

Judging Home Dried Foods

Drying is a process of food preservation involving the removal of moisture from foods in order to stop microbial growth and prevent spoilage. The appropriate amount of moisture removed during drying depends on the product, but it must be enough to prevent spoilage and maintain the safety of the product.

Since fruits have a high acid content that aids in preservation, less moisture needs to be removed to preserve these products compared to vegetables and meats. Fruits are usually dried until they are leathery, yet pliable.

Vegetables are lower in acidity and, consequently, need more water removed to safely preserve the product. Vegetables are adequately dried when they are brittle or crisp. Many would shatter if hit with a hammer.

Meat jerky is adequately dried when a piece that is bent will crack without breaking. The highest quality jerky is made from lean meat with little connective tissue

Packaging for dried foods is important. Moisture should not be reabsorbed during storage. Most fairs require that dried foods be exhibited in glass jars since this is the best way to see the product. However, jars containing dried foods do not have to be vacuum sealed. Lids with rubber or plastisol gaskets provide better seals than ungasketed screw-on lids. Even though it is not helpful in a judging situation, dark glass preserves color better than clear glass. Heavy-weight plastic bags are also sometimes permitted, and the zippered kind make judging easier.

Desirable General Characteristics for Dried Foods

Color	Characteristic of product and uniform throughout container. No excessive discoloration.* *Light-colored fruits and vegetables will brown when exposed to air. Pretreatments can minimize this browning during drying and storage but should not be required. Discoloration can also result from drying at too high temperatures or for too long, and pieces will almost appear toasted or burned.
Size and Shape	Pieces in exhibit are uniform in size and shape. No ragged edges.
Texture	Pieces are uniformly dry throughout. See descriptions for individual classes of food.

Desirable General Characteristics for Dried Foods

Container No foreign matter. No visible moisture. Properly labeled. Appropriate size for amount of food being exhibited (too much empty space represents poor storage practice for moisture control). If in a jar: No cracks, chips, or rust on jar. Band or lid free of rust and dents or other damage; clean and easily removed.

Judging Dried Fruits and Leathers

Judging Criteria for Dried Fruits

Color Similar to fresh product and uniform throughout container. No excessive discoloration. Do not penalize for fruit that has darkened because sulfur was not used. Take note of whether the discoloration is excessive as a result of poor drying techniques. No signs of mold.

Size and Shape Uniform and neatly cut. Suitable in size for later use.

Texture Leathery and pliable. If the piece of fruit is folded over itself, it springs back. Not sticky or brittle. Free from cores and objectionable seeds or peel.

Container No foreign matter. No visible moisture. Properly labeled. Appropriate size for amount of food being exhibited (too much empty space represents poor storage practice for moisture control). If in a jar: No cracks, chips, or rust on jar. Band or lid free of rust and dents or other damage; clean and easily removed.

Flavor Should be similar to natural fruit. May be more tart or sweet after water removal. Free from scorched or burned taste. After soaking and cooking, should taste like fresh product.

Judging Criteria for Fruit Leathers

Color	Similar to fresh product and uniform. Spices (e.g., cinnamon) may result in darkening or dark flecks. No signs of mold.
Size and Shape	Rolls or strips of uniform size.
Texture	Leathery, yet pliable. Not sticky, crisp, or brittle. Rolls without tearing or breaking.
Container	Fruit leathers are often wrapped as serving size pieces in plastic or parchment wrap. No foreign matter. No visible moisture. Properly labeled. Appropriate size for amount of food being exhibited (too much empty space represents poor storage practice for moisture control). If in a jar: No cracks, chips, or rust on jar. Band or lid free of rust and dents or other damage; clean and easily removed.
Flavor	Should be characteristic of fruit used. May be more tart or sweet after water removal. Free from scorched or burned taste.

