

## Tips for Entering Home Canned Foods at the Hunterdon County 4-H and Agricultural Fair

Sandra Greci, MS, RDN, LDN, CDCES;  
Family & Community Health Sciences Educator  
Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Hunterdon County  
[Greci@njaes.rutgers.edu](mailto:Greci@njaes.rutgers.edu)

***The following are some Frequently Asked Questions and issues that we encounter each year in regard to the Home Canned Foods Judging at the Fair. Please read these carefully if you are planning to submit an entry!***

### **QUESTION: What is a “tested” recipe for home canned foods?**

A **tested recipe** is one where there is data, documentation, or prior knowledge, which supports the food safety of the product produced. The data usually comes from a qualified testing **laboratory** and, in the case of **home canning**, involves measuring the pH, density, and temperature of the product inside the glass jar during processing (to make sure the food is heated sufficiently at all parts within the jar). There may also be simultaneous microbiological testing to determine if the process has destroyed harmful microorganisms. Tested recipes also aim to produce a product of high quality, while guaranteeing product safety.

### **QUESTION: Where can I get tested recipes for home canning?**

Available sources of reliable, tested recipes include:

- **USDA’s Complete Guide to Home Canning-** 2015 Edition:  
[http://nchfp.uga.edu/publications/publications\\_usda.html](http://nchfp.uga.edu/publications/publications_usda.html)
- **The National Center for Home Food Preservation:** <https://nchfp.uga.edu/#gsc.tab=0>
  - Including *So Easy to Preserve*, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2014, the Home Food Preservation resource published by the University of Georgia.
- **Ball Canning Recipes:** <https://www.ballmasonjars.com/recipes> and/or recipes published in the latest edition of **The Ball Blue Book, 37<sup>th</sup> Edition or later.**
- Other **select Extension Universities** who conduct their own research and testing may provide recipes on their websites or in print materials.

### **QUESTION: Why can’t I submit one of my own family recipes or one that I have gotten from the internet?**

Recipes handed-down from family members over the years may not have been updated to follow current home preserving guidelines. Websites such as Pinterest, celebrity chefs, and cookbooks, magazines, and newspaper articles cannot **be counted on to share tested recipes**. The emphasis may be on the taste or appearance of the food, not the food safety of the product.

**QUESTION: What are the most common reasons why entries lose points (or are disqualified) by the Foods Judges?**

The most common reasons include:

- Failure to submit a completed Entry Form with the entry, per the Rules. The Entry Form serves as a check-list to verify the most important safety steps in the preparation of the product.
- Failure to submit a detailed recipe with the entry, per the Rules. The judges must verify that a recipe submitted follows all current guidelines for preparation/processing.
- Failure to follow a **tested recipe from an approved source, which is one of the most serious issues**. Judges are therefore unable to determine if the recipe is safe. Note that judges do not have access to non-approved recipe sources at the time of judging.

Other reasons include:

- Changing ingredients or proportions of ingredients in a recipe which may affect the safety of the product: i.e. altering vinegar/water ratios in pickle recipes, adding more fresh herbs than recommended to a recipe, changing proportions of acid and low acid ingredients in salsas, adding thickeners such as flour or cornstarch
- Using the wrong processing method for the product
- Improper headspace per recommendations for the product. This can also be a result of improper packing of ingredients, which leads to too much air in the jar.
- Using a jar-size that is not indicated in a tested recipe for that product
- Failure to achieve a proper (vacuum) seal on the jar
- Failure to indicate date of processing and name of product on the jar
- Omitting acid (lemon juice or vinegar) to tomato recipes

**QUESTION: Where can learn more about safe home food preservation?**

The **National Center for Home Food Preservation** website contains a wealth of information about preserving food at home: <https://nchfp.uga.edu/#gsc.tab=0>

You may also visit the web-based resources at the Department of Family and Community Health Sciences, Rutgers Cooperative Extension, located at: <https://njaes.rutgers.edu/food-safety/home-food-preservation/>