

Introduction to Cottage Foods

Cottage Food Operators in California must specifically meet the following requirements:

- Register with the local Environmental Health Agency
- Only market cottage foods on the approved food list through either indirect and/or direct sales to consumers
- Complete a food processor training course
- Implement sanitary food preparation operations
- Create compliant labels
- Operate within established annual gross sales limit

Cottage Food Operators will also have to obtain approval from their local planning department, which might have other requirements.

Product Possibilities

Cottage Food Operations are allowed to produce certain non-potentially hazardous foods., which do not support the rapid growth of bacteria that would make people sick when held outside of refrigeration temperatures.

Allowable products under the Cottage Food Law include:

- Chocolate-covered nuts
- Granola, cereals, and trail mixes containing nuts
- Nut mixes and nut butters

Planning & Production

Sources for Product Ingredients (Raw Product)

California requires that all ingredients used in cottage foods must come from an “Approved Source.” Included in this are licensed commercial sellers, such as retailers and distributors. Farmers who are certified with their County Agricultural Commissioner can use their own commercially grown fruits, vegetables, nuts, herbs, and honey. Some counties have developed approved source programs for operators of community or culinary gardens who self-certify their management practices. Produce grown in backyard gardens is not allowed to be used in cottage foods.

Food Safety

Dry foods, like nuts, are not a common source of harmful bacteria. However, in recent years a number of dried foods have been associated with outbreaks of salmonellosis. The presence of harmful bacteria cannot be determined by sight, smell, taste, or texture and refrigeration and freezing do not destroy these bacteria.

California almonds sold in retail stores, because of their association with two raw almond outbreaks, must be treated in some way to eliminate Salmonella. Commercial blanching and roasting processes are two types of treatments. Almonds may also be treated with a lite steam/heat treatment, with the gas propylene oxide, or other approved process. The health benefits, storage life, and flavor are not affected by these treatments.

Market Outlook

Cottage foods are niche products of particular interest to consumers desiring locally produced foods. There is a high demand for local, nutritious nuts. This is largely in part because consumers are interested in the numerous health and nutritional benefits of nuts like, almonds, pecans, pistachios, and walnuts which have high levels of unsaturated fatty acids. Extensive research on diet and health indicates that including these nuts in a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol may protect against heart disease.



Planning & Production (cont'd)

Food Safety cont'd

Follow good hygienic practices when handling and shelling nuts:

- Wash hands with soap and water before and after handling nuts
- If buying nuts in the shell, crack them in a clean area and into clean containers
- Store cracked nuts in clean, closed containers
- Washing nuts in the shell is not recommended because the extra moisture could encourage bacteria or mold growth

Marketing

Overview

All Cottage Food Operations must be registered or permitted by the local environmental health agency before starting business. Class A Cottage Food Operators may sell tree nuts at farmers markets, roadside stands, and Community Supported Agriculture programs directly to customers. Class B Cottage Food Operators may also sell to retailers. A Class A Cottage Food Operators will get a higher price for each product, but will also incur higher marketing costs than when selling wholesale.

Labeling

All food made by a Cottage Food Operator must be labeled properly with an approved label which states “made in a home kitchen” in 12 point type, along with a descriptive name of the product, the contact information and location of the Cottage Food Operator, the permit/registration number, an ingredient list in descending order of weight, the net quantity in English units and metric units, and a declaration of food allergens.

Allergens

Tree nuts are among the eight most common food allergens. Allergic reactions can vary in severity from stomach and intestinal upset, skin irritations, sneezing, and shortness of breath to more severe reactions including anaphylaxis, which is a life-threatening reaction that includes swelling of the throat, difficulty talking or breathing, vomiting, diarrhea, and/or a drop in blood pressure.

There are two approved methods prescribed by federal law for declaring the food sources of allergens in packaged foods.

- 1) Have a separate summary statement immediately following or adjacent to the ingredient list.
- 2) Have the allergen listed within the ingredient list.

Storage & Packaging

The length of time you can store nuts depends on the storage temperature and humidity. Storage life is shorter at room temperature than it is in a refrigerator or freezer. Room temperature storage encourages insect growth and causes nut oils to become rancid quicker. Rancid nuts are not unsafe but they have a sharp flavor that most people find unpleasant. Nuts can maintain quality for up to a few months at room temperature and a shorter time in a warmer environment. Nuts retain quality for a year or more at refrigerator temperature (40°F or below). Be aware that shelled nuts absorb moisture and external flavors, so they should be packed in moisture free and odor-tight packaging such as plastic or glass containers. Storing nuts this way also reduces the risk of contamination by harmful bacteria.



Resources

Consumer Knowledge and Handling of Tree Nuts: Food Safety Implications:
<https://www.foodprotection.org/files/food-protection-trends/Jan-11-Bruhn.pdf>

Nuts: Safe Methods for Consumers to Handle, Store, and Enjoy:
<https://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/pdf/8406.pdf>

For more information on Cottage Foods visit:

<https://ucanr.edu/sites/cottagefoods/>