Thermal Processing and RTE (Ready to Eat) Products: An Overview

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Processing and preservation of food is an important activates to ensure safe food supply apart from reducing food loss. Fish being highly perishable food commodity, processing and preservation assumes great importance. There are number of reasons for processing fish and shellfish which are given below.

1. To supply safe food
2. To minimize loss/waste of valuable food commodity
3. To meet consumer preference and specified quality standards
4. To extend the shelf life of food for longer duration
5. To make profit by adding value and increasing convenience to the consumer

Thermal sterilization of foods is the most significant part of food processing industry and is one of the most effective means of preserving food supply. Thermal processing, which is commonly referred as heat processing or canning is a means of achieving long-term microbiological stability for non-dried foods without the use of refrigeration, by prolonged heating in hermetically sealed containers, such as cans or retortable pouches, to render the contents of the container sterile. The concept of thermal processing has come a long way since the invention of the process by French confectioner, Nicholas Appert. Later on Bigelow and Ball developed the scientific basis for calculating the sterilization process for producing safe foods. Today, thermal processing forms one of the most widely used method of preserving and extending shelf life of

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treatment for sufficient time to destroy all the microorganisms of public health and spoilage concerns. Normally, thermal processing is not designed to destroy all microorganisms in a packaged product, which may result in low quality product which destroys important nutrients. Instead of this, the pathogenic microorganisms in a hermetically sealed container are destroyed by heating and a suitable environment is created inside the container which does not support the growth of spoilage type microorganisms. Several factors must be considered for deciding the extent of heat processing which include,

a)   type and heat resistance of the target microorganism, spore, or enzyme present in the food

b)   pH of the food

c)   heating conditions

d)   thermo-physical properties of the food and the container shape and size

e)   storage conditions

Thermal processing is designed to destroy different microorganisms and enzymes present in the food. Normally in thermal processing, exhausting step is carried out to before sealing the containers. In some cases, food is vacuum packed in hermetically sealed containers. In such cases very low levels of oxygen is intentionally achieved. Hence, the prevailing conditions are not favorable for the growth of microorganisms that require oxygen (obligate aerobes) to create food spoilage or public-health problems. Further, the spores of obligate aerobes are less heat resistant than the microbial spores that grow under anaerobic conditions (facultative or obligate anaerobes). The growth and activity of these anaerobic microorganisms are largely pH dependent. From a thermal-processing standpoint, foods are divided into three distinct pH groups which are given below. Changes in the intrinsic properties of food, mainly salt, water activity and pH are known to affect the ability of microorganisms to survive thermal processes in addition to their genotype. Due to health related concerns on the use of salt, there is increased demand to reduce salt levels in foods. The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) have classified foods in the federal register (21 CFR Part 114) as follows (Table 2):

1.   high-acid foods (pH < 3.7; e.g., apple, apple juice, apple cider, apple sauce, berries, cherry (red sour), cranberry juice, cranberry sauce, fruit jellies, grapefruit juice, grapefruit pulp, lemon juice, lime juice, orange juice, pineapple juice, sour pickles, vinegar)

2.   acid or medium-acid foods (pH 3.7 - 4.5; e.g., fruit jams, frit cocktail, grapes, tomato, tomato juice, peaches, piento, pineapple slices, potato salad, prune juice, vegetable juice)

3.   low-acid foods (pH > 4.5; e.g., all meats, fish and shellfishes, vegetables, mixed entries, and most soups).

Table 2. Approximate pH range of different food

Food	pH	Food	pH
Lemon juice	2.0 - 2.6	Sweet potato	5.3 – 5.6
Apples	3.1 - 4.0	Onion	5.3 – 5.8
Blueberries	3.1 – 3.3	Spinach	5.5 – 6.8
Sauerkraut	3.3 – 3.6	Beans	5.6 – 6.5
Orange juice	3.3 – 4.2	Soybeans	6.0 – 6.6
Apricot	3.3 – 4.0	Mushroom	6.0 – 6.7
Bananas	4.5 – 5.2	Clams	6.0 – 7.1
Beef	5.1 – 7.0	Salmon	6.1 – 6.3
Carrot	4.9 – 5.2	Coconut milk	6.1 – 7.0
Green pepper	5.2 – 5.9	Milk	6.4 – 6.8
Papaya	5.2 – 6.0	Chicken	6.5 – 6.7
Tuna	5.2 – 6.1	Whole egg	7.1 – 7.9

