

JUDGING HOME PRESERVED FOODS

People choose to can foods at home for many reasons: to preserve the harvest from their gardens or local farmers' markets for year-round enjoyment; to gain more control over what is in their food by limiting or avoiding salt, sugar, or preservatives; to save money; to get better-tasting canned foods; to follow family traditions; or just for the sense of satisfaction that home canning provides. Some home canners also enjoy showcasing their work, usually by entering canned goods in a local or state fair or festival. To win an award at these venues, whether it's a ribbon or small monetary prize, individuals must follow science-based recipes, paying close attention to following correct home canning processes. Winning an award can instill confidence in the home canner and offer a sense of pride in a job well done, especially as they watch fairgoers looking at the fruits of their labor in awe.

HOME CANNING

Home canning has changed over the last 200 years. Scientists have found ways to produce safer, higher quality products, including better home canning equipment and supplies. Because many microorganisms live and multiply quickly on the surfaces of fresh fruits and vegetables, methods of home canning should always follow research-based recommendations. The advantages of home canning are lost when you start with poor quality fresh foods; when jars fail to seal properly; when food spoils; or when color, texture, flavors, and nutrients deteriorate during prolonged storage. Following the correct procedures can ensure safely canned foods that are of top quality and can be stored for up to two years.



THE JUDGE

Judging preserved foods requires education, hands-on training, and good judgment. Knowledge about food preservation and what various types of products should look like will help you in choosing prize-winning entries. Becoming familiar with the criteria suggested by the venue will help in making a mental score on individual entries. Judging home-canned foods is an opportunity to teach people safe food preservation. As an exhibit judge, you should inform contestants if their product was not safely processed and be sure the contestant receives instruction about safe food preservation techniques. Be as positive as possible in your comments so the exhibitor will continue to learn more about being a home food preserver.

SAFETY TIPS

Safety should be the primary consideration when judging preserved foods. The attractiveness of the product is secondary. Each jar of canned food must be labeled according to the rules of the venue, and the label should also include the type of process. Many venues only allow half-pint or pint jars. The



criterion for producing safe food should follow USDA-approved recipes. Entrants can find these in the Home Canning publication series produced by the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service or from the National Center for Home Food Preservation <https://nchfp.uga.edu>. Specifically, USDA rules state...

- Low-acid foods must be pressure canned.
- High-acid foods may be processed in a boiling water canner or a pressure canner.
- Paraffin should not be used to seal jams and jellies.
- Open kettle processing is not acceptable for any product.
- Only entries that are not safely processed should be disqualified. Note: Some venues do not disqualify anyone and give a ribbon regardless. This is your time to educate the individual about what you think they could have done differently.

Since no home canned foods should be opened and tasted because of safety concerns, judges must rely on visual inspection to judge characteristics such as flavor and texture. You can see the flavor of fruits through ripeness and appearance. The flavor of vegetables is usually indicated by maturity of the product and overall appearance. The integrity or wholeness of the product is a good indicator of texture. Entrants must use clear, clean standard jars and

two-piece lids and rings should not show rust. There should be no signs of spoilage, such as gas bubbles, leaky seals, bad odor, or cloudy liquid. The judge should test to see that the jar has a seal by pressing the middle of the lid with a finger. If the lid springs up when the finger is removed, the lid is not sealed. Or, when holding the jar at eye level and looking across the lid, a sealed lid should appear curved down in the center, not flat or bulging.

Entrants must follow the appropriate headspace guidelines. Headspace is the unfilled space above the food in a jar and below its lid.

Recommendations for headspace are:

- Jams and Jellies: ¼ inch
- Fruits*, Pickles, and Tomatoes: ½ inch
- Vegetables*: 1 inch
- Meats, Seafood, Soups, and Pie Fillings*: 1 inch
- Poultry: 1¼ inch

Note: *Check the recipe for the appropriate headspace to use. Apple juice, grape juice, and fruit puree only require ¼-inch headspace. Green tomato pie filling only requires ½-inch.

