning is bad on terra firma, the possibility of such an infection in a Gemini capsule could prove fatal. The process had to change. When food safety practices first began, they relied heavily on product testing. Samples would be extracted from the processed foods and tested for contamination. While useful in many ways, testing only a small portion of the product could not guarantee that the entirety of a batch of food was safe to eat. In fact, such a huge portion of each batch needed to be tested that very little final product would be left over for consumption.

As a result, NASA partnered with the US Army Laboratories and the Pillsbury Company to develop a more reliable approach to food safety. It was

decided that NASA's engineering management requirements, Critical Control Points, would be used as a guideline for this food safety initiative. Critical Control Points (CCP) were used to test weapon and engineering system reliability and by using CCPs, NASA and Pillsbury were able to hire contractors to identify and eliminate the "critical failure areas" in the food processing procedures. This new approach focused on preventing the introduction of hazards in the process of manufacturing food, rather than looking for the effects of those hazards in the finished product.

The system they developed revolutionized safe food production, and by the 1990s, would come to be the internationally recognized HACCP approach to food safety. HACCP is included in the Codex Alimentarius that is recognized by both the World Health Organization and World Trade Organization for the merit of its guidance on food safety.

UTILIZING HACCP

HACCP remains the foundation for all food safety plans because of the focus on avoiding hazards in production before the product is finalized.

This is accomplished through seven key steps:

1. Conduct a hazard analysis
2. Identify Critical Control Points
3. Establish critical limits for each critical control point
4. Establish critical control point monitoring requirements
5. Establish corrective actions
6. Establish verification procedures
7. Establish record-keeping and documentation procedures
8. Reviewing every step in the entire manufacturing process (from raw material production, procurement, and handling, to manufacturing, distribution, and consumption of the finished product) allows you to consider the potential risks for biological, chemical, and physical contamination. What you want to be able to do is identify risks and then effectively control them. That is what a HACCP plan will do for you.

One of the defining factors of a CCP is that the process has measurable results that are regularly monitored. Monitoring allows you to be proactive. The process also ensures that if your process has gone out of control by deviating from the critical limit, you will be alerted that the product is at risk and needs corrective actions. Monitoring wouldn't be possible without record keeping! Clear, consistent records make it possible to demonstrate that the food you manufacture was produced safely.

Don't forget that critical limits must be science- and evidence-based!

WHY IS A HACCP PLAN IMPORTANT?

Bottom line, proper implementation of a HACCP program will revolutionize your company. A successful HACCP plan reduces customer complaints and the likelihood of a recall by identifying and controlling potential hazards which may come from raw materials, facility processes, and the always terrorizing human error.

With a functioning HACCP plan, you achieve greater employee awareness and buy-in. Empower your employees to be part of the food safety process and show them that they too are helping to create safe food.

Last but certainly not least, HACCP principles are in alignment with the requirements of the FDA's Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) rule for food processors — Hazard Analysis and Risk-based Preventive Controls (“HARPC” or “Preventive Controls”). Although a HACCP plan does not meet all of the requirements, it meets the majority of the requirements and is the best platform from which to build an FSMA-compliant management system.



GFSI CERTIFICATION

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Global Food Safety Initiative when a customer asks for a copy of their GFSI Certificate. Because GFSI is such a large and complicated institution, it can be difficult to grasp what exactly GFSI certification means on your own.

It is most easily explained by telling the history of the organization.

THE HISTORY OF GFSI

In the 1990's, food processing and manufacturing businesses around the world began to realize that the state of food safety was not what it should be. With food supply rapidly globalizing and a string of well-publicized food safety crises, consumer confidence was falling fast. In an attempt to address the issue, the numbers of food safety audits ballooned as retailers found themselves needing food safety audits for their customers.

No good solutions were at hand.

LEADING INDUSTRY ISSUES

First-party audits presented a major conflict of interest and were not consistent from one supplier to the next

Second-party audits were expensive for retailers and onerous for suppliers who had a different audit for each customer

Third-party audits were all across the board as each type of audit had its own expectations and auditors had widely variable expertise and credentials

Recognizing this, the heads of many global corporations met in 2000 and agreed to create the Global Food Safety Initiative or GFSI. This Initiative would provide a benchmark against which third party food safety standards could be judged. The standards that were approved would be recognized and accepted by major retailers around the world.

