

THE CULINARY OWL

BEYOND THE LABEL

READ BEYOND THE HYPE — CHOOSE SAFE, CHOOSE RIGHT!

INK & INSIGHT

Every day, we choose what to eat on the strength of a few words printed on a wrapper — "healthy", "100% pure", "natural". As trainees who will one day run kitchens and food outlets ourselves, we cannot afford to take such claims on trust. This issue of *Beyond the Label* examines how India's food safety regulator has scrutinised such claims over the past year and why the story matters to us as future hospitality professionals just as much as it does to any consumer.

Our theme, "Don't Be Fooled by Labels!", is not simply about packaged snacks on a supermarket shelf. It concerns the discipline we must bring to every goods-receiving counter, every menu we design, and every ingredient list we hand to a guest with a food allergy. We hope this issue leaves you reading labels and menus a little more carefully.

HERE'S THE DEAL



A food label is, in essence, meant to be a short and honest summary of what the product actually contains. In India, that promise is regulated by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), established under the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006, which sets out what a label must legally state: the FSSAI licence number, the ingredient list, net quantity, manufacturing and expiry dates, and any allergen warnings.

Over the past few years, India's packaged food and "health food" markets have grown rapidly, driven by consumers who are increasingly conscious of what they eat and willing to pay a premium for products marketed as healthy, natural, or organic. This growth has created an incentive for marketing language to run ahead of what a product can honestly claim, with some companies using vague buzzwords to attract customers without holding the certification or evidence to substantiate them.



Since 2026, FSSAI has moved decisively to close this gap, issuing a series of notices and prohibition orders against some of India's best-known food brands. This issue examines that crackdown in detail and considers what it means for consumers and for the hospitality industry that serves them.

UNMASKING THE LABEL



Sources: The Hindu, India court grants Dabur interim relief against food regulator’s order over ‘100%’ claims. 7 August 2026

On 3 August 2026, FSSAI issued a Prohibition Order against Dabur India Limited, directing the company to immediately cease selling honey, ghee and related products bearing "100%" claims, including "100% Natural", "100% Pure", "100% Purity Guaranteed" and "100% Organic". The regulator noted that Dabur had previously been asked to withdraw such claims and that its corrective measures had proved unsatisfactory. The company was given fifteen days to file an Action Taken Report.

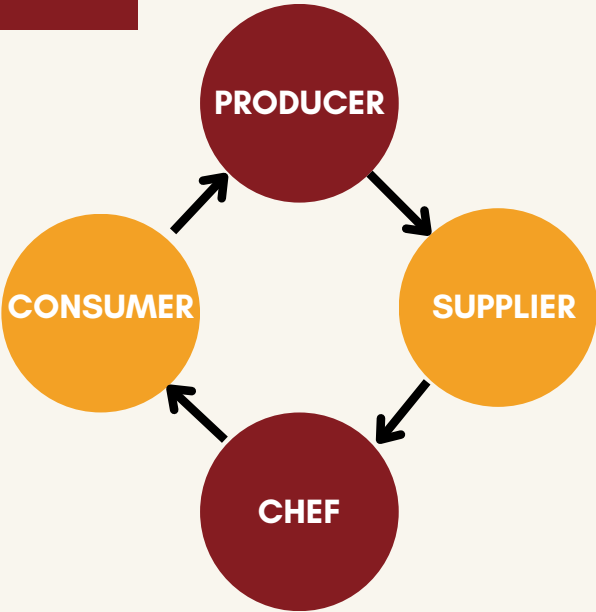
This was the most high-profile move in a much wider campaign FSSAI conducted throughout the year. In June 2026, it questioned more than a dozen food and beverage brands — including Emami Healthy & Tasty, The Health Factory, Organic Wisdom and Two Brothers Organic Farms — over their use of terms such as "healthy", "organic" and "zero maida". In July, the campaign widened further, with notices sent to Lotte India and Ferns N Petals over labelling and branding violations. Brands including The Whole Truth, Marico and MasterChow were separately questioned over claims such as "no added sugar" and "100% Natural".