The acidity of the substrate or medium in which micro-organisms are present is an important factor in determining the extent of heat treatment required. With reference to thermal processing of food products, special attention should be devoted to *Clostridium botulinum* which is a highly heat resistant mesophilic gram positive, rod shaped spore-forming anaerobic pathogen that produces the toxin *botulin*. It has been generally accepted that *C. botulinum* and other spore forming, human pathogens does not grow and produce toxins below a pH of 4.6. The organisms that can grow in such acid conditions are destroyed by relatively mild heat treatments. For food with pH values greater than 4.5, which are known as low-acid products which includes fishery

products, it is necessary to apply a time–temperature regime sufficient to inactivate spores of *C. botulinum* which is commonly referred to as a *botulinum cook* in the industry. Thermal processes are calibrated in terms of the equivalent time the thermal centre of the product, i.e. the point of the product in the container most distant from the heat source or cold spot, spends at 121.1°C, and this thermal process lethality time is termed the F_0 value. Although there are other microorganisms, for example *Bacillus stearothermophilus*, *B. thermoacidurans,* and *C. thermosaccolyaticum*, which are *thermophilic* in nature (optimal growth temperature ~ 50–55°C) and are more heat resistant than *C. botulinum a* compromise on the practical impossibility of achieving full sterility in the contents of a hermetically sealed container during commercial heat processing, whereby the initial bacterial load is destroyed through sufficient decimal reductions to reduce the possibility of a single organism surviving to an acceptably low level. This level depends on the organism, usually *Clostridium botulinum*, which the process is designed to destroy. The time required to reduce the number of spores of this organism (or any other micro-organism) by a factor of 10 at a specific reference temperature (121.1°C) is the decimal reduction time, or *D* value, denoted D_0. The D_0 value for *Clostridium botulinum* spores can be taken as 0.25 minutes. To achieve a reduction by a factor of 10^{12}, regarded as an acceptably low level, requires 3 minutes at 121.1°C, and is known as the process value, or *F* value, designated F_0 so, in this case, $F_0 = 3$, which is known as a botulinum cook which is the basis of commercial sterility.

Thermal resistance of microorganisms

For establishing a safe thermal processing, knowledge on the target microorganism or enzyme, its thermal resistance, microbiological history of the product, composition of the product and storage conditions are essential. After identifying the target microorganism, thermal resistance of the microorganism must be determined under conditions similar to the container. Thermal destruction of microorganism generally follow a first-order reaction indicating a logarithmic order of death i.e., the logarithm of the number of microorganisms surviving a given heat treatment at a particular temperature plotted against heating time (survivor curve) will give a straight line (Figure 1). The microbial destruction rate is generally defined in terms of a decimal reduction time (D value) which represents a heating time that results in 90% destruction of the existing microbial population or one decimal reduction in the surviving microbial population. Graphically, this represents the time between which the survival curve passes through one logarithmic cycle (Fig. 1). Mathematically,

$$D = (t_2 - t_1) / (\log a - \log b)$$

where, a and b are the survivor counts following heating for t_1 and t_2 min, respectively. As the survivor or destruction curve follows the logarithmic nature, the complete destruction of the microorganisms is theoretically not possible.

From the survivor curve, as the graph is known, it can be seen that the time interval required to bring about one decimal reduction, i.e. 90% reduction in the number of survivors is constant. This means that the time to reduce the spore population from 10,000 to 1000 is the same as the time required to reduce the spore population from 1000 to 100. This time interval is known as the

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numbers, but it is affected by the temperature of the heating medium. The higher the temperature, faster the rate of thermal destruction and lower the D value. The unit of measurement for D is

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in spore numbers are brought about by a thermal process, there will always be some probability of spore survival. Different micro-organisms and their spores have different D values as shown in Table–3.
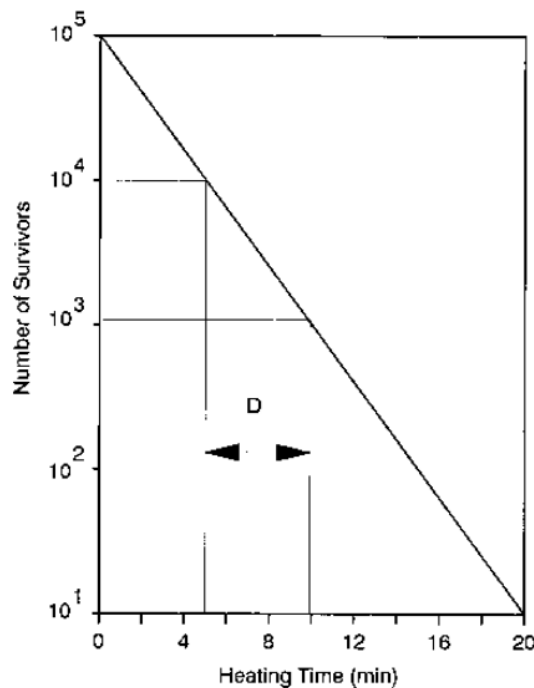