This market-driven approach meant that just one GFSI-benchmarked audit each year could satisfy a food processor's various customers by demonstrating that they had been found acceptable by a credentialed auditor to a known standard. In English this means that with a GFSI audit, you only need one annual audit instead of having different audits for each retailer you were trying to sell with.

RETAILERS THAT RECOGNIZE GFSI

Walmart 

Raley's

 Albertsons[®]
Companies

 TARGET[®]

 Kroger[®]

SAFEWAY 

amazon 

 COSTCO[®]
WHOLESALE

 McDonald's[™]

UNDERSTANDING GFSI

Every GFSI standard effectively reviews three things:

1. Does the supplier say what they do? (Reviewing policies and procedures)
2. Does the supplier do what they say? (Observing processes while they run, interviewing employees, inspecting the facility)
3. Does the supplier track that they do what they say? (Reviewing records)

Putting all of these elements together, a GFSI audit ensures that a supplier is producing safe food year round.

While it can be stressful for a supplier to learn that an important contract hinges on obtaining a certification they've never heard of before, suppliers who successfully pursue GFSI certification generally find that the effort invested leads to significant rewards.

THE BENEFITS OF GFSI

In general, companies who have adopted GFSI certification have seen incalculable rewards. If you are interested in becoming GFSI certified, you can use the information below to assist in your decision process.

Improved Margins – When food is consistently produced safely and processes are under control, there are far fewer recalls, product holds, reworks, and wasted product headed for the landfill.

- 72% of food safety professionals say GFSI has enhanced food safety practices at their facilities
- 61% say GFSI has improved their ability to produce safe food
- 90% say GFSI has helped to increase employee food safety knowledge
- 68% say GFSI is helping to prepare them for forthcoming regulatory changes

Attractive Marketing – Many major retailers will not even consider buying from suppliers without GFSI certification. Even those who do not currently require it recognize the significance of such certification as an important asset. If your customers are currently not requiring GFSI from your facility, you can count on the fact that they eventually will be.

Consistent Systems – A well-implemented GFSI system is just that: a system. Instead of having one or two people who are essential to keeping a plant running, a food safety system helps to ensure that the plant can keep running and producing safe food even when the QA manager is out sick, on vacation, or in meetings.

Brand Protection – Safer food production will help prevent a facility experiencing a product recall or receiving an FDA Form 483. Such crises can cause long-lasting harm to a brand's appeal, doing incredible damage to a supplier's ability to remain open and operational.

Safe Food – Most importantly, a GFSI food safety system helps keep your food safe. You want those who eat the food you produce—your own families, friends, and neighbors, as well as people you may never know—to safely enjoy it. A GFSI system empowers you to keep consumers healthy and safe.

MANAGEMENT COMMITMENT

As you consider GFSI Certification, you should bear in mind that there is one key factor for every facility that helps determine whether or not implementing a GFSI standard will be successful: Management Commitment.

In every facility, upper management always effectively chooses to view GFSI Certification in one of two ways:

1. As a hoop they have to jump through to keep their customers
2. As a necessary system for producing safe food for consumers

For those holding to the perspective that GFSI Certification is a required necessity to do business with some customers; you will find customers increasingly viewing GFSI Certification as fundamental necessity for their suppliers. But those who see it primarily as an obstacle to cross, may end up communicating this attitude to their employees and find themselves with a facility full of people who do the right and safe thing when someone is watching.

In contrast, those who recognize that GFSI Certification is not only a necessity to retain and attract customers but also an essential tool in producing safe food will communicate this attitude to their employees with a very different outcome. When everyone in a facility understands that best practices are essential because they keep real people like their own families healthy, when they recognize that their jobs are more secure when the facility is less likely to suffer a major recall, people do the right and safe thing whether or not anyone is looking.

Management Commitment is not just a feeling, but an attitude that leads to action by using resources to ensure that all employees have proper training, that equipment is safely maintained, and that hazards are effectively removed from the finished product.

Furthermore, Management Commitment is an essential requirement for GFSI and is verified in every GFSI audit.

Quick Facts & Figures

61%

GFSI certification increases the ability to produce safe food

72%

Would choose to become GFSI certified if they were not already

90%

GFSI raises awareness and knowledge about food safety

72%

GFSI certification increases the ability to produce safe food

68%

GFSI-recognised certification helps to prepare for forthcoming regulatory changes



The Major Players

As explained in the introduction, there are ten different platforms under the GFSI umbrella. But when it comes to Food Processing, two of the largest are BRC and SQF. Globally SQF has 6588 certified sites and BRC has 20903 certified sites, showing the footprint that the two platforms have.

