

Quality Aspects of Dried and Salted Fish

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Drying is one of the oldest and cheapest method which still continues to be the most widely used method of fish preservation in many parts of the world. Though many processing and preservation technologies are introduced as a result of revolutionary changes happened over the years, the importance of drying have made its presence in the market. In addition to drying technique other traditional methods of processing includes, salting, smoking, pickling, marination and fermentation, which collectively known as curing. These preservation methods can be used either single or a combination of methods. Curing is more practiced in areas where the availability of fresh fish is comparatively limited viz., interior markets as well as hilly areas, simultaneously in the coastal areas when an excess catch is to be preserved for later utilization during the lean season or for marketing to other areas.

The term 'drying' implies the removal of water by evaporation. In fish, water constitutes about 70-80% and since water is essential for the activity of all living organisms, its removal will facilitate retardation of microbial and autolytic activity as well as oxidative changes and hence can be used as a method of preservation. In any process of drying, the removal of water requires an input of thermal energy. The thermal energy required to drive off the water can be obtained from a variety of sources like the sun or the controlled burning of oil, gas or wood, electrical heating etc. The thermal energy can also be supplied directly to the fish tissue by microwave electromagnetic radiation or ultrasonic heating.

Drying Phases

During air drying, water is removed from the surface of the fish and water moves from the deeper layers to the surface. Drying takes place in two distinct phases. In the first phase, whilst the surface of the fish is wet, the rate of drying depends on the condition (velocity, relative humidity etc.) of the air around the fish. If the surrounding air conditions remain constant, the rate of drying will remain constant; this phase is called the 'constant rate period'. Once all the surface moisture has been carried away, the second phase of drying begins and this depends on the rate at which moisture can be brought to the surface of the fish. As the concentration of moisture in the fish falls, the rate of movement of moisture to the surface is reduced and the drying rate becomes slower; this phase is called the 'falling rate period'.

Methods of Drying

There are basically two methods of drying fish. The common and traditional method being sun drying which is done by utilizing the atmospheric conditions viz., temperature, humidity and airflow. In recent times, the controlled artificial dehydration of fish has been developed so that fish drying can be carried out under controlled conditions, regardless of weather conditions.

Salting

Salting is one of the oldest methods of preservation of fish. Salting is usually done as such or in combination with drying or as a pre-treatment to smoking. The presence of sufficient quantities of common salt (sodium chloride) in fish can prevent or drastically reduce bacterial action. Salting amounts to a process of salt penetration into the fish flesh when fish is placed in a strong solution of salt (brine) which is stronger than the solution of salt in the fish tissue. Penetration ends when the salt concentration of the fish equals that of the surrounding medium. This phenomenon is known as osmosis. This is based on different factors like diffusion and biochemical changes in various constituents of the fish. The process facilitates preservation of fish by reducing the water activity. A concentration of between 6–10 % salt in the tissue together with the removal of some water from the tissue during the salting process will prevent the activity of most spoilage bacteria. If fish are salted before drying, less water needs to be removed to achieve preservation. A water content of 35–45%, depending on the amount of salt present, will often prevent, or drastically reduce, the action of bacteria.

Salt: Source and properties

Common salt, in its purest form consists of sodium chloride (NaCl). However almost all commercial salts contain varying levels of impurities depending on the source and method of production.

Based on the source as well as method of manufacture, common salt can be grouped as:

- (1) Solar salt: prepared by the evaporation of sea or salt lake waters by the action of sun and wind.
- (2) Brine evaporated salts: produced from underground salt deposits which are brought to the surface in solution form and is heat evaporated.
- (3) Rock salt: obtained as natural deposits from interior rock mines which are ground to varying degrees of fineness without any purification.

Chemical composition

Commercial salts vary widely in their composition with best quality salt containing up to 99.9 % sodium chloride, whereas low quality salt may only contain 80 % sodium chloride.

