

## Squeeze Smart with Membrane Technology: Creating Pure, Preservative-Free Juices

Harithraadevi L.

Department of Postharvest Technology, Horticultural College and Research Institute, TNAU, Periyakulam - 625604, Theni, India

### Abstract

In response to rising consumer demand for fresh, additive-free beverages, membrane technology has emerged as a promising non-thermal method for fruit juice processing. Traditional heat-based techniques such as pasteurisation often degrade nutritional and sensory qualities, whereas membrane filtration offers a gentle, efficient alternative. Using pressure-driven semi-permeable membranes, processes like microfiltration, ultrafiltration, nanofiltration, and reverse osmosis enable juice clarification, concentration, deacidification, and aroma recovery without compromising quality. These methods preserve vitamins, flavour compounds, and bioactives while extending shelf life and reducing energy consumption. Microfiltration and ultrafiltration are particularly effective for juice clarification, while nanofiltration and reverse osmosis aid in flavour enhancement and acidity reduction. However, challenges such as membrane fouling and high setup costs persist. Ongoing research aims to improve membrane materials and cleaning strategies to enhance durability and efficiency. As technological advancements continue, membrane filtration stands out as a sustainable and scalable approach for producing high-quality, minimally processed fruit juices in the modern food industry.

**Keywords:** Membrane technology, Fruit juice processing, Juice clarification, Reverse osmosis, non-thermal processing

### Introduction

In today's health-focused market, consumers want beverages that are fresh, flavourful, and free from additives. Fruit juices have emerged as a top choice for their natural taste and nutrition, but large-scale processing can be challenging. Maintaining clarity, preserving nutrients, and extending shelf life without using heat or chemicals becomes difficult with traditional methods like pasteurisation, which can damage flavour and vitamins.

Membrane technology offers a smarter solution. Techniques like microfiltration, ultrafiltration, nanofiltration, and reverse osmosis gently purify and concentrate juice using semi-permeable membranes, without heat. This helps retain nutrients, extend shelf

life, and reduce waste. As demand for clean-label, minimally processed drinks grows, membrane filtration stands out as a modern, efficient, and sustainable approach. Let's dive deeper into the world of membrane technology.

### What is membrane technology?

Membrane technology uses advanced molecular-level separation to filter out particles smaller than 10  $\mu\text{m}$ . These pressure-driven processes operate in closed systems under pressures higher than atmospheric levels, making them highly efficient and controlled. The required pressure varies based on the membrane type and the intended separation objective, enabling customised applications in different food and beverage processing operations.

### Principle

Membrane separation uses a semipermeable membrane that selectively allows certain molecules or ions to pass while blocking others. This process relies on a pressure gradient between the feed side and the permeate side of the membrane. The pressure difference drives the fluid mixture through the membrane. The permeate, which is the liquid or gas that passes through the membrane, is collected on the downstream side. The membrane's selectivity is influenced by factors such as pore size, surface charge, and hydrophilicity.

### Membrane separation process

The feed system is divided into two streams.

- Retentate – Solute components that get retained on the membrane.
- Permeate – The liquid stream that passes through a semi-permeable membrane.

The concentrate (retentate) or filtrate (permeate) is the desired outcome of any membrane filtration operation. In membrane filtration systems, two main flow configurations are commonly employed:

- a) dead-end flow
- b) crossflow

#### a) Dead-end Flow

In dead-end flow, the feed moves directly toward the membrane, forcing all particles to pass through it. This causes rapid buildup on the membrane surface, leading to clogging and reduced efficiency.

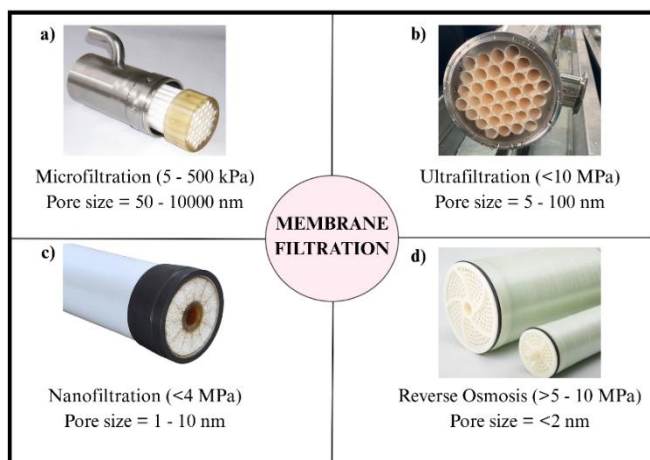
Frequent cleaning is often needed, making it less ideal for continuous use.

### b) Crossflow

In crossflow filtration, the feed flows parallel to the membrane. While some liquid passes through as permeate, the rest moves along the surface as retentate. This sweeping action prevents particle buildup, maintains a steady flow rate, and ensures more efficient, long-lasting filtration.

### Types of membrane filtration

- Microfiltration
- Ultrafiltration
- Nanofiltration
- Reverse Osmosis



### Applications

The most widely used filtration techniques in the food and beverage industry are ultrafiltration (UF) and microfiltration (MF). Both are pressure-driven processes designed to separate particles based on size. UF is effective for particles ranging from 1 to 100  $\mu\text{m}$ , while MF targets even finer particles between 0.1 and 10  $\mu\text{m}$ . Nanofiltration (NF) is crucial in the juice industry, particularly for the recovery of valuable aromatic compounds from fruit juices. This process enhances both flavour and overall quality. Reverse osmosis (RO), a highly efficient separation method in chemical engineering, is commonly used to concentrate or purify fruit juices without altering their phase, making it ideal for preserving nutritional and sensory properties. When it comes to clarification, microfiltration and ultrafiltration membranes are frequently used to remove suspended solids, bacteria, and other impurities, resulting in a clearer and more stable juice product. For the concentration of fruit juices, reverse osmosis and nanofiltration membranes are the

preferred choices, as they efficiently remove water from the juice, thereby intensifying its flavour and prolonging its shelf life. Deacidification with nanofiltration and reverse osmosis helps reduce excess acidity in juices like orange juice, making them smoother and more palatable. Fractionation employs nanofiltration and ultrafiltration to separate key components such as pulp or specific sugars, allowing for customised juice formulations to suit consumer tastes.

