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Cleaning the Kitchen Cupboard: Toss or Save?

Have you ever opened your cupboard to pull an ingredient for your favorite cake and wondered if that particular item was really fresh? It has very difficult to remember when you purchased that sugar or flour and as my Granny Lorene used to say, “if your ingredients aren’t fresh, then your recipe won’t turn out as well.” Alice Henneman, MS, RD, Extension Educator and Joyce Jensen, REHS, CFSP Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department have written the following article that will help you know the proper amount of time to keep your staple ingredients and how to test for freshness.

Storing Kitchen Cupboard Foods

The following storage tips are based on food stored at a room temperature of about 70° F. The times are those generally cited for maintaining best food quality. A range of times and the more conservative recommendations are given to allow for age of the product when purchased, how long it has been open, etc. READ LABELS CAREFULLY — they often contain important storage information and recommended “use by” dates.

Baking Powder — 12 to 18 months or expiration date on container

Storage Tip: Store tightly covered in a dry place. Make sure measuring utensils are dry before dipping into the container.

Testing for Freshness: Mix 1 teaspoon baking powder with 1/3 cup hot water. If it foams vigorously, it still has rising power.

Baking Soda — 12 to 18 months or expiration date on container

Storage Tip: Store tightly covered in a dry place. Make sure measuring utensils are dry before dipping them into the container.

Testing for Freshness: Place 1-1/2 teaspoons in a small bowl. Add 1 tablespoon vinegar. If it fizzes, then it will still help leaven a food. If it doesn’t fizz, use it as an odor catcher in the refrigerator.

Shortening — 3 to 8 months opened; 8 to 12 months unopened

Storage Tip #1: Store in a tightly closed container in a cool, dark place.

Storage Tip #2: Times reported by shortening companies and other sources varied. For more specifics, see “Kitchen Cupboard Management 101” at the end of this article for suggestions on how to contact the company for more information.

Storage Tip #3: Shortening that has been stored too long will go rancid and develop an undesirable taste and odor. If you haven’t used a shortening for a while, smell it before using it in a recipe.

White Flour — 6 to 12 months

Storage Tip #1: Store in a cool, dry place. It’s important to store flour in an airtight container or freezer bag to preserve the flour’s moisture content. Exposure to low or high humidity will affect the flour’s moisture content and may influence the outcome of a recipe.

Storage Tip #2: For longer storage, keep white flours in the refrigerator in an airtight container. All-

purpose and bread flour will keep up to two years at 40° F in your refrigerator, according to the Wheat Foods Council www.wheatfoods.org. They can be stored indefinitely in the freezer.

Storage Tip #3: As a general rule, if measuring flour from refrigerated or frozen flour, allow your measured portion to come to room temperature before using it in baked goods. Remove the flour for your recipe a few hours before use, so it doesn't affect the action of other ingredients such as baking powder or yeast.

Brown Sugar — 4 months to 6 months for maximum flavor

Storage Tip: It's VERY important to store brown sugar in an airtight container to retain its moisture and prevent it from becoming hard. Either store it in its original plastic bag, tightly closed, or transfer to an airtight container or a heavy moisture-proof plastic bag, such as a freezer bag.

To Soften Brown Sugar: Brown sugar becomes hard when the moisture in it has evaporated. Several methods have been suggested to help restore the moisture to brown sugar; here's an overview of those mentioned most frequently:

Oven Method. Heat the brown sugar in a 250° F oven for a few minutes. Watch it carefully and as soon as it is soft, measure the amount you need. When the sugar cools, it will become hard again.

Warning: the sugar will be very hot.

Microwave Method. Place brown sugar in a microwave-safe container and cover loosely with a clean, white, wet (but not dripping wet) paper towel. Microwave on high (100 percent power) and check about every 30 seconds. When the sugar cools, it will become hard again. Warning: the sugar will be very hot.

White Granulated Sugar — 2 years

Storage Tip: Store sugar in an airtight container or a heavy moisture-proof plastic bag, such as a freezer bag. Properly stored sugar keeps indefinitely.

To Soften Hardened White Sugar: When white granulated sugar absorbs moisture, it becomes hard. Here are some possible suggestions for breaking up hard sugar:

Put hard sugar in a sturdy food-quality bag and pound it with a hammer, meat pounder or flat side of a meat mallet.

Smash smaller pieces with a mortar and pestle.

Break up small pieces in a spice grinder.

Vegetable Oil 1 to 6 months opened; 6 to 12 months unopened

Times vary according to type of oil, method of processing, etc. Some companies recommend up to 1 year opened and 2 years unopened for certain of their oils. For oils with a shorter storage time, some companies recommend refrigerating the oil after opening. See "Kitchen Cupboard Management 101" at the end of this article for suggestions on how to contact the company for more information. NOTE: If the container has sat unopened for the total storage time, it no longer may be fresh the entire "opened" storage time.

Storage Tip #1: Store in a tightly closed container in a cool, dark place.

Storage Tip #2: Some of the oils that may have a shorter storage life include walnut, sesame, hazelnut and almond oils.

Storage Tip #3: Oil that has been stored too long will go rancid and develop an undesirable taste and odor. If you haven't used an oil for a while, smell it before using it in a recipe.

Storage Tip #4: You can prolong the life of oils by storing them in the refrigerator. Some, such as olive oil, may become cloudy in the refrigerator but usually clear after sitting at room temperature to warm up.

Kitchen Cupboard Management 101

Now that you've sorted, tossed, moved and/or repackaged and perhaps revived some foods, here are a few tips to take control of storing foods in your cupboard:

If you tossed portions of expired foods, buy a smaller container next time.

Keep a permanent marker pen in your kitchen and put the date month and YEAR you purchased the food on the container.

When in doubt about storage times, call the company (many have toll-free numbers), write to the address on the label, or check if the company has a Web site that might answer your questions.

If you can't determine how old a food is and the container contains no use by date, check for a production code on container. If it's not possible to decipher the production code, call or write the company or check if this information might be given on a company Web site.

Practice first in, first out, or what food service professionals refer to as FIFO, for foods. If you have purchased several containers of the same type of food, arrange the containers so you reach for the oldest package first.

READ LABELS CAREFULLY for storage information and possible recommended use by dates.

For more information, please call the Texas AgriLife Extension Service office at 903/473-5000, ext. 157.

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