The main chemical impurities of commercial salts include calcium and magnesium chlorides and sulphates, sodium sulphate and carbonate, and traces of copper and iron. Apart from these, contaminants such as dust, sand and water may also be present in salt. Presence of calcium and magnesium chlorides even in small quantities tends to slow down the penetration of salt into the flesh and hence their presence may lead to increase the rate of spoilage. Further magnesium chloride is hygroscopic and tends to absorb water, making the fish more difficult to dry and to keep dry. Calcium and magnesium salts give a whiter colour but tend to impart a bitter taste. Very often the consumer demands a whitish colour in salted fish products and small quantities of calcium and magnesium compounds in the salt are usually considered desirable. Excessive quantities, however lead to a bitter flavour and the dried product tends to be brittle which can cause problems during packaging and distribution. Trace quantities of copper in salt can cause the surface of salted fish to turn brown affecting the appeal of dried fish.

Microbiological purity

Many commercial salts, particularly solar salts, contain large numbers of salt tolerant bacteria (halophiles) and counts of up to 10⁵/g have been recorded. A group of halophiles, also referred to as the red or pink bacteria, can be a problem in commercial fish curing operations as they cause a reddening of wet or partly dried salt fish. Halophilic moulds tend to grow on dried fish under favourable conditions causing the formation of dark patches called 'dun'. They tend to occur more frequently in rock salt.

Physical properties

Fine grain salt dissolves more rapidly in water and is preferred for making brines. However on direct application of fine grain salt on fish causes a rapid removal of water from the surface which becomes hard and prevents the penetration of salt to the inside of the fish, a condition referred to as 'salt burn'. Hence for dry salting, a mixture of large and small grain sizes of salt is recommended.

Types of Salting

Dry salting: This is the most widely used method of fish curing. Dry salting is advisable for fishes of any size, except fatty fishes. The fish is gutted, beheaded or ventrally split open and the viscera removed followed by washing. Scoring is also practiced if the flesh portion is thick for facilitating better salt penetration. Salt is then applied in the ratio 1:3 to 1: 10 (salt to fish) depending upon the size of the fish. The fish is then stacked in clean cement tanks or other good containers layered with salt and weight is applied from top for better salt penetration. The fish is kept in this condition for 24-48 hours. After salting period, the fish is taken out, washed in brine to remove adhering salt and drained. It is then hygienically dried to a moisture content of about 25%. Yield of the product by this method is about 35-40% with a storage stability of upto three months under ambient conditions.

Wet salting: The initial stages of processing and salting are the same as for dry curing. However the fish kept in tank is allowed to remain in self brine till marketing without further drying. For marketing, as per the demand the wet salted fish is drained and packed in palmyrah leaf baskets or coconut leaf baskets. This method is particularly suitable for fatty fishes like oil sardine, mackerel etc. Wet salted fishes have short shelf stability with a moisture content of 50-55% and a salt content of around 25%.

Pickle salting: Pickle curing is a type of wet salting where the fish is layered by granular salt which, dissolves in the surface moisture of the fish forming solution which penetrates into the fish removing moisture from the fish. The fish is allowed to remain in this self-brine. If the self-brine is not sufficient, saturated brine is added to immerse the fish.

Kench salting: In this method, salt is rubbed on to the surface of the fish and stacked in layers of salt and fish. The self-brine formed is allowed to drain away. This method cannot be recommended for general use in the tropics as the fish are not covered by the brine or pickle and are therefore more susceptible to spoilage and insect attack. Exposure to the air and the presence of salt also encourages the rate of fat oxidation which gives rise to discoloration and the characteristic rancid flavours.

Mona curing: Mona curing is mainly adopted for medium to small size fishes. Before salting, the intestine and entrails are removed by pulling out through the gill region without split opening the fish. The flesh is not exposed during salting thereby causing less contamination and the product has a shelf stability of about two months. The yield obtained by this method is about 70%.

Pit curing: In this method, fish is mixed with salt (4:1) and placed in pits dug on beaches. The pits may be lined with palmyrah / coconut leaves. After 2-3 days of maturation, the fish is taken out for marketing in wet condition and packed in bamboo baskets and transported to markets without drying. The quality of fish cured by this technique is poor with a shelf stability of upto three weeks only.

Colombo Curing: Colombo curing is similar to pickling process which is widely practiced in Sri Lanka. A piece of dried malabar tamarind (*Garginia cambogea*) is kept in the abdomen portion of the gutted and cleaned fish which is further stacked in airtight wooden barrels filled with brine. Fishes cured by this method has a shelf life for upto 6 months.

