

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:

- Baked goods without cream, custard, or meat fillings
- Breads, biscuits, churros, cookies, pastries, and tortillas
- Dried pasta and dry baking mixes
- Fruit pies, fruit empanadas, and fruit tamales
- Granola and cereals

Market Outlook

Cottage foods are niche products of particular interest to consumers desiring locally produced foods. The demand for local, nutritious baked goods is high, in part because consumers are interested in nutritious baked goods made with whole and unique grain and without preservatives and artificial coloring. “Just like grandma used to make” still sells today!



Planning & Production

Management Considerations

Sourcing local ingredients may be expensive. A tracking system should be in place; the simplest would be putting the date the product was made on the packaging.

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. Be sure to use reputable sources when buying flours and grains and be sure to inspect for insects. Store ingredients in sealed containers, not paper bags.

Food Safety

Following Food Safety Guidelines as outlined in the Cottage Food Law and taking food processor training is required for all Cottage Food Operators. Certain baked goods are potentially hazardous; for example, some pumpkin and cream pies, cheese cakes, and filled pastries support pathogen growth, requiring refrigeration. These types of baked goods are not allowed under the California Cottage Food Law.

Planning & Production (cont'd)

Standards for Goods

Cottage Food Operators should follow the standards for baked products. Baked goods standards may be found in cookbooks or in Cooperative Extension Baked Goods Judging pamphlets, such as the one from the University of Nebraska (<https://4h.unl.edu/documents/2012%20Foods%20Judging%20Guide%20Edition.pdf>).

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 baked goods at farmers markets, roadside stands, and Community Supported Agriculture programs directly to customers. Class B Cottage Food Operators may also sell to retailers. A 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 baked goods contain any of the eight major food allergens such as milk, eggs, fish, shellfish, tree nuts, wheat, peanuts, and soybeans, a declaration must be put on the label in plain language. There are two approved methods prescribed by federal law for declaring the food sources of allergens in packaged foods.

- 1) Have a separate summary statement immediately following or adjacent to the ingredient list.
- 2) Have the allergen listed within the ingredient list.

Storage & Packaging

Baked goods are best the day they are baked. Cool according to directions and package as directed for Cottage Foods—usually in air tight, moisture-resistant, food-safe materials. Baked goods have a limited shelf life, so storing them in the refrigerator is best. For longer storage, freeze using the directions for freezing and thawing. Use the best packaging materials for the product. Don’t display baked goods without packaging; for example, use a paper bag for breads and plastic wrap for cookies.



Resources

Safely Storing Food for Safety and Quality:

<https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/pnw612>

Freezing Baked Goods:

https://cottonwood.k-state.edu/documents/fcs-docs/Freezing_Baked_Goods.pdf

Freezing Prepared Foods, University of GA:

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

For more information on Cottage Foods visit:
<https://ucanr.edu/sites/cottagefoods/>