

Editorial



Small-Scale Food Processing in the Caribbean

Audrey Morris^a

Many persons in the Caribbean are involved in small-scale food processing, carrying out operations at the household or cottage industry level, or in small establishments. The objectives of food processing range from extending shelf life and preservation of nutrients, to enhancing the appeal to the consumer (for example, colour, flavour and appearance). While fresh foods eaten within a short time after harvest will no doubt provide best nutrient quality, today's consumers also demand access to foods which are convenient, have a reasonable shelf life, have a fresh appearance and are of good quality even when out of season.

By using a variety of local foods, small-scale food processing not only contributes to the income of the business operator, but also to the local economy and to the independence and self-sufficiency of the country and the wider region. The raw materials they use expand the market for local agricultural produce, meat, poultry and fish, thereby supporting the economic stability of these industries. Improvements in the

industry can therefore not only result in improvements on an individual level and on the local economy but also to the economic independence and self-sufficiency of the country.

Food processors are also a vital link in the food supply system, contributing to the health and food security of the region by creating foods that are safe and nourishing for local consumption and for export. This is especially important in today's global environment, as international markets open up to food trade. In addition to the well-established food exports such as bananas and sugar, products such as jams, jellies, pickles, spices, fruit drinks and pepper sauces from the Caribbean now make their way to places that a few years ago would not have been regular markets. Seasonal crops can therefore be made available year-round even in locations where they do not normally grow.

For those operating on a small scale to be able to compete effectively in the marketplace, they need to understand not only food processing and preservation techniques, but also how to

^a*Ms. Morris is CFNI's Food Safety Specialist.*

Editorial continued

ensure food safety and quality, which are of extreme importance in creating and maintaining markets. Ensuring that food safety and quality are kept within acceptable standards benefit both the local population and international trade, especially with most countries now rigidly adhering to regulations governing food safety, such as Codex. In recent times, for instance, safety standards in two of the Caribbean's major trading partners, the USA and Europe have been strengthened.

For the benefit of small-scale food processors in this region, CFNI collaborated with the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and published the "Food and Nutrition Resource Manual for the Small-Scale Food Processor in the Caribbean". The purpose of the manual, is to provide guidelines for the production of safe, nutritious processed foods in the Caribbean region. Excerpts of this manual are presented in this issue of **Cajanus**.

The manual is designed as a resource document for training small-scale processors in the Caribbean, to produce safe and nutritious foods, and is structured in three main parts:

Section I: Basic Nutrition and Food Security

This section gives a brief overview of the elements of nutrition and acts as a guide to community nutrition specialists and small processors in ensuring that

processed foods are handled in a way to minimise loss of nutrients. It should also assist rural communities to become aware of the types of basic food items to be consumed to provide adequate nutrition.

Section II: Food Processing, Preservation and Storage

This section is designed to guide the small and/or cottage processing industry in the use of low cost technologies to extend shelf life. Commodities which are readily available in the Caribbean (for example, fish, fruits and vegetables) are used to illustrate the application of the technologies discussed.

Section III. Food Hygiene/Safety

Principles of Good Manufacturing Practices (GMPs) are described, with special emphasis on sanitation, food safety and personal hygiene. Risks and dangers of cross-contamination in the manufacture of food products are highlighted, as well as the management of typical trouble spots.

The excerpts presented in this issue of *Cajanus* focus on food preservation – basic techniques, preserving some of our local Caribbean foods, and the consequences of preservation on nutrient content.

Anyone with an interest in food preservation will find this issue of *Cajanus* interesting and enlightening.