

FOOD STORAGE, CONTINUED

Ingredients used in cooking and baking typically are called dry, solid, or liquid. Last time we talked about the storage of dry staples in your kitchen. Today let's look at wise storage of other common ingredients.

Shortening will remain useable for 8 to 12 months unopened, but once you break the seal on the product, it should be used within 3 to 8 months. Store it in a tightly closed container in a cool, dark place. Shortening that has been stored too long or has gotten too warm will become rancid and develop an undesirable taste and odor. If you haven't used it for a while, smell the shortening before using it in a recipe. Shortening that is still usable will have no noticeable fragrance.

Canola, corn, peanut, and vegetable oils should be used within a year of opening. Store vegetable oil in a tightly closed container in a cool, dark place. You can prolong the life of oils by storing them in the refrigerator. Some oils may become cloudy in the refrigerator but usually clear after sitting at room temperature. Walnut, sesame, hazelnut and almond oils may have a shorter storage life and should be kept in the refrigerator after opening and used within six months. For the best results in baking, oil that was refrigerated should be at room temperature before using.

Vegetables oils should have no distinctive aroma. When it has been stored too long these oils can deteriorate and develop an undesirable taste and odor. As with shortening, be sure to take a whiff before adding this ingredient to a recipe.

Olive oil will keep longer than other edible oils. Although it can become rancid, this is less likely to occur with olive oil than with other oils, especially when it is stored properly. The best containers for storage are glass (especially tinted glass), ceramic, porcelain, or non-reactive metals such as stainless steel. If olive oil is stored in a bottle, always replace the cap on the bottle and keep it tightly sealed. Never put olive oil in a container that is not tightly sealed.

It is important to store olive oil in a cool, dark place. On the countertop or near the range is not a good location. A kitchen cabinet located away from the stove or direct sunlight will work well.

Olive oil should keep a minimum of 15 months, if it is properly stored in its original container. Unopened, it should last for two years or more.

Honey stores best at room temperature, so your kitchen counter or pantry shelf is ideal. Honey can remain stable when stored in sealed containers but it does tend to darken and lose its aroma and flavor over time. Storing honey in the refrigerator accelerates the honey's crystallization. This is a natural process in which the liquid in honey becomes solid. If your honey crystallizes, simply place the honey jar in warm water and stir it until the crystals dissolve. Or, place the honey in a microwave-safe container with the lid off and microwave it, stirring every 30 seconds, until the crystals dissolve. Be careful not to boil or scorch the honey.

Note: Honey should not be fed to infants less than one year old.

Maple syrup has a shelf life of two years unopened and kept in the pantry. Once opened it should be refrigerated and used within one year.

Vinegar's shelf life is almost indefinite. Because of its acid nature, vinegar is self-preserving and does not need refrigeration. It should be tightly covered. White distilled vinegar will remain virtually unchanged over an extended period of time.

After opening, you may notice "mother" beginning to form. Mother is actually cellulose (a natural carbohydrate which is the fiber in foods like celery and lettuce) produced by harmless vinegar bacteria. Today, most manufacturers pasteurize their product before bottling to prevent these bacteria from forming mother while sitting on the retail shelf. Vinegar containing mother is not harmful or spoiled. Just remove the substance by filtering it.

Chocolate should not be stored in the refrigerator or freezer where it is more likely to pick up other flavors. If chocolate is exposed to rapid changes in humidity or temperature, the surface may “bloom” or develop a whitish coating. Bloomed chocolate is safe to eat and cook with. To extend the life of chocolate, wrap it tightly in plastic wrap and keep it in a cool dry place. White and milk chocolate have shelf lives of six months while dark, semi-sweet, and unsweetened chocolate have a shelf life of two years. Cocoa, stored tightly closed in a cool, dry pantry, will last indefinitely.

Ground coffee will keep for two years unopened. Once opened, store it in the coolest place in the kitchen, tightly covered. If you will not use it within two weeks, place the container of ground coffee in the refrigerator or the freezer. Be sure to return it immediately after use to avoid condensation that occurs with the cooling and warming.

If you purchase whole coffee beans, use them in less than 12 days, stored in an airtight container on the counter. Keep the coffee beans away from air and light. Freeze coffee beans you plan to keep longer than 12 days.

Many of us stock up during sales of commercially canned foods. Here are some things to remember about storing them.

- Use the FIFO rule—first in, first out. When you unpack the groceries, put the newly purchased cans in the back of the pantry, so you use the older products first.
- Don't keep canned goods longer than one year.
- Do not keep canned fruit juices for more than nine months.
- Canned goods should be kept moderately cool but not frozen. Sometimes in the winter, canned goods stored in a garage or basement may freeze. It is possible to thaw and use this food, but the quality will be noticeably diminished.
- Canned food stored above 70 °F will have a shorter shelf life. Do not store canned goods in temperatures above 95°F.
- If cans are bulging, the food inside is spoiled. Throw any bulging cans away without opening them.
- Dents on the side seam or the rim seams of cans may mean the food has been exposed to air, providing an environment for harmful bacteria to grow. Often dented cans are offered at bargain prices at the grocery, but avoid purchasing them, regardless of the price savings.
- Do not buy or use cans that have leaks or should signs of rust.

The lesson here is simple—it does not pay to buy extra amounts of ingredients, unless you can use them within the safe storage time limits.

For more information about storage of foods, go to www.foodsafety.gov

If you missed the previous article about food storage, find it at www.berkeleyextension.com under Families and Health.

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