WHAT IS BRC?

The British Retail Consortium (BRC) is a trade association for the UK food retail industry created in 1992. The BRC has published standards for best practices for the food and manufacturing industries for two decades, and also publishes the On-Pack recycling standards for the UK. The BRC Global Food standard has been in existence since 1998, and in 2000 was the first food safety standard to be recognized by the GFSI organization, which means the standard meets their “benchmark” criteria for acceptance. The standard is designed as a “total quality management” program, and includes both food safety requirements and quality requirements which food manufacturers must meet in order to be certified. As of December 2018, BRC has 20903 global certified sites under the platform.

WHAT IS SQF?

The SQF food safety standard, first developed in Australia in 1994, has been owned and managed by the Food Marketing Institute (FMI) since 2003; it is recognized as Safe Quality Foods Institute (SQFI). The SQF food safety standard has a unique structure which includes a modular approach. Module 2 of the standard is applied to all food manufacturers, and applies to basic management requirements and application of the HACCP process. In addition to Module 2, the other Modules of the standard are applied which contain industry-specific GMP and Prerequisite programs based on what the company produces (such as meats, beverages, grains & nuts, produce, etc.). As of September 2018, SQF has 6588 global certified sites with 4648 of them in the United States.

BRC OR SQF?

Many facilities considering GFSI certification for the first time find themselves asking whether they should pursue BRC or SQF. Ultimately, there is no wrong choice, as both standards are equally benchmarked to the Global Food Safety Initiative Guidance Document and both are designed to be used by food processors and manufacturers. Even so, there are a few key considerations that might help facilities determine which direction they want to pursue.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

1. Because GFSI is largely driven by retailer demand, it is never a bad idea to ask your biggest customers if they have a preference between the two certifications. In broad strokes, BRC tends to be more familiar in the United Kingdom and Western Europe, while SQF tends to be more familiar around the Pacific. If you export to either of these regions, this should be something you consider. Since both standards are GFSI Benchmarked, should mean that both standards are equally accepted anywhere.
2. SQF requires each certified site to have an unannounced audit for one out of every three annual audit cycles. At present, this is not a requirement of BRC although this may change in the near future as the code is updated. Note* A BRC certificated site can choose to have their BRC audit performed as unannounced if they would like to.
3. Both SQF and BRC have introductory programs that do not meet the full requirements of GFSI but that can help get your facility on the path toward full certification. BRC has the BRC START! Program while SQF has SQF Fundamentals.
4. The two codes take different approaches to your initial certification audit:

SQF Certification

- With SQF, your initial certification audit is broken into two separate visits: the Desk Audit and Facility Audit.

- The Desk Audit is a review of only your policies and procedures, whereas the Facility Audit involves inspection of the facility and its processes while they are running, employee interviews, and reviews of your records. Basically, the Desk Audit answers the question “Do you say what you do?” while the Facility Audit answers “Do you do what you say and track that you do what you say?”
- The Desk Audit is not graded and does not impact the final grade on your SQF Certificate the first year. It is included in the final report which will be seen by SQF and your customers upon request. All non-conformities from the Desk Audit must be closed out with Corrective Actions before the Facility Audit can take place.
- The Facility Audit can be performed any time from 4 weeks after up to 6 months after the Desk Audit, but is usually completed within 6 to 8 weeks.
- Once your facility is certified, your annual recertification audits will combine the Desk and Facility into a single visit.

BRC Certification

- The initial BRC audit all takes place on one visit, so effectively it combines the Desk and the Facility into one visit from the first year on.
5. Practically speaking, this difference your first year can have an impact in a few ways:
 - Because SQF breaks the Desk Audit and Facility Audit into different visits, the initial SQF Certification tends to cost a bit more than the initial BRC audit. This difference does not persist after the first year, as both codes use just one visit for annual recertification audits.
 - Because the SQF Desk Audit gives you a chance to catch problems in your policies and procedures before the graded Facility Audit, it can help you to ease your way into the process, as any non-conformity in your policies and procedures will likely lead to more non-conformities downstream in your actual practices. By catching them at the policy stage, you might be able to fix the issues before the facility audit.

Even so, it should be noted that both BRC and SQF audits could be preceded by HACCP Verification Audits, or BRC or SQF Pre-Assessments which can bring in an auditor to conduct a mock audit beforehand to help catch any issues.

