

While Brussels is recognised by its expat community as a city rich in good food, Belgium, like anywhere in the European Union, is subject to much regulation in the sector. We take a look behind the scenes...

Diverse laws concerning hygiene, labelling and transportation, among others, all directly relate to how we consume, and are served, the food we eat.

Take, for example, *frites*. A prized treat by locals and expats alike, the humble *frite* is an immense source of pride to local vendors, who take great care in the preparation of each batch, maintaining a consistently high-quality product that has come to distinguish Belgium as the place that elevates the oft-maligned 'chip' to something approaching an art form. But small *frites* producers have recently come under threat from EU and local laws that might spell doom for the small stalls (*friteries*) that we know and love.

STALLING BUSINESSES

Mobile stalls, which can be found in town squares across the country, are finding it increasingly difficult to meet the abundance of health and safety regulations with which they must comply, forcing many a seller to establish permanent premises to continue operating and, thus, contributing to the steady decline of this most Belgian of traditions.

Such 'micro enterprises', defined as any business with up to nine employees, are finding themselves increasingly unable to meet some or all of the regulatory

demands placed upon them. Recent EU laws on hygiene, that exclude micro enterprises, have been welcomed by the Belgian authorities, but other businesses are also finding it difficult to operate within the current regulatory framework.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which typically employ between 12 and 15 people, have also complained of both the administrative and practical burdens put upon them by over-regulation. Unlike micro enterprises, SMEs in Belgium, and elsewhere, have to comply with an increasing amount of paperwork, all of which needs to be filed to the relevant authorities to ensure compliance with all applicable laws.

"It is not simply an administrative burden," says Ludger Fischer of SME organisation, UEAPME, "but also a practical one. You lose a lot of time on this, because one of your staff has to do this kind of desk work. And then they also find it difficult to keep their hands clean, going from one type of job to another."

Fischer maintains that some of the ideas currently put forward by the European Commission are "not helpful" for small-food businesses such as *frite* shops or bakeries. "The larger types of establishment", he continues, "are in a position to hire a specific expert for administration work. Not so for *friteries*".

It is perhaps no wonder that several concerned voices have been raised suggesting that Belgium is currently more favourable towards the creation of larger restaurants, instead of the traditional *frites* stall.

But it is not just *frites* production that is being affected by changes in the law, fresh bread, it appears, is also changing its pallour.

La Friterie Antoine,
Place Jourdan.
Quality frites
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REGULATING YOUR REPASTS

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