Article ID 240205-S-14

Food Preservation: Extending Shelf Life using Processing Techniques

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Food processing, preservation and packaging are essential for keeping food fresh, safe and enjoyable. These methods turn raw ingredients into edible and long-lasting food. Processing includes various techniques like mechanical, chemical and thermal techniques to enhance flavour and shelf life of food products. Preservation prevents its spoilage from microbes, oxidation and other natural processes later maintaining nutritional value, texture and flavour.

Food preservation is an important practice in the agricultural and food industries for many reasons. It helps to reduce the effects of inadequate planning in agriculture so creates value-added products and provides dietary variety. Agricultural production yields a diverse range of raw food materials. Though, improper planning and management can result in inadequacies, such as producing too much or too little of certain foods at inappropriate times. These issues can be solved through food preservation methods that extend the storage life of raw materials. Hence creating value-added products to improve the nutritional, functional, suitability and sensory qualities of food. While preserving food items, it is essential to consider the desired quality level, the duration of preservation and the target consumer group.

Causes of Deterioration

Food spoilage is a natural process where food gradually deteriorates in color, texture, flavour, nutritional value and edibility. Eating spoiled food can cause illness and, in severe cases, even death. Food spoilage can result from mechanical, physical, chemical and microbial effects. Mishandling during harvesting, processing and distribution can cause damage that reduces shelf life. Examples of deterioration include bruising of fruits and vegetables, leading to rot, loss of water in tuberous and leafy vegetables causing wilting and dried foods absorbing moisture in high humidity, becoming soggy.

Microbial contaminants from soil, water, air and animals also contribute to spoilage. Environmental factors like pressure, temperature, humidity, oxygen and light can trigger reactions that degrade food. Mechanical damage, like bruises, can lead to further chemical and microbial deterioration.

Table 1: Enzymes that cause the degradation of the food quality

Enzyme	Food	Type of spoilage
Ascorbic acid oxidase	Vegetables	Vitamin C destruction
Lipase	Cereals	Discoloration
	Milk	Rancidity
	Oils	Rancidity
Lipoxygenase	Vegetables	Vitamin A destruction and off-flavor
Pectic enzyme	Citrus juices	Pectic substances destruction
	Fruits	Softening
Peroxidase	Fruits	Browning reactions
Polyphenol oxidase	Fruits, vegetables	Off-flavor, browning and vitamin loss
Protease	Eggs	Shelf-life reduction of fresh and dried eggs
	Crab, lobster	Excessive tenderization
	Flour	Gluten formation reduction
Thiaminase	Meats, fish	Thiamine destruction

Preservation of Foods

Overtime, preserved food can also deteriorate and can lose its desirable qualities. Quality is an ever-changing concept which refers to the degree of fitness for use or consumer satisfaction. When food degrades, it cannot be consumed as it has reached the end of its shelf life. Quality attributes, such as appearance, sensory and microbial characteristics. It varies widely depending on the food type, formulation, packaging and storage conditions. Minimizing quality loss is possible at any stage of food production, processing, distribution and storage, ensuring that the final product provides an enjoyable experience for consumers.

Food Preservation Principles

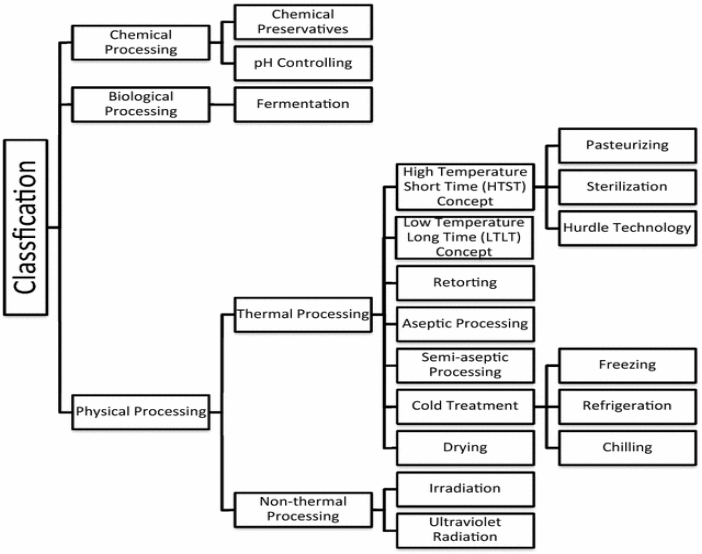
Food preservation techniques can be categorized into three main approaches:

1. **Slowing down or inhibit chemical deterioration and microbial growth**: This comprises of controlling the environment, such

as temperature and humidity, or by using chemicals which inhibit the microbial growth.

