

When Good Food Goes Bad
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My sister came to visit the other day, and I caught her in my kitchen, throwing all my food into the garbage can. “STOP,” I shrieked, “what are you doing?” “I’m getting rid of all the old, expired food,” she replied. “But I’ve only had that mayonnaise for six years,” I explained.

When I’d calmed down and she’d stopped with the food pitching, we decided to find out what those dates on the food really meant. Did I really need to get rid of so much food? Does mayonnaise ever go bad?

We found out that the only foods that legally require expiration dates according to the Federal government are baby food and infant formula. I don’t have either of these in my kitchen, so I wondered why the other foods all had a label of some kind. “Expires on,” “Expires by,” “Enjoy by,” “Best by,” “Use within,” “Use by,” and so on seemed to be stamped or printed on just about all the store-bought food in my pantry and refrigerator. It turns out that most of this labeling comes voluntarily from the manufacturers of the food products. It also turns out that the stores do not have to remove any products from the shelves upon expiration of these dates, except for the baby foods and infant formulas. Some individual states have food dating laws, but not all. Now, most grocers realize that good customer relations require that spoiled food not be sold, so they do use these dates as guidelines for rotating stock.

According to the USDA, “...“Use-by” dates usually refer to best quality and are not safety dates. But even if the date expires during home storage, a product should be safe, wholesome and of good quality — if handled properly and kept at 40° F or below.” For general use, however, the USDA recommends adhering to the manufacturer’s advice.

“Enjoy by,” “Best by” and similar wording means that the food manufacturer believes that you will find the food quality deteriorates after this date. How much this affects the taste of the food remains an individual assessment.

Another label, “Sell by,” helps the grocery store employees know when to pull food from the shelves in order to ensure that the customers do not buy already spoiled food. Fresh food, such as milk and other fresh dairy products, can usually be consumed for 7-10 days after the “Sell by” date without making anyone sick, provided the dairy products are stored in a safe manner (in the refrigerator, at 40°F or lower). Meats, poultry and fresh fish, however, should be cooked or frozen within 1-2 days of purchase. Eggs, if properly refrigerated, should last 3-5 weeks after the “Sell by” date.

What about shelf-stable food? The University of Clemson, Cooperative Extension publishes a chart showing the amount of time you can store pantry items without loss of quality, but also says “Pantry foods will probably be safe beyond recommended storage time, but eating quality (flavor and texture) and nutritive value will be reduced.” Of course, if you see a bulging or leaking can, or if the pasta seems to be crawling with tiny bugs or larvae, it is time to throw that food away! Go to the El Dorado County Master Food Preservers website at http://ceeldorado.ucdavis.edu/Master_Food_Preservers/ and click on “El Dorado County Master Food Preservers Links” to see the complete chart.

So, the real scoop on date labeling seems to be that the labels provide a guideline to assure that the food you eat get to your table before the quality of the food begins to diminish. Oh, about that mayonnaise. Turns out that after opening, mayonnaise can be stored in the refrigerator for about 2 months. OOPS!

If you have any questions about safe home food preservation, be sure to call the Master Food Preservers and leave a message at (530) 621-5506. A Master Food Preserver will get back to you with an answer. For more information about the public education classes and activities, go to the Master Food Preserver website at http://ceeldorado.ucdavis.edu/Master_Food_Preservers/.