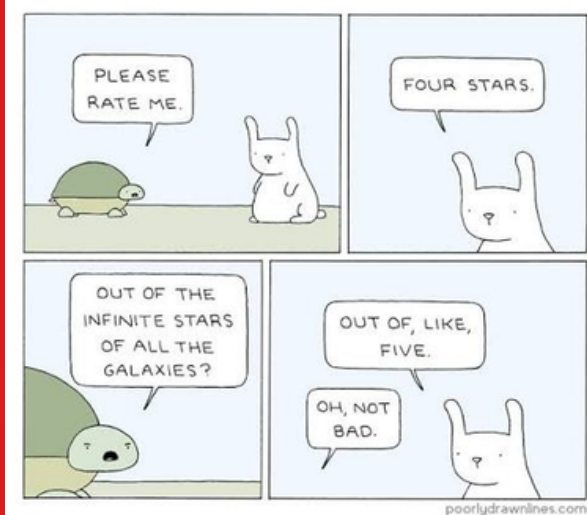
These actions follow the Food Safety and Standards (Labelling and Display) First Amendment Regulations, 2026, notified on 30 May 2025, which specifically restrict broad, unqualified claims and tighten the rules governing nutrition disclosure and food symbols. Together, the amendment and the enforcement drive represent one of the most concrete efforts yet to close the gap between what a label promises and what regulators can actually verify.

For students of hospitality, the lesson is a direct one: even large, trusted brands can drift into exaggeration under commercial pressure, and it is the regulator's job — much like a chef's or a store manager's — to check the claim against the evidence, not the packaging against the price tag.

CONNECT FOUR

Misleading labels are not solely a packaged-food problem; they sit close to home for hotels and restaurants. Under Schedule 4 of FSSAI's food safety rules, restaurants must display their FSSAI licence number, and wherever a dish contains gluten, nuts, milk, eggs, fish, soy or other major allergens, that information must be made available to the guest. A menu description that quietly omits an allergen is, in principle, no different from a wrapper that quietly omits an ingredient.





FSSAI's voluntary Hygiene Rating scheme assigns a one-to-five-star rating covering food storage, pest control, staff hygiene and documentation, which is then displayed at the premises. It operates on the same logic as a food label: it turns invisible kitchen practice into a visible, verifiable claim. Establishments are also required to have at least one FoSTaC-certified Food Safety Supervisor for every twenty-five food handlers, ensuring that label literacy and hygiene standards are embedded in daily kitchen operations rather than confined to head-office marketing.

Regarding an establishment's private label offerings—including boutique bakery treats, mineral water, or customized guest amenities—the mandate remains identical to that of any FSSAI-regulated entity: every stated claim must be supported by transparent and verifiable evidence.

PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH



Ingredient lists on processed foods sometimes include vague terms such as "natural flavourings", "artificial flavourings", "artificial colourings" and "spices", which may contain controversial additives. Some of these may be related to allergies and other safety concerns to consumers depending on the substance and individual customers. Avoiding such items in the kitchen, or declaring when menu items contain unspecified additives, helps to protect customers. This also allows us, as culinary students, to master the art of flavour balance, enabling us to create exceptional dishes without relying on pre-seasoned products.



For hospitality students and aspiring culinary professionals, a sound understanding of food labels is of the utmost importance. Ingredients affect every component of the final product, including taste, texture, flavour, nutrition and appearance, and interpreting the ingredient list is therefore essential to maintaining control over the final dish and adapting to dietary restrictions. The quantity of salt and sugar, for instance, profoundly influences the flavour of a dish, and understanding this through the label is necessary for precise culinary control.

Food labels also state serving sizes, which is important for food control and portion sizes. Certification is an important aspect of food labelling of a food label, as it helps us to distinguish between trustworthy products and those that are merely glorified imitations. All of these considerations are crucial for students in this industry, who may one day be responsible for the health, awareness and wellbeing of others.

