

Food Processing is not a Four-Letter Word

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As someone who has been involved in various aspects of the food industry for over thirty-five years, it is upsetting to hear “food processing” being repeatedly maligned. I cringe when I hear that it is “evil”, and that it completely destroys the goodness and nutritional aspects of the food we eat. Granted, fresh fruits and vegetables have advantages over their processed counterparts, but this does not mean that processed foods are to be regarded with contempt.

Technically, washing and slicing a carrot that you pull from your garden is processing. However, this is not normally what we mean by “processing”, and most of us accept it because it is “transparent” without any misunderstood or hidden steps. Canning, drying, and freezing are common, commercially important, food processing methods. Unfortunately, we frequently paint the entire food processing spectrum with the same brush when it comes to the use of additives or preservatives. Many people find additives confusing, which in turn clouds their judgement about food processing. We cannot go into a detailed discussion in a brief article, since this is a huge, emotionally-charged topic.

Public opinion has done much to pressure the food industry into finding alternate methods of processing foods to create more user-friendly, understandable, and “clean” ingredient lines, which is truly a good thing. However, there is still a vocal outpouring of protest over the use of ingredients simply because of their chemical-sounding names, or the lack of familiarity about their true function in a specific product.

We see fads that originate with people trying to avoid products, such as sugar, with little or no knowledge of the alternative they are using. Often these are endorsed by celebrity spokespersons, thereby adding to the frenzy. Certain alternatives may not be any better than what they are trying to replace.

Rather than dwelling on these perceptions, let’s take a look at why we process foods and the benefits derived.

Perhaps the most obvious reason for processing foods is to extend their storage life by slowing or preventing their spoilage. Typically, the culprits are microorganisms such as yeasts, molds, and bacteria – many of which are capable of causing food-borne diseases. This brings into play the aspect of how processing can be used to enhance

the degree of safety in the foods we consume. Pasteurization of milk is a good example of how a simple heating process has improved the safety of this source of nutrition.

Processing also makes certain foods “edible” or “digestible”. Many of the starch-based foods we eat would not be digestible if the starches were not gelatinized by cooking. This includes something as simple as boiling a potato.

Processing has provided today’s consumers with variety and convenience in their time-impoverished lifestyles. We don’t need to look too far to see how microwavable foods provide a wide range of meals that can be prepared in a matter of minutes. These and oven-ready meals allow us to have high-quality entrées stored in our home freezers with little risk of spoilage over time. Coupled with this is the diversity of international foods we now find in grocery stores, that were never available to us in the past.

Another thing we often fail to consider is how processing permits matching the supply of food with demand in the framework of both time and geography. In Canada, our growing seasons are limited by severe winters. Much of the food that is harvested is then processed for later use. We are also forced to rely on imported fresh produce during the off-season at increased costs to the consumer.

Processing lets us to ship foods beyond our borders to other countries where there is either a need due to poor growing conditions, or there is a potential export market. In our global economy, many countries rely on such exports for financial reasons, or imports to support the nutritional needs of their citizens.

The bottom line to food processing is that it provides a safe, sustainable, consistent, and nutritious supply of high quality food to consumers around the world. So, before you condemn food processing, you may want to consider where we would be without it, and not think of it as a four-letter word. As always, we need to keep a balance in our food consumption patterns and recognize the role of food processing in it.