Fig 1. Survivor curve

Table-3. D value (at 121.1°C) of some bacterial spores

Microorganism	Optimum growth temperature (°C)	D value (min)
Bacillus stearothermophilus	55	4 to 5
Clostridium thermosaccharolyticum	55	3 to 4
Clostridium nigrificans	55	2 to 3
Clostridium botulinum types A & B	37	0.1 to 0.25
Clostridium sporogenes (PA 3679)	37	0.1 to 1.5
Bacillus coagulans	37	0.01 to 0.07
Non-spore forming mesophilic bacterial yeasts and moulds	30 - 35	0.5 to 1.0

The thermal death time may be defined as the time required at any specified temperature to inactivate an arbitrarily chosen proportion of the spores, the higher the proportion the greater will be the margin of safety. TDT is the heating time required to cause complete destruction of a microbial population. Such data are obtained by subjecting a microbial population to a series of heat treatments at a given temperature and testing for survivors. The thermal death time curve is obtained by plotting the thermal death time on logarithmic scale against temperature of heating on linear scale on a semilogarithmic graph paper (Fig. 2). Comparing TDT approach with the decimal reduction approach, one can easily recognize that the TDT value depends on the initial microbial load (while D value does not). Further, if TDT is always measured with reference to a standard initial load or load reduction, it simply represents a certain multiple of D value. For example, if TDT represents the time to reduce the population from 10^0 to 10^{-12}, then TDT is a measure of 12 D values. i.e., TDT = nD, where n is the number of decimal reductions. The extent of inactivation in the case of pathogenic microorganisms (*C. botulinum*) is equivalent to a 12 D process. The slope

'z' ,

traverse one log cycle. The temperature sensitivity indicator is defined as z, a value which

represents a temperature range which results in a ten-fold change in D values or, on a semilog graph, it represents the temperature range between which the D value curve passes through one 'z' sensitivity indicator is usually taken as 10°C in the case of *C.botulinum.*
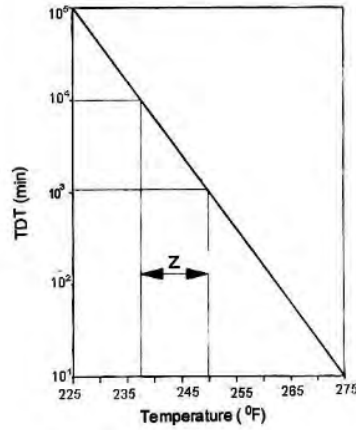

Fig. 2   TDT Curve

For the purpose of heat process determination with respect to their lethality towards specific micro-organisms, the reciprocal of the thermal death time (TDT value) called the lethal rate, L is used. So, instead of temperatures, the corresponding lethal rates are plotted against time, the area enclosed by the graph and the ordinate represent the F value for the process. i.e.,

$$L = \frac{1}{TDT}, \quad \text{and}$$

$$F = \int_{0}^{t} L \, dt$$

Thermal Process Severity or F$_0$ value

From D value and the initial number of spores inside the sealed container (N_o), an idea of the severity of heat process required to reduce the spore population to a predetermined level, N_t, can be calculated from the equation:

$t = D (\log N_o - \log N_t)$ or $t = D \log (N_o/N_t)$

where, t = time required to achieve commercial sterility

This log N_0/N_t ' , ' '

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$$F_0 = mD_{121.1°C}$$

For example, considering the generally accepted minimum process for prevention of botulism through under processing of canned fishery products preserved by heat alone, assuming that the initial loads are of the order of 1 spore/g and in line with good manufacturing practice guidelines, the final loads shall be no more than $\log 10^{-12}$ spores/g. That is 12 decimal reductions are required. It is also known as 12 D process. The minimum time required to achieve commercial sterility can be calculated from

$$t = 0.25 (\log 1 - \log 10^{-12}),$$

i.e., $t = 0.25 \times 12 = 3.00$ min

Thus an F_0 value of 3.00 minutes at 121.1°C at the slowest heating point (SHP) of the container is sufficient for providing safety from pathogenic organism *C. botulinum*.

