

Introduction to Cottage Foods

Cottage Food Operators in California must specifically meet the following requirements:

- Register with the local Environmental Health Agency
- Only market cottage foods on the approved food list through either indirect and/or direct sales to consumers
- Complete a food processor training course
- Implement sanitary food preparation operations
- Create compliant labels
- Operate within established annual gross sales limit

Cottage Food Operators will also have to obtain approval from their local planning department, which might have other requirements.

Product Possibilities

Allowable products under the Cottage Food Law include:

- Dried apples, apricots, cherries, peaches, pears and fruit leathers
- Dried vegetables such as tomatoes, green beans, carrots, onions, peppers, dried vegetable soup mixes and vegetable leathers

Planning & Production

Management Considerations

Cottage Food Operators must dry their products in a home kitchen, so sun drying is not acceptable. Using an electric dehydrator can be costly and the removal of moisture in the dehydration process reduces the yield of foods. For example, a pound of fresh tomatoes may only yield 2 ounces of dried tomatoes.

Sources for Product Ingredients (Raw Product)

California requires that all ingredients used in cottage foods must come from an “Approved Source.” Included in this are licensed commercial sellers, such as retailers and distributors. Farmers who are certified with their County Agricultural Commissioner can use their own commercially grown fruits, vegetables, nuts, herbs, and honey. Some counties have developed approved source programs for operators of community or culinary gardens who self-certify their management practices. Produce grown in backyard gardens is not allowed to be used in cottage foods.

Standards for Goods

The appropriate amount of moisture removed during drying depends on the product; however, enough moisture must be removed to prevent spoilage in order to maintain the safety of the product. Since fruits have a high acid content that aids preservation, less moisture needs to be removed to preserve these products compared to vegetables. Fruits are usually dried until they are leathery, yet pliable. Vegetables are lower in acidity and, consequently, need more moisture removed to safely preserve the product. Vegetables are adequately dried when they are brittle or crisp and they bend without breaking.

Market Outlook

Cottage foods are niche products of particular interest to consumers desiring locally produced foods. The demand for local, nutritious dried fruits and vegetable is high, in part because consumers are interested in eating summer-time foods all year long. Dried fruits and vegetables take up limited space and can be safely stored at room temperature. Dried foods can be eaten in the dried state or rehydrated.



Planning & Production (cont'd)

Desirable Characteristics for Dried Foods

Product color should be uniform throughout the container without excessive discoloration. Light-colored fruits and vegetables brown when exposed to air. A pretreatment minimizes browning during drying and storage, but is not required. Discolored pieces that appear toasted or burned can result from drying at temperatures too high or for too long. All pieces should be neatly cut into uniform sized and shaped pieces without ragged edges. All pieces must be consistently dry throughout the package. **Fruits** should have no signs of mold, have a leathery and pliable texture (for example, if the piece of fruit is folded over itself, it springs back), not be sticky or brittle, and be free from cores and seeds or peel. **Vegetables** should be brittle and crisp, and be dry enough to rattle. **Herbs** should be like dust when rubbed between fingers.

Food Safety

Following Food Safety Guidelines as outlined in the Cottage Food Law and taking food processor training are required for all Cottage Food Operators. Fruits and vegetables should be dried as directed; the dried product should be discarded if it becomes moldy or contaminated by insects, dirt, vermin, or other foreign matter.

Marketing

Overview

All Cottage Food Operations must be registered or permitted by the local environmental health agency before starting business. Class A Cottage Food Operators may sell dried fruits, vegetables and herbs at farmers markets, roadside stands, and Community Supported Agriculture programs directly to customers. Class B Cottage Food Operators may also sell to retailers. Class A Cottage Food Operators will get a higher price for each product, but will also incur higher marketing costs than when selling wholesale.

Labeling

All food made by a Cottage Food Operator must be labeled properly with an approved label which states “made in a home kitchen” in 12 point type, along with a descriptive name of the product, the contact information and location of the Cottage Food Operator, the permit/registration number, an ingredient list in descending order of weight, the net quantity in English units and metric units, and a declaration of food allergens.

Allergens

If a sulfite dip is used to reduce browning of dried fruit, “contains added sulfites” should be on the label. Technically, the FDA requires this statement only if the detectable amount of sulfating agent is 10 parts per million or more of the sulfite in the finished food. Since this can be difficult for a Cottage Food Operator to measure, it is simplest to make the declaration.

Storage & Packaging

Packaged dried foods should be stored in a cool, dry, dark place. Recommended storage times range from 4 months to 1 year. The product quality is affected by heat; the higher the temperature, the shorter the storage time. Most dried fruits can be stored for 1 year at 60°F, or 6 months at 80°F. Longer storage is possible in the freezer at 0° F. Items must be packed in vapor and moisture resistant packaging.



Resources

4-H Judging Standards:

<http://food.unl.edu/documents/4089482/4128861/4-H+Foods+Judging+Guide+2012.pdf/069b3837-6781-4f8e-b72e-78ccbde8518>

Preserving Foods: Drying Fruits and Vegetables:

http://nchfp.uga.edu/publications/uga/uga_dry_fruit.pdf

So Easy to Preserve:

<http://nchfp.uga.edu/publications/uga/FreezingPreparedFoods.pdf>

For more information on Cottage Foods visit:
ucanr.edu/cottagefoods