While one standard or the other may be preferable for your specific facility, you really can't go wrong with either.

UNDERSTANDING THE ADDENDA

First and foremost, what is an addendum?

An addendum is an additional audit component that can be added to a larger audit. This is very common with big retailers like McDonalds and Costco.

One of the benefits of a GFSI audit is that you can include an addendum with the audit to help evaluate your facility in additional ways. It's also usually less expensive than paying for the two audits separately.

With the Costco Addendum--a simple document filled out in addition to a SQF or BRC audit—you can easily demonstrate that your facility meets the requirements to supply food products to Costco. This is a necessity for any current or prospective Costco supplier and can only be performed by a handful of approved Certification Bodies, including Safe Food Certifications. If your facility currently is required to conduct a 1 day Costco Audit each year, that audit would be replaced by an SQF or BRC audit combined with the Costco Addendum.

With the FSMA Module, an auditor can take a special look at those requirements of the Food Safety Modernization Act that are not already covered by GFSI. This does not impact the result or grade of the GFSI audit, but it can help you to ensure your facility is in compliance with federal law.

CHOOSING A CB

Choosing the certification body or (CB) that is right for you can seem daunting at times. Which one do you choose? What is the difference amongst them?

Step one will be to choose a scheme that works for you. Once that is done the options for certification bodies gets smaller. Luckily most schemes provide a list of all the certification bodies that audit to that specific standard. Here are links to a few:

- **SQF:** <https://www.sqfi.com/how-to-get-certified/find-a-certification-body/>
- **BRC:** <https://brcdirectory.co.uk/>
- **Primus GSF:** <http://www.primusgfs.com/certificationBodies.aspx>

When selecting the right certification body, you need to make sure that the company audits to the standard you are interested in utilizing.

The next thing you need to consider is what are the most important things for your organization. Is it customer service? Is it price? Proximity? Access to resources? Create a list in order of priority of what are the most important attributes you would like to see in the certification body you work with. Find a certification body that will help explain how the certification process works, answer quick questions about your facility, and be there to guide you through the auditing process.

Tip* Use the completed matrix when you call potential certification bodies to ensure that they can meet all of your needs.

Keep track of how long it takes for them to get back to you and how helpful they are with getting you certified. The process of becoming GFSI certified can be difficult. You need a certification body who is going to be your partner in the process.

The selection matrix on the following page was created using feedback from our clients, however, every organization is different; so, you may want to create your own matrix using evaluation criteria more closely aligned with your organization.

Criteria	CB 1:	CB 2:	CB 3:
<p>Size</p> <p>Smaller CB's can give more personal attention, but a larger CB has more auditors</p>			
<p>Schemes</p> <p>Do they have the schemes you need?</p>			
<p>Are they responsive?</p> <p>If a CB isn't responsive during the quote process they definitely won't be responsive during the audit process</p>			
<p>Are they local?</p> <p>If they have auditors in your state you will save money on travel</p>			
<p>What is their KPI Rating?</p> <p>Some schemes, such as BRCGS, offer CB ratings</p>			
<p>Price?</p> <p>Are they affordable? What is included in the quote? Do they offer discounts?</p>			
<p>Partner or Customers?</p> <p>Do they take the time to understand your unique needs? Do they work with you? Or do they treat you like a number?</p>			



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CERTIFICATIONS

WHY WORK WITH SAFE FOOD CERTIFICATIONS?

As an organization, Safe Food Certification's main priority is you. When we work together, we both succeed. What sets us apart?

- **Approachability**

When you call Safe Food Certifications, you get a real person on the phone every time.

- **A Go to Resource**

When you work with us, you have access to great resources like this E-book. We are here to help you at every step of the way. You get the services you want, when you need them.

- **Top Quality**

Safe Food Certifications is one of two West Coast 5-star BRC certification bodies.

- **Excellent Staff**

With our sister company Safe Food Alliance, you have access to auditors that are also trainers, bringing unsurmountable industry experience with them.

Becoming certified for the first time can be intimidating but you don't have to do it alone. We understand the liabilities and the worries. In order to smooth out your learning curve, contact Safe Food Certifications to help you establish a road map for pursuing GFSI certification for your facility. No matter your level of preparedness and scheme-specific requirements, we will help you meet your food safety goals.

On hold is not an option, reach a real person every time.

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'The Safe Food Certifications auditors are very professional and experienced. I appreciate your guidance throughout the certification process and being able to reach someone every time I contact the organization.'

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