

PENNY SAVER NEWS

Feb. 20, 2014

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How Old is Too Old? 109 Years and counting....

There are lots of people who read the dates on every food can or package they buy. That's great! But a lot of them then throw food away the minute the calendar rolls over to that date. That, unfortunately, is a great waste of food, perfectly good food.

I just recently came across an article about the steamboat Bertrand. Never heard of it? Here's the story: In 1865 the boat was loaded with supplies, including canned foods, for forts and for gold miners in Montana. It headed up the Missouri River, loaded down. But it struck a sandbar and sunk in the middle of Nebraska and was lost. Fast forward to 1968: it was discovered buried in 30 feet of dirt in a soybean field north of Omaha. The farmer gave permission, and archeologists dug it up.

Among the cargo they found canned peaches and tomatoes, oysters, honey and mixed vegetables. Several years later, in 1974, the National Food Processors Association labs analyzed the contents of some of the jars. The food in those jars, 109 years old, was completely safe to eat! There were no bacteria, there was no mold. The food was safe! They did report that the color and appearance were "not as fresh", and the foods didn't smell fresh. But they would not have made anyone sick.

So, does that mean the dates on foods today don't mean anything? No. But the dates on canned goods are not expiration dates, and they don't mean the food won't be safe after the date. Most food canneries today give a recommended shelf life of 2 to 5 years depending on the product. The date on a can might be that recommended life. Or it might just be the date the food was canned. But unless it explicitly says Expires on, or Do Not Use After... it is not the day the food becomes unsafe!

Here's why. When fruits or vegetables are picked for canning they are left in the fields or orchards until they are at their peak of ripeness. Then they are harvested quickly, cleaned, chilled and processed. Usually the time from when the food is picked until it is safely sealed in a can is less than 8 hours! That's how long it takes to wash, trim, cut, sort, put in the can, suck the air out of the can, seal the lid, cook it to kill any bacteria, and chill the can.

Once the can is sealed there is no way for bacteria to get back into it. It is cooked very quickly so that there is less softening than what happens when we cook vegetables on the stove. Without air the enzymes can't work that would turn things brown or soft, or create strange flavors. The cooking also destroys the enzymes. No air and no light can get back into the can either. They are the other things that will change the quality of the food. So once the food is sealed and cooked, there are very few changes that can occur. And no bacteria or molds can grow.

Some foods, mostly things like infant formula and liquid meal replacements, do have Expiration Dates on them. In these foods during long storage the proteins might tie onto the minerals. Or the vitamins might break down. So if you chose to use a very old bottle you or your infant would not get the full nutritional value the label promised. On these items the Expiration Date is important, and they should not be used after it.

But if you find a date from last year on canned fruits or vegetables, meat or seafood, pasta sauce or soup, don't assume that the food will be unsafe. Open the can. The manufacturer was willing to guarantee that you'd be happy with the food up to that date. You may well still be happy with it if you use it. But it won't be unsafe.

Here's a different twist on an old favorite, and a way to use up that last can of pumpkin that didn't make it into a pie. If you don't tell the family they might not even guess what the ingredients are. If you have sage, do use it. It really makes a difference in the flavor of the sauce. Enjoy!

Spaghetti with Creamy Sauce

16 ounces dry spaghetti or other pasta	1 can (12 ounces) fat-free evaporated milk
2 tablespoons margarine	1 can (15 ounces) solid-pack pumpkin
1 teaspoon onion powder	1 teaspoon garlic powder
1 teaspoon dried sage	1/4 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
1/4 cup toasted pine nuts or sunflower seeds (optional)	

Cook the pasta according to the package directions. While the pasta is cooking mix the milk, margarine, pumpkin, onion powder, garlic powder and sage in a saucepan. Cook over medium heat until simmering. Stir in the cheese. Drain the pasta, toss with the sauce and garnish with the pine nuts, if desired. Serves 8.

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