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Holiday foods: Homemade and mail order gifts are welcome

K-State food safety specialist provides tips

K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan – Candy, jellies, cookies and more—some of the best holiday gifts come from our own kitchens, or from the kitchens of local specialty food companies.

If you plan to send gifts of food to family and friends this holiday season, don't take a chance on your food going to waste. Pack it safely, mark it clearly and be sure to notify the receiver of its expected delivery date.

That's the advice of Londa Nwadike, assistant professor of food science at Kansas State University.

"Everyone likes to get gifts of food, especially homemade or specialty food items," said Nwadike, who is a food safety specialist with K-State Research and Extension and the University of Missouri Extension. "However, certain steps must be taken by the sender and the receiver to ensure that the food arrives in top-quality condition and is safe to eat."

Perishable foods will stay at a safe temperature longer if frozen solid first. Once the item is completely frozen, pack your food with a cold source such as a frozen gel pack or purchased dry ice.

Check with your post office for the best method of packing your food gift to ensure safety and quality, and the recommended shipping method. Remember, perishable foods need to arrive as soon as possible, ideally overnight.

Make sure to compare shipping options with your local post office and other companies. You may need to pay extra for a quicker shipping method, such as overnight delivery.

"Although you may want the gift to be a surprise," Nwadike said, "with perishable foods, you should notify the recipient and make sure someone will be home to take the delivery on the expected delivery date. Don't have a perishable item delivered to an office unless you know it will arrive when someone there will be responsible to refrigerate or freeze it upon arrival, and refrigerator space is available for keeping it cold."

For packing, use a sturdy box made of heavy foam or corrugated cardboard. Use crushed newspaper or foam "peanuts" to help cushion the item and fill empty space. Air space in the box can cause the food and cold source to thaw quicker.

Mark the package "keep refrigerated," and list the contents on the outside of the package. Include instructions on proper temperature and storage inside the box for the recipient.

Going retail

For peace of mind or if trying to make a last-minute deadline, you may want to order through a mail order company, whose business is to ship food products quickly and safely, Nwadike said. Many Kansas and Missouri food businesses send food products through the mail, so you can also help to support local businesses by sending their products as gifts.

When ordering food gifts through catalogs, ask the company what type of cold source will be used with perishable food and how long the package will be in transit. The cold source must last long enough for the food to arrive still frozen, or firm and cold. Ideally, the item will be shipped overnight. Check that the package will be labeled with "keep refrigerated."

"Perishables have a much better chance of surviving if properly labeled," the specialist noted. "Ask if information on proper arrival temperature and storage will be included with the item."

Find out approximately when the gift will arrive. Check with the recipient or someone at that address about a convenient delivery date. If no one will be home, arrange for a neighbor to receive the gift, and refrigerate or freeze it immediately.

Sweet foods like fruitcakes, candy, jams and jellies can be shipped at room temperature and seldom pose health problems, as the sugar and other preservatives usually postpone deterioration. In these cases, the main thing to watch for is torn packaging, dents or cracks in glass or ceramic containers.

Cheesecake and similar products are one exception in the dessert category. They must stay cold (below 40 degrees Fahrenheit) to prevent spoilage. Make sure they are shipped frozen solid and are refrigerated upon arrival, Nwadike said.

If you learn that your food gift arrived spoiled or damaged, call the company regarding its return and refund policy. If you shipped it yourself, and the delay was the fault of the post office or other courier, call and explain the situation and ask for a resolution.

If the quantity and quality is not what you paid for, contact your local better business bureau or the Direct Marketing Association, Consumer Affairs Department, at 1615 L Street NW, Suite 1100, Washington, DC 20036 or by email: Consumer@the-DMA.org; explain your problem briefly by providing details on shipping dates, costs and the product ordered.

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