

Supporting a growing market niche: Providing food safety training for small food processors



Helping small food processors is an excellent way to increase the availability of products that are made in Wisconsin.

Extension is committed to serving small food processors by providing ongoing training and support in the critical area of food safety.

Situation

Wisconsin has a vibrant “buy local” economy and small food processors are benefiting from the economic momentum. In some cases, farmers wishing to add value to their crops are delving into the sale of canned pickles, salsas and other family-favorite products.

As a group, canned products such as pickles, salsas and tomato-based products are referred to as acidified foods. Processed incorrectly, acidified canned foods are potentially hazardous—they present the risk of botulism poisoning. As a result, the federal government requires processors of acidified canned foods to receive training before they are issued a processing license.

For small food processors, finding training that fits their needs often poses a challenge.

Response

In spring of 2009, with funding from the University of Wisconsin’s Ira and Ineva Reilly Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Endowment and support from the University of Wisconsin-Extension and the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, a training program was developed to meet the needs of small businesses in Wisconsin processing acidified foods.

Since 2009, roughly 200 small business owners and entrepreneurs have completed the Wisconsin Acidified Canned Foods workshop as they prepare to develop and market their products. The training has been offered a total of 15 times at UW-Extension county offices across the state.

A survey of training participants was sent out in October 2010, and 25% of participants responded. The majority of those responding have been in business for less than 5 years—37% for less than one year. This is indicative of the growing market niche that these businesses are hoping to fill. For 61% of businesses, the owner is the only employee of the business.

The predominant acidified canned foods processed for sale by these businesses are salsas or tomato sauce, or fruit or vegetable pickles or relishes. Many of these businesses also process other non-hazardous items such as jams and jellies, baked goods, sauerkraut, and honey or maple syrup. Processing acidified canned foods represents an area of market expansion for these businesses.



When asked to describe their business, 73% of survey respondents indicated that they are selling mostly to local markets, with under \$5,000 annually in sales revenue. However, businesses expect this to change, as they indicated they expected to sell a variety of new products in the coming year, including pickled asparagus, tomato or spaghetti-type sauce, herb or wine jellies, fruit-based sauces, barbeque sauces, pickles and dried herbs or fruits.

Outcomes

The workshops offered by UW-Extension were clearly important in helping businesses move toward success.

A majority of respondents indicated that they had accomplished particular milestones since the training:

- 60% had submitted samples for commercial pH testing.
- 40% had received recipe approval.
- 40% had received their food processing license from the state.
- 53% had manufactured and sold their product, helping to meet a growing demand for locally produced food.

Even with these successes, processors indicated that there are significant barriers to business success. For instance, 30% of respondents found state and/or local business regulations confusing; 25% found establishing a retail or wholesale market challenging; and 22% found it challenging to gain access to an approved processing facility.

When asked to identify areas where the University of Wisconsin, the University of Wisconsin-Extension or the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection could assist processors in establishing a successful business, processors identified areas such as:

- Spending more time in training on a step-by-step review of the licensing and approval process.
- Streamlining the recipe approval process.
- Developing a list of approved food processing facilities.
- Supporting shared-use commercial kitchens (which support small processors).

These ideas have been used to redesign the Wisconsin Acidified Canned Foods training program so that it better supports small businesses.

Along with providing needed training, the University of Wisconsin-Extension supports small food processors with online and print-based materials. A web site was developed by Extension specialists specifically to support processors of acidified foods. This web site includes information on licensing and product testing, sample process forms, and contact information for process approval. It is available at <http://www.foodsafety.wisc.edu/acidifiedcanning.html>

In addition, the Extension Learning Store stocks publications with research-tested, pre-approved recipes which can make it easier for processors to ready their product for market.

These publications can be found at: learningstore.uwex.edu/Food-Nutrition-C53.aspx.

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The University of Wisconsin-Extension is committed to continuing to serve small businesses by providing ongoing training and support in this critical area. Local UW-Extension county offices also help to support this program by hosting trainings and connecting local businesses with University of Wisconsin resources. To find contact information for a county office, go to:

<http://yourcountyextensionoffice.org>

To learn more

To learn more about Extension's programs in support of small food processors, contact:

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