2. **Directly inactivating bacteria, yeasts, molds or enzymes**: This includes heat treatment, high-pressure processing and the use of ultrasound, electricity or radiation.
3. **Avoiding recontamination before and after processing**: This involves appropriate packaging and quality management to prevent its contamination.

Effective preservation methods should reduce or prevent spoilage without damaging the food item. Traditional methods include drying, freezing and canning. Modern methods also emphasis on maintaining nutritional and sensory qualities.



Physical processing

Drying or dehydration, removes water from food through evaporation hence significantly lowering moisture content to inhibit microbial and enzymatic activity. This ancient preservation method reduces food weight and volume, later simplifies its storage, packaging and transport and can enhance flavours. However, drying can also lead to the loss of flavour, aroma and nutrients like vitamin C and thiamin. Drying techniques include convective (most common), conductive and radiative methods. Dryers operate in batch or continuous modes depending on the scale and duration of the operation. Foods items are commonly dried include fruits, vegetables, meat and fish, as well as instant coffee and tea.

Pasteurization is a physical preservation technique that heats food to a specific temperature to destroy spoilage-causing microorganisms and enzymes hence extending shelf life. It is named after Louis Pasteur, who used it on wine and beer in 1862, it involves three main methods: VAT (batch), high temperature short time (HTST) and ultra-high temperature (UHT). HTST and UHT are continuous processes, with UHT being most effective for inactivating heat-resistant spores. Pasteurization can slightly reduce some vitamins and minerals, such as vitamin C, calcium, phosphorus, thiamin and vitamin B12, but these losses are generally minor nutritionally.

Thermal sterilization, distinct from pasteurization technique, involves heat treatment to destroy all viable microorganisms, extending food shelf life. Methods include retorting, where food is sterilized in its container and in aseptic packaging, where sterilized food is sealed in a sterile package. Freezing can slow down reactions and microbial growth by forming ice, with quick freezing forming smaller ice crystals, preserving food texture. Chilling maintains food at temperatures between -1 and 8°C, extending its shelf life. Irradiation uses ionizing radiation to eradicate pests and pathogens, with minimal nutrient loss. High-pressure processing (HPP) inactivates microorganisms without degrading nutrients, while pulsed electric field (PEF) processing uses high voltage to disrupt cell membranes, effective for liquid foods.

Biological Processing

Fermentation technique uses microorganisms to preserve food by decomposing carbohydrates. Common microorganisms include bacteria, yeasts and molds hence enhancing the nutritional value and digestibility of foods. There are different fermentation types:

1. **Alcohol Fermentation**: Yeasts can convert hexose sugars into alcohol and carbon dioxide, excluding air to prevent development of aerobic microorganisms hence extending shelf life of food item.
2. **Vinegar Fermentation**: Acetobacter bacteria convert alcohol to acetic acid in the presence of oxygen. It is used for pickles and delights.
3. **Lactic Acid Fermentation**: Involves homofermenters producing mainly lactic acid and heterofermenters producing lactic acid, ethanol, acetate and carbon dioxide.

These methods are healthier alternatives to toxic chemical preservatives.

Chemical Preservatives

Chemical preservatives are substances which are added to food to prevent spoilage, enhance shelf life and maintain the nutritional quality and safety by inhibiting the growth of microorganisms and slowing down the chemical reactions that can cause food to

degrade. Common types of chemical preservatives include antimicrobials, antioxidants, chelating agents, acidulants and sweeteners.