RANDOM BUT REAL

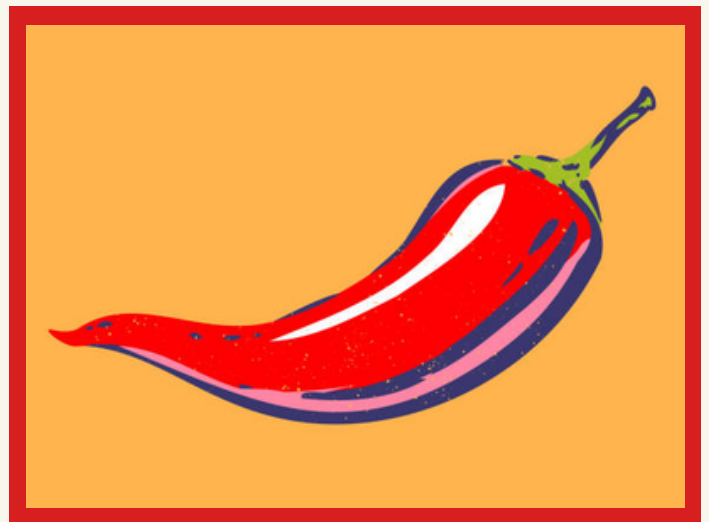


- FSSAI operates a program called Food Safety and Wheels (FSW), which uses mobile testing laboratories that conduct testing, food safety awareness and outreach
- Every packaged food sold in India must carry a 14-digit FSSAI licence or registration number on the label.
- The 2026 Labelling Amendment Regulations specifically restrict unqualified “100% natural” and “100% pure” claims.
- Rhodamine B, a bright-pink dye meant for textiles and cosmetics, has repeatedly turned up in cotton candy, gobi manchurian and street-snack colours – it is banned in food due to health risks like potential carcinogenicity, yet keeps reappearing in lab tests.
- Penalties for false or misleading label claims in India can run up to ₹10 lakh, alongside possible licence suspension.

SPICE UP YOUR BRAIN

For each claim, decide whether it is a verifiable, reliable statement or a vague one that needs a closer look. Answers are given below.

1. “100% Natural” in bold on a fruit drink bottle
a) Reliable b) Vague / needs checking
2. A 14-digit FSSAI licence number printed on the pack
a) Reliable b) Vague / needs checking
3. “Healthy Choice” printed across a packet of fried chips
a) Reliable b) Vague / needs checking
4. A recognised organic-certification mark beside the word “organic”
a) Reliable b) Vague / needs checking
5. A menu item marked “Contains: Nuts, Dairy”
a) Reliable b) Vague / needs checking



Answers: 1-b, 2-a, 3-b, 4-a, 5-a

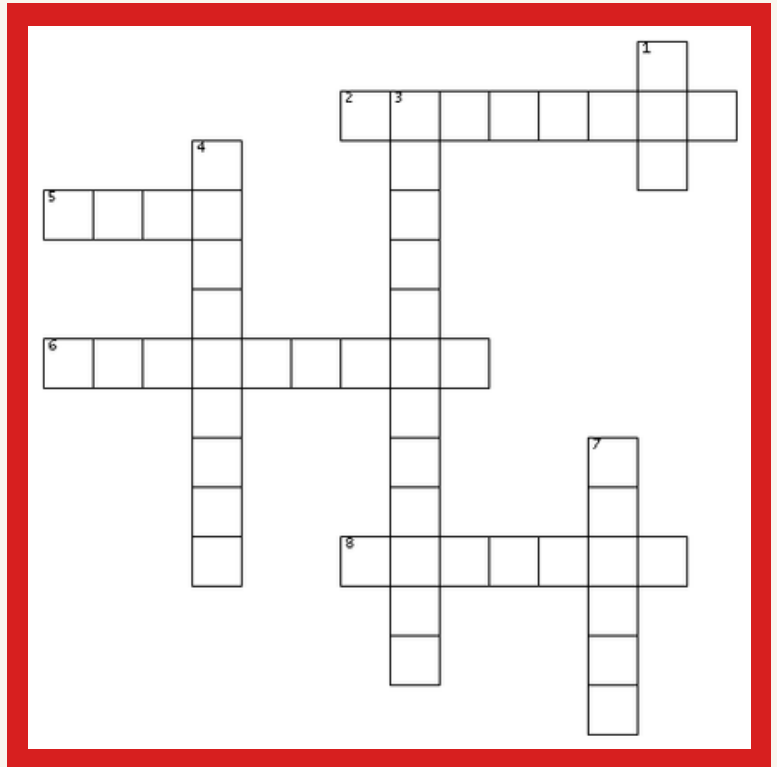
Verifiable claims are backed by a licence number, certification mark, or a required declaration; adjectives alone are not proof.

DOWN

1. A specialized agency of the United Nations that directs international public health.
3. The illegal and dangerous practice of lowering food quality by adding cheap, inferior, or toxic substances.
4. The term for staple food that has been enriched with essential micronutrients, denoted by the "+F" symbol.
7. FSSAI's mandatory training and certification ecosystem for food handlers and supervisors.