### a) Juice Clarification

Juice clarification is a crucial step in industrial fruit juice processing, aimed at removing turbidity-causing substances like pectin, cellulose, starch, proteins, and metals. This enhances juice purity, lowers viscosity, and improves appearance and flavour. Membrane filtration, especially microfiltration (MF) and ultrafiltration (UF), is widely used for this purpose. For juices with high pectin content, enzyme pretreatment is often applied to reduce membrane fouling and maintain filtration efficiency.

Membrane filtration is widely used to clarify a broad range of fruit juices, including pomegranate, apple, citrus, tomato, guava, dragon fruit, banana, cashew apple, and prickly pear. These filters are suitable for different juice types:

- Light juices (e.g., apple, pear, peach, pineapple, orange, lemon, and light grapes) are typically clarified using ultrafiltration.
- Pink juices like pomegranate and strawberry, and
- Dark juices such as cherry, carrot, blackberry, beetroot, and dark grape are effectively clarified using microfiltration.

Compared to conventional methods, MF/UF technologies offer significantly higher juice yields, typically 94% or more, with diafiltration further boosting this up to 99%.

### b) Juice Concentration

Juice concentration helps extend shelf life by lowering microbial activity and reducing storage and transport costs. Traditionally, this was done using high heat, which evaporates water but also causes loss of flavour and aroma compounds. To retain nutritional and sensory quality, reverse osmosis (RO) and ultrafiltration are now commonly used. These low-temperature membrane techniques are effective for concentrating prefiltered juices like apple, pomegranate, grape, watermelon, citrus, date, and orange.

RO is a pressure-driven process based on osmotic pressure. Its key benefits include better retention of nutrients, aroma, and flavour, along with lower energy consumption and simple, compact operation. However, RO has a limitation. It achieves lower concentration levels compared to thermal evaporation. Hence, it is often used as a first-stage process, followed by techniques like osmotic evaporation to enhance concentration. High pressure is essential to overcome the juice's natural osmotic pressure.

### c) Deacidification

Deacidification of fruit juices is commonly achieved using nanofiltration (NF) and reverse osmosis (RO). Nanofiltration works similarly to RO but operates at lower pressure with slightly larger membrane pores, allowing selective removal of certain molecules based on size and weight. It effectively eliminates organic acids like citric and malic acid, helping reduce acidity. Unlike chemical methods, NF preserves the juice's nutritional quality, retaining essential sugars, vitamins, and flavours without adding chemicals. It also maintains the original flavour profile, making it a gentle and efficient method for acidity reduction.

### d) Aroma Recovery

Pervaporation and membrane distillation are advanced techniques for aroma recovery in juice processing. Both use semi-permeable membranes that selectively allow volatile aroma compounds to pass through while retaining non-volatile components such as sugars, acids, and water. In pervaporation, volatile compounds pass through the membrane via evaporation and are then condensed on the other side, effectively separating aroma compounds from the juice matrix. Membrane distillation uses heat and a partial pressure gradient to transfer volatile aroma compounds across a membrane. Driven by vapour pressure differences, these compounds evaporate from the juice side and pass to the permeate side, resulting in a concentrated, aroma-rich extract.

### Pros

Membrane technology is a cost-effective and energy-efficient method for separating and purifying substances, making it highly suitable for the food and beverage industry. It is environmentally friendly, helps reduce operational costs, and produces high-quality, pure products. The process is easily automated and scalable, allowing for efficient integration into industrial operations. Additionally, it can recover valuable

compounds from waste streams, enhancing overall sustainability. Membrane systems are also effective in removing microorganisms, viruses, and bacteria, making them ideal for sterilisation and disinfection. When combined with other separation technologies, they offer even greater efficiency and purity.

### Cons

Membrane fouling is a phenomenon where solutes or particles accumulate on the membrane surface (concentration polarisation) or clog the membrane pores (pore blocking), leading to a decline in performance, affecting both productivity and product quality. Common foulants include bacterial growth, organic and biological materials, and colloidal and suspended particles. The extent of fouling is influenced by factors such as membrane characteristics, composition of the feed solution, and operating conditions. During filtration, long-term decline in membrane performance is mainly caused by two key phenomena:

- **Concentration polarisation:** The accumulation of a gel or cake layer on the membrane surface, creating a secondary barrier that reduces the membrane's selectivity.
- **Pore blocking:** The clogging of membrane pores by deposited particles, which restricts flow and reduces throughput.

Together, these issues significantly reduce membrane efficiency and compromise its intended separation performance.

### Future Prospects

Membrane technology offers a sustainable, energy-efficient solution for the food and beverage industry, enabling precise separation while preserving flavour, nutrients, and product quality. It is widely used in juice clarification, aroma recovery, and dairy processing. Despite challenges like fouling and high initial costs, ongoing innovations in membrane design and cleaning methods are improving performance. Current research is focused on enhancing membrane materials, cleaning techniques, and operational protocols to improve performance and longevity. As advancements continue, membrane technology is set to play a key role in producing high-quality, safe, and eco-friendly food products.

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