



Cooking Validation

Q&A

with Liz Moran Head of PASS

What does PASS offer?

PASS (Public Analyst Scientific Services) offers verification of cooking instructions within our extensively equipped test kitchen, to ensure product quality and safety for manufacturer, retailer and consumer. Using our technical expertise, cooking verifications are performed to ensure consumers are provided with correct information and cooking guidelines for ready meals and other food products whilst ensuring product quality and safety. PASS has food law and food industry experts among its team, to enable manufacturers to comply with regulations and customer requirements.

How does PASS test cooking instructions?



PASS operates a state-of-the-art kitchen facility featuring numerous cooking appliances including microwaves, gas and electric ovens, grills, hobs, fryers and pressure cookers that customers would use at home. Manufacturers are asked to supply six or more samples of the product. The first time we cook the item, we would use the instructions provided and establish whether it's likely to comply with regulations in order for us to certify the instructions. If a manufacturer is unsure about the cooking time or temperature then we ask them to send additional samples, allowing us to establish what the appropriate instructions should be.

In addition to verifying the cooking instructions, we also conduct sensory testing to check that the product tastes how the customer would expect it to. Being part of the Eurofins Group, we have access to global analytical expertise, so we can carry out further checks such as nutrition information or process contaminants, and our food law experts can check for legal compliance, providing an end-to-end service for the manufacturer

THE REGULATIONS:

Why is it important for cooking instructions to be correct?

The instructions must be correct so the food tastes nice and is served at the correct temperature for the customer. More importantly, the food must be safe to eat with no harmful bacteria present.



What are the regulations?



The Food Information Regulations define what information must be provided to consumers on food labels, one of those aspects is instructions for use to enable the customer to consume the food in the way it is intended. Any food which has to be cooked or heated in order to be eaten needs to have proper instructions including the method of cooking, time and temperature.

In order to sell a product, it must not contain any food poisoning bacteria when sufficiently cooked, so that there is no danger of customers becoming unwell. The FSA guidelines are very simple to follow and give the appropriate temperatures each different type of food must reach in order to be microbiologically safe, and the length of time the food should remain at that temperature for. Generally, food must reach a minimum temperature of 70°C for a minimum of two minutes.

IMPACT OF INCORRECT INSTRUCTIONS:



Why can manufacturers not check the instructions themselves?

Some larger companies do conduct their own testing in-house, but in smaller companies the development chef is likely to be using commercial ovens and equipment rather than domestic ovens, meaning that while they may have an idea of the correct instructions, they need to make sure consumers can cook the product in their own kitchens with their own equipment.

What issues have you come across when testing instructions?

Sometimes we find that when we follow the instructions provided, the product is insufficiently cooked. This means if a consumer was to follow them in their own home, they're not going to be able to eat the product. Not only is this damaging for the brand, there is also a safety issue particularly for raw meat and fish. If the core of the product is still cold (or even frozen in some cases), then any potentially harmful bacteria have not been killed during the cooking process.

What is the impact if instructions are not correct?

If the instructions are incorrect, we are unable to issue a certificate of compliance until we have altered them and completed at least four test cooks where the product has reached the correct minimum temperature for the correct amount of time. If manufacturers have already had the cooking instructions printed on the food labels, it means they will have to reprint their labels which can cause a delay in terms of launching the product as well as an additional cost for the manufacturer.



What should manufacturers do ahead of testing?

We advise companies to contact us in advance to talk to us about the type of product they're making – that way we can advise them about how many samples to send into the test kitchen. Once we've done the first trial, if we think there's an issue then we can go back to them and ask for more products.

When should manufacturers be thinking about cooking instruction verification?

The earlier in the process, the better. We can test the product very early on and give them guidance on what cooking instructions they should be using, and the best methods of cooking that particular product. This means that we will have verified the instructions before the label design is completed, meaning when they come to print the labels, the manufacturer knows they're correct. We find the more closely we work with manufacturers, the more smoothly the process runs. Talking to companies early on generally means a more successful outcome.

How long does the process take?

It can take a number of days to test each product, depending on how many trial cooks we need to complete. It also depends how many different methods there might be for cooking the product, such as grilling and frying. We'll discuss this with the manufacturer at the beginning of the testing process.

RAISING STANDARDS AND AWARENESS:



Why is PASS raising awareness of cooking instructions verification?

We know, especially for small companies just starting up, there may be a lack of awareness about the requirement to have accurate cooking instructions on the product. It might be something they don't think about until right at the end of the process. Start-up and smaller companies simply don't have the resources to verify their cooking instructions – PASS has the advantage of being able to replicate the conditions in domestic kitchens but with the added value of being accredited and retailer-approved for the testing.

How has PASS worked to improve the industry?

When we started the service over a year ago, there were a very small number of providers in the UK and very few were accredited. As part of our own UKAS accreditation, we set up a ring trial to enable providers to demonstrate their own proficiency, raise standards and provide a benchmark for the industry. This accreditation helps to reassure manufacturers, retailers and consumers that their instructions have been checked properly and that standards are high across all accredited providers.