Commercial sterility

If the thermal process is sufficient to fulfill the criteria of safety and prevention of non-pathogenic spoilage under normal conditions of transport and storage, the product is said to be ' ' I , O / HO x Commission (1983) defines, commercial sterility as the condition achieved by the application of heat, sufficient alone or in combination with other appropriate treatments, to render the food free from microorganisms capable of growing in the food at normal non-refrigerated conditions at which the food is likely to be held during distribution and storage. Apart from this concept there are circumstances where a canner will select a process which is more severe than that required for commercial sterility as in the case of mackerel and sardine where bone softening is considered desirable.

Mechanism of heat transfer

Understanding the mechanism of heat transfer is very important for thermal processing. Normally, there are three different modes of heat transfer: conduction, convection and radiation. Conduction is the transfer of heat by molecular motion in solid bodies. Convection is the transfer

of heat by fluid flow, created by density differences and buoyancy effects, in fluid products. Radiation is the transfer of electromagnetic energy between two bodies at different temperatures. In thermal processed foods, the mechanism of heat transfer is either by conduction, convection or by broken heating (combination of conduction and convection). The factors which determine the mode of heat transfer are nature or consistency of a food product, the presence of particles, and the use of thickening agents and sugars. The heating modes in the thermal processing are first by heat transfer to the container or packaging material from heating and cooling media, second through the container wall and third is into the product from container wall. Convective-heat transfer rates depend largely on the velocity of flow of the media over the container, and this is an important factor to be controlled in all processing operations. In conduction heading method, energy transfer takes place when different parts of a solid body are at different temperatures. The slowest heating point or cold point in cylindrical metal containers is at its geometric centre for food products heated by conduction method. Convection heat transfer involves the transfer of heat from one location to the other through the actual movement or flow of a fluid. The slowest heating point for convection heated products in cylindrical metal container is approximately $1/10^{th}$ up from the base of the container. Packaging material forms the most important component of thermal processed foods. It should be able to withstand the severe process conditions and should prevent recontamination of the product.

Containers for thermal processing

Containers used for thermal processing should have special properties like it should withstand high temperature and pressure. Tin cans are commonly used in the canning industry and cans are denoted by trade name. First digit represents diameter of can (in inches) and next two digits represent measurement in sixteenth of inches. Apart from OTS cans, other container used in canning are: aluminium cans, tin free steel (TFS) cans, glass containers, retort pouches and semi-rigid containers.

Glass containers

Glass is a natural solution of suitable silicates formed by heat and fusion followed by immediate cooling to prevent crystallization. It is an amorphous transparent or translucent super cooled liquid. Modern glass container is made of a mixture of oxides viz., silica (S_1O_2), lime (CaO), Soda (Na_2O), alumina (Al_2O3), magnesia (MgO) and potash in definite proportions.

Colouring matter and strength improvers are added to this mixture and fused at 1350 - 1400ºC and cooled sufficiently quick to solidify into a vitreous or non-crystalline condition.

Glass jars for food packing has the advantages of very low interaction with the contents and product visibility. However, they require more careful processing and handling. Glass containers used in canning should be able to withstand heat processing at high temperature and ' ' reater significance in caning than other reasons of breakage. Thermal shock is due to the difference in the temperature between the inside and the outside walls of the container giving rise to different rates of expansion in the glass wall producing an int ' ' large cracks and container failure. Thermal shock will be greater if the wall thickness is high. Therefore, glass container in canning should have relatively thin and uniform walls. Similarly the bottom and the wall should have thickness as uniform as possible. More failures occur at sharp containers and flat surface and hence these should be avoided. Chemical surface coatings are often applied to make the glass more resistant t ' ' seals are available, including venting and nonventing types, in sizes from 30 to 110 mm in diameter, and made of either tin or tin-free steel. It is essential to use the correct overpressure during retorting to prevent the lid being distorted. It is also essential to preheat the jars prior to processing to prevent shock breakage.

Metal containers

Metal cans are most widely used containers for thermal processed products. Metal containers are normally made of tin, aluminium or tin-free steel.

Tin plate cans

Tinplate is low metalloid steel plate of can making quality (CMQ) coated on both sides with tin giving a final composition of 98% steel and 2% tin. Thickness varies from 0.19 to 0.3 mm depending on the size of the can. Specifications with respect to content of other elements are: Carbon (0.04 - 0.12%), manganese (0.25 - 0.6%), sulphur (0.05 % max), phosphorus (0.02 % max), silicon (0.01% max) and copper (0.08% max). Corrosive nature of tin plate depends principally on the contents of copper and phosphorous. The higher the contents of these metals, greater the corrosiveness of steel. However, higher phosphorous content imparts greater stiffness to steel plate

which is advantageous in certain applications where higher pressure develops in the container, eg