

Considerations for using donated ingredients

Using free, donated or alternative sources of ingredients can keep costs down and reduce the environmental impacts of food waste but can have implications for food safety and manufacturing processes of your products.

Consistency and regular supply

Donated food comes in fluctuations and supply cannot always be predicted, both in terms of what is on offer and what amounts you'll receive. Planning for the supply of products using donated produce can be problematic especially when retailers and customers may expect a certain product or recipe and your packaging is already printed.

Product quality and dates

Donated food may be coming towards the end of its life. If you are selling a fresh ready meal you need to be sure that the produce and ingredients you use will be in edible condition on the day that it reaches its Best before / Best before end date or Use by date. Even if you are freezing meals immediately after production, safety and quality standards still need to be maintained and ingredients should be in good condition if you have used donated produce. The Food Safety Act 1990, and regulations thereunder do not exclude foods that are donated, given away or repurposed as all legislative food safety requirements will continue to apply.

Recipe considerations

Consumers buying products may expect a level of consistency of taste and appearance, so keeping your recipe the same for each batch when using donated foods can be quite complicated. Consider using it as a marketing opportunity to demonstrate and say that your products may vary in taste and texture as a result of using produce diverted from waste.

Allergens

The presence of allergens can vary in mixed dry items such as curry powders. If for example you are using one brand of curry powder you have been donated and then change to another brand, check the ingredients very closely to ensure that you are not adding a new allergen and that your recipe information on the packaging is correct. The requirements for pre-packed foods to include allergen details for the consumer will also continue to be required.

How to get around inconsistency in supply

If you have an abundance of a vegetable that you use, consider freezing in advance to use in production later. Have adaptable packaging! Consider having packaging that can be adapted or updated easily to accommodate recipe changes. This may include using labels on the packaging. For example, Tamar Grow Local came up with a name for their ready meals called *Seasonal Suppers*. The packaging was designed to accommodate small runs of different meals using gluts of seasonal vegetables. Using a sticker system the name of the meal, ingredients, nutritional info and traffic light labelling could all be adaptable and changeable and then stuck to the branded sleeve. Although quite time intensive to create the different labels, it was cost effective and could be easily adapted.

Be aware that many highly perishable foods carrying a 'Use By' date, once frozen, will need to be relabelled with a 'Best Before' date when supplied as a frozen product. Also, where meats and meat products are supplied fresh and have been previously frozen, this must be marked. The date of freezing where this is required by legislation, for example for meat, meat preparations and unprocessed fishery products must also be marked on relevant foods. Remember that in freezing products, bacteria are not killed. Freezing and defrosting of foods will inevitably cause some growth of bacteria.

Hygiene

Donated vegetables fresh from the farm may come in with soil, insects and grasses mixed in. Ensure that you have the space to deal with this and effective cleaning policies in place to avoid any cross-contamination. Segregation of raw and ready-to-eat foods must always be assured for fresh and frozen packaged products and the legal requirements to ensure high risk (ready-to-eat, highly perishable foods) are maintained in storage below 8°C (ideally between 1 and 4°C) and frozen foods below -18°C will continue to apply.

Links and further guidance

<https://www.allotment-garden.org/recipe/freezing-produce/freeze-information-blanching/>