Antimicrobials, such as sodium benzoate, potassium sorbate and calcium propionate, inhibit the growth of bacteria, yeasts and moulds and are often used in acidic foods, dairy products, baked items and fruit-based products. Antioxidants, like butylated hydroxyanisole (BHA), butylated hydroxytoluene (BHT) and ascorbic acid (vitamin C), prevent oxidation, which can cause rancidity in fats and oils and discoloration in foods and are commonly found in snacks, cereals and canned fruits. Chelating agents, such as ethylene diamine tetraacetic acid (EDTA), bind metal ions that catalyze oxidation and other reactions hence making them useful in mayonnaise, salad dressings and canned seafood. Acidulants, including citric acid and lactic acid, lower the pH of food to inhibit microbial growth and are used in beverages, toffees, pickled products and fermented foods. Sweeteners like sucrose and sorbitol not only provide sweetness but also act as preservatives by inhibiting microbial growth in jams and jellies and retaining moisture in sugar-free products.

The chemical preservatives use is mainly regulated by agencies such as the FDA in the United States and EFSA in Europe to ensure they are safe for consumption, with strict limits set on the types and amounts that can be used in food products. In India, the use of chemical preservatives in food products is regulated by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI). FSSAI is the central regulatory body which is responsible for laying down standards for food products and ensuring its safety.

Food Storage

Food storage is crucial for preserving food quality. Improper storage can lead to nutrient loss, such as vitamin C and thiamine, especially at high temperatures. During storage, food can change colour, lose its texture and develop off-flavors. Therefore, designing a proper food storage system is essential to maintain maximum quality. Temperature is a main key factor, with lower temperatures reducing most of the reactions and quality losses. Furthermore, controlling atmospheric gases like oxygen, carbon dioxide and ethylene can extend the storage life of fresh foods. For instance, the North American apple industry uses controlled-atmosphere storage to preserve fruit quality.

Modern methods of food preservation: Modern methods of food preservation include a range of advanced techniques that effectively extend the shelf life of food while maintaining its quality and nutritional value. Some prominent modern methods include:

1. **High Pressure Processing (HPP)**: It involves subjecting food item to very high pressures to inactivate microorganisms and enzymes while preserving its nutrients and flavours.
2. **Pulsed Electric Field (PEF)**: It uses short pulses of high voltage electric fields to kill microorganisms and enzymes, particularly effective for liquid foods.
3. **Vacuum Packaging**: Removes air around the food, reducing oxygen levels to slow down spoilage and maintains its freshness.
4. **Modified Atmosphere Packaging (MAP)**: Alters the composition of gases surrounding the food to inhibit the microbial growth and oxidative reactions.
5. **Freezing and Freeze Drying**: Freezing lowers the temperature to inhibit microbial growth, while freeze drying removes moisture under vacuum to preserve the food's structure and nutrients.
6. **Irradiation**: Uses ionizing radiation to kill bacteria and pests in food, extending its shelf life and enhancing food safety.
7. **Ultra-High Temperature (UHT) Processing**: It involves heating food to very high temperatures for a very short time to kill bacteria and spores, followed by aseptic packaging to maintain sterility.
8. **Nanotechnology**: Utilizing nanoparticles to create antimicrobial coatings or films on the food surfaces hence enhancing preservation and safety.
9. **Osmotic Dehydration**: Submerges food in hypertonic solutions to draw out moisture, thereby inhibiting microbial growth and enzymatic activity.
10. **Chemical Preservatives**: Includes additives like antioxidants, antimicrobials and chelating agents to inhibit spoilage and maintain food quality.

Conclusion

Food processing, preservation and packaging play vital role in ensuring food remains fresh and safe for consumers. These practices not only transform raw ingredients into palatable products but also extend their shelf life while maintaining nutritional quality and safety. Preservation methods are crucial in mitigating inadequacies in agricultural production, adding value to food products and offering diverse dietary options. Considering the causes of food

deterioration, whether from physical, chemical, or microbial factors, underscores the importance of effective preservation techniques. Both traditional methods like drying and modern innovations such as High-Pressure Processing (HPP) and Modified Atmosphere Packaging (MAP) contribute to preserving food quality and safety across various food types. By continually refining these methods and adhering to regulatory standards, the food industry ensures that consumers receive high-quality, nutritious and safe food products.

In conclusion, the continuous evolution and application of food preservation technologies are essential for meeting the growing demands of global food supply chains. With a focus on maintaining freshness, nutritional integrity and safety, these practices not only uphold food quality but also support sustainability and consumer confidence in the food they consume. As new challenges arise in food production and distribution, innovative approaches and rigorous adherence to quality standards will be key in ensuring that food remains a reliable and pleasant part of daily life.

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