Quality problems associated with cured and dried products

1. **Pink/Red:** Salt content prevents the growth of normal spoilage microflora in the fish but halophiles, which can survive at 12-15% of salt concentration, will survive. Halophilic bacteria are present in most of the commercial salt. A particular group of halophiles called Red / Pink cause reddening of wet or partially dried salted fish. These do not grow in brine or in fully dried fish. They are aerobic and proteolytic in nature,

grows best at 36°C by decomposing protein and giving out an ammoniacal odour. Spoilage appears on the surface as slimy pink patches. However these bacteria are not harmful in nature. Usage of good quality salt is recommended to avoid this condition. This spoilage is mostly found in heavily salted fish and absent in unsalted fish.

2. **Dun:** In salted fish, brownish black or yellow brown spots are seen on the fleshy parts, referred to as “dun”. This is mainly caused by growth of halophilic mould called *Sporendonema epizoum*. This gives the fish a very bad appearance. Moulds usually grow at relative humidity above 75%. The optimum temperature for growth is 30-35 °C. During the initial stages of appearance of moulds on the fish, it is possible to remove them manually. In advanced stages it penetrates into the flesh. To avoid the mould growth it is necessary that the fish be dried, packed and stored properly to avoid uptake of moisture. Chemical method of prevention includes dipping the fish in a 5% solution of calcium propionate in saturated brine for 3-5 minutes depending upon the size of the fish.
3. **Salt Burn:** A mixture of large and small grain sizes is recommended for dry salting of fish. If fine grain is used directly on the fish, salt burn may occur due to the rapid removal of water from the surface with no penetration of salt to the interior of the fish.
4. **Case hardening:** Under certain conditions, where the constant rate drying is very rapid due to high temperature and low relative humidity, the surface of the fish can become 'case hardened' and the movement of moisture from the deeper layers to the surface is prevented. This can result in a fish which is dry at surface. However the centre remains wet and hence spoils quickly.
5. **Rancidity:** This is caused by the oxidation of fat, which is more pronounced in oil rich fishes like mackerel, sardine etc. The unsaturated fat in the fish reacts with the oxygen in the atmosphere forming peroxides, which are further broken down into simple and odoriferous compounds like aldehydes, ketones and hydroxy acids, which impart the characteristic odours. At this stage the colour of the fish changes from yellowish to brown referred to as rust. This change results in an unpleasant flavour and odour to the product, leading to consumer rejection.
6. **Insect Infestation:** Spoilage due to insect infestation occurs during initial drying stages as well as during storage of the dried samples. The flies which attack the fish during the initial drying stage are mainly blowflies belonging to the family Calliphoridae and Sarcophagidae. These flies are attracted by the smell of decaying matter and odours emitted from the deteriorating fishes. During the glut season when the fish is in plenty and some are left to rot, these flies come and lay their eggs. These eggs develop into maggots, which bury within the gill region and sand for protection from extreme heat. and develop mainly when conditions are favourable. The most commonly found pests during storage are beetles belonging to the family Dermestidae. Beetles attack when the moisture content is low and especially when the storage is for a long time. The commonly found beetles are *Dermestes ater*, *D frischii*, *D maculates*, *D carnivorous* and *Necrobia rufipes*. The larva does most of the damage by consuming dried flesh until the bones only remain. Mites are also an important pest, which are found infesting

dried and smoked products. *Lardoglyphus kono* is the commonly found mite in fish products. Infestation can be reduced by proper hygiene and sanitation, disposal of wastes and decaying matter, use of physical barriers like screens, covers for curing tanks etc, and use of heat to physically drive away the insects and kill them at 45 °C.

7. Fragmentation: Denaturation and excess drying of fish results in breaking down of the fish during handling. Fish can become brittle and liable to physical damage when handled roughly. Insect infestation is also a reason behind fragmentation in dried samples. It is necessary that fresh fish be used as raw material to ensure a good finished product.

Conclusion

Curing is one of the oldest and traditional methods of fish preservation. These are cost effective technologies, which can be opted for a wide range of communities. However a major drawback with this traditional processing is the lack of standard operating procedures being followed which affects the quality of cured products. Moreover, there is a general a conception that drying/salting is a secondary method for preservation applicable for low value as well as inferior quality varieties. Efforts towards effective and hygienic handling practices in the process chain, popularization of improved drying and packaging practices, and adequate extension services can facilitate better adoption of cured fishery products in the seafood sector.