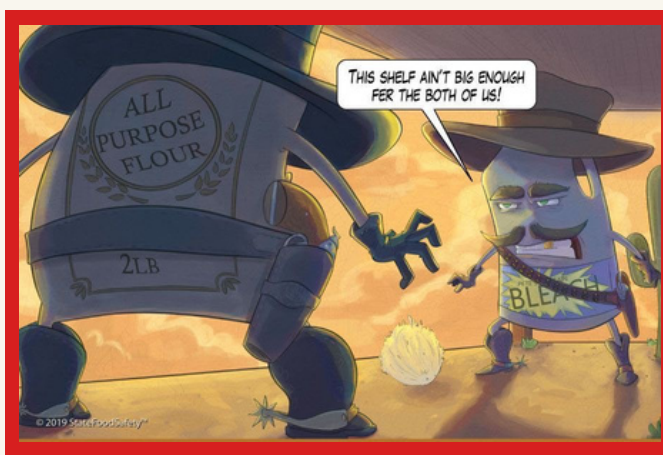
ACROSS

2. FSSAI's nationwide movement to encourage citizens to make healthy, safe, and sustainable food choices.
5. FSSAI's initiative is designed to convert used cooking oil into biodiesel.
6. Substances like preservatives or artificial colors whose limits are strictly regulated by FSSAI.
8. A mandatory 14-digit requirement that major food businesses must obtain to operate legally in India.



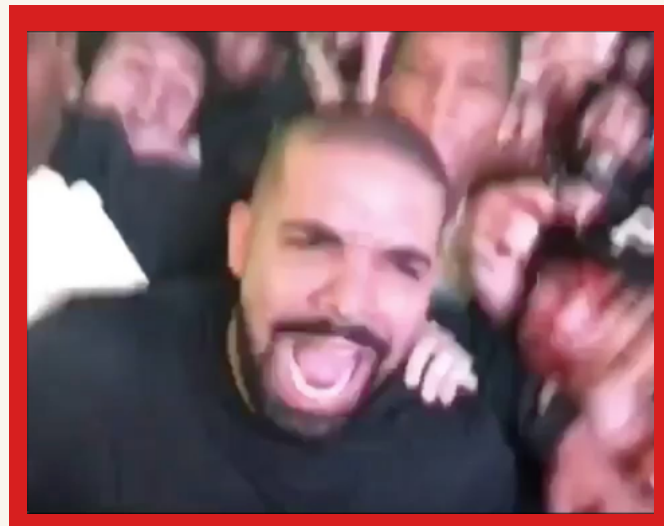
1. WHO 2. EATRIGHT 3. ADULTERATION 4. FORTIFIED 5. RUCCO 6. ADDITIVES 7. FOSTAC 8. LICENSE

TRUST ISSUES



Food is a fundamental part of our lives, and every consumer deserves to feel confident that what they buy is safe, clean and nutritious. Yet in India, recent instances of mislabelled food have raised significant concerns about consumer trust. Issues arise at every level of the supply chain – from contaminated ingredients and unproven additives to poor packaging materials, incomplete documentation, absent ingredient statements, inaccurate nutritional information, incomplete allergen declarations, and misleading claims disseminated through various forms of media. Some companies employ attractive phrases designed to excite consumers into purchasing their products, without acknowledging that they may be selling little more than a lie dressed up as "pure and healthy".

Government bodies such as the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) and the State Food Safety Departments are addressing this, regularly inspecting and taking action against businesses that flout food safety rules. Nevertheless, they too must continue to tighten their regulations and improve the systems that govern labelling, to ensure clear and honest nutritional data and to prevent the spread of false claims. Ultimately, however, keeping our food safe is a collective effort. Food businesses must adhere to hygiene standards, while consumers should remain informed, read labels, check expiry dates, and report any unsafe practices they encounter. We can trust our food only when strict government oversight works hand in hand with an informed and uncompromising public that refuses to trade safety for convenience.



WRAPPING-UP

Food labels carry legal responsibilities they are not merely marketing copies — and in 2026, FSSAI has demonstrated its willingness to act against even major national brands, including Dabur, when those undertakings do not hold up. The gap between a label's language and a product's substance is precisely where consumers, and future hospitality professionals, need to remain vigilant.

For us as hospitality students, this is not a distant regulatory story. It shows up at the goods-receiving counter, on our own menus, and in every claim we might one day place on a private-label product. The habit this issue asks you to build is a simple one: read beyond the hype, check the claim against the evidence, and choose — and serve — accordingly.