AN EXPERT JUDGE'S IDEAS

Every year the Kentucky State Fair Board publishes the criterion and ribbons or premiums for awards in Preserved Foods. Judging standards are listed for each division or type of preserved food. Completing a scorecard



for every entry would be ideal but when there are large numbers of entries, this may be too time consuming. Here are one expert's step-by-step instructions for judging each division.

1. Make sure to be familiar with and have access to the judging standards for each division.
2. Come prepared with printed self-adhesive, removeable labels with the following wording. (Add these stickers to the jars to explain why the person didn't receive a blue or red ribbon. It is also your chance to encourage proper home canning.)
 - a. The USDA recommends Mason-type jars with two-piece screw-on caps. Canning jars go through a tempering process during manufacturing and are less susceptible to breakage. Do not use commercial single-use jars, such as peanut butter, pickle, or spaghetti sauce jars, because they are more prone to breaking during the canning process.
 - b. Headspace, or the distance between the top of food and the bottom of the lid, is important in forming a strong seal in home canned foods. Always follow the headspace indicated in your USDA-recommended recipe. Note: If this seems to be a huge problem, you could add additional information, such

as the following statements. As food heats, it expands forcing excess air to be expelled from under the lid during processing. As the product cools after processing, the product pulls a vacuum, assuring a strong seal. Too little headspace may cause the food to expand and bubble out as excess air is being forced out from under the lid during processing. The food may stick to the rim of the jar preventing the jar from pulling a strong vacuum and sealing properly as it cools.

- c. It is important to follow USDA-recommended recipes and correct home-canning procedures. Visit your County Extension Office for more information.
- d. Call your County Extension Office for future home canning classes.
- e. The University of Kentucky has a Home Canning Series for more information. The Basic Home Canning publication is available from <http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/fcs3/fcs3578/fcs3578.pdf>.
- f. Jar has been opened and is no longer safe to consume!

3. Now, look at all the home canned products in one division. You may wish to open all jars to smell or get a better look at the color and texture. Observe texture by placing a spoonful on a plate. Often, participants expect this. Do not eat any products as you cannot tell if they are safe based on appearance or smell alone. Any opened jars should receive a label indicating the jar has been opened and is no longer safe to consume.

- a. Set aside all the jars with improper packaging or headspace, those that are unsealed, and/or those that have obviously not been processed correctly. Give them a white ribbon or a DQ, depending what the venue suggests. Add the appropriate label so participants will know why they did not receive a blue or red ribbon and how to be more successful the next time.
- b. Now divide the jars into what would be considered red or blue ribbons, based on the judging standards for the division. Give the red ribbons. Upon closer inspection, you may move a jar to another ribbon. You may want to include a label about visiting or calling your local county Extension office. You should be left with blue ribbon jars. Upon closer inspection, you may move a jar to another ribbon. Now inspect all the jars for what you consider to be the best of that division, based on the judging standards for that division. Assign the blue ribbons and the best of that division ribbon.

- c. Do this for all the divisions. Then compare all the separate division blue ribbons for the best of show. Realize that some of the judging is subjective since you are not opening or tasting the products for flavor.

Remember, this should be a fun and educational experience for both the judge and the participant. Thank you for providing this valuable service for the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

RESOURCES

- Bastin, S., and Norris, A. (2019) FCS3-578 Home Canning Basics, University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, <http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/fcs3/fcs3578/fcs3578.pdf>, accessed April 2023.
- Andress, E. and Oesterle, A. (2003) Judging Home Preserved Foods. National Center for Home Food Preservation, https://nchfp.uga.edu/publications/nchfp/tech_bull.html#gsc.tab=0, accessed April 2023.
- (2014) Judging Preserved Foods (includes scorecards). University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service, <https://www.uaex.uada.edu/life-skills-wellness/food-safety/preservation/2014%20Fair%20Manual%20Updated%20Preserved%20Foods.pdf>, accessed April 2023.

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