Judging Dried Vegetables and Herbs

Judging Criteria for Dried Vegetables and Herbs

Color	Similar to fresh product and uniform throughout container. No excessive discoloration. No signs of mold.
Size and Shape	Uniform. Vegetables neatly cut. Suitable in size for later use.
Texture	Vegetables should be brittle and crisp; dry enough to rattle. Herbs should pulverize or become like dust when rubbed between fingers.
Container	No foreign matter. No visible moisture. Properly labeled. Appropriate size for amount of food being exhibited (too much empty space represents poor storage practice for moisture control). If in a jar: No cracks, chips, or rust on jar. Band or lid free of rust and dents or other damage; clean and easily removed.
Flavor	Pleasant odor. Vegetables would not be tasted without rehydrating. (After soaking, should taste like fresh product.)

Judging Dried Meats and Jerky

Judging Criteria for Jerky

Color	Characteristic of meat used. Beef and wild game are dark brown or red. Only lean meat is used; free from fat spots. No signs of mold.
Size and Shape	Strips or pieces of uniform size throughout container.
Texture	Leathery, drier than fruit, but not brittle. Piece cracks but does not break when bent.
Container	No foreign matter. No visible moisture. Properly labeled. Appropriate size for amount of food being exhibited (too much empty space represents poor storage practice for moisture control). If in a jar: No cracks, chips, or rust on jar. Band or lid free of rust and dents or other damage; clean and easily removed.
Flavor	Pleasant odor and flavor. Not overly salty, smoky or spiced. Free from rancid flavor.

Summary

Competitive events lend excitement to community activities and provide opportunities to educate people about standards of safety and quality in home food preservation. Judging is a way to recognize quality work on the part of those who enter exhibits and requires application of basic rules and standards from the sponsor, as well as established standards of quality based on the science of food preservation. Exhibitors should not have to gamble on meeting someone's personal preferences. Applying uniform standards is the only way to defend placing decisions and avoid the pitfalls of personal bias.

The guidance provided in this manual is intended to help sponsors develop standards for competitions and select qualified judges. The information can also be used to educate and prepare judges, as well as assist them with summaries of key points during the judging experience. The described criteria are based on canning procedures in the USDA *Complete Guide to Home Canning* as well as food drying recommendations from recognized resources in the Cooperative Extension System.

Dried Foods

Characteristic	Points	
Color Characteristic of product. No excessive discoloration.*	30	
Color uniform throughout container.		
Pretreatment, if done, appropriate. Note: game meat should be frozen to destroy parasites before making jerky.		
Size and Shape Pieces in exhibit are uniform in size and shape; leathers uniform in thickness.	10	
Pieces neatly cut; no ragged edges.		
Size suitable for later use.		
Texture Pieces uniformly dry throughout.	40	
<i>Fruits, tomatoes:</i> Leathery and pliable. If the piece of fruit is folded over itself, it springs back. Chewy, not sticky or brittle. Free from cores and objectionable seeds or peel.		
<i>Vegetables:</i> Brittle and crisp; tough or cracking hard. Dry enough to rattle.		
<i>Herbs:</i> Pulverize or become like dust when rubbed.		
<i>Leathers:</i> Leathery, yet pliable. Not sticky, crisp, or brittle. Rolls without tearing or breaking.		
<i>Jerky:</i> Leathery, drier than fruit, but not brittle. Piece cracks but does not break when bent.	10	
Packaging and Labeling Label is neat, clean and contains name of product, date dried, and method of drying.		
Appropriate size and material for product; airtight closure <i>If in jar:</i> No cracks, chips or rust. Lid/band free of dents, rust, corrosion or dents; clean and easily removed.		
No foreign matter or visible moisture.	10	
Flavor/Odor Pleasant odor and flavor, characteristic of fresh food except jerky. No scorched or musty odor.		
<i>Jerky:</i> Not overly salty, smoky or spiced. Free from rancid flavor.	if not tasted, use points for aroma	
Comments		

* Light-colored fruits and vegetables will brown when exposed to air. Pretreatments can minimize this browning during drying and storage but should not be required. Discoloration can also result from drying at too high temperatures or for too long, and pieces will almost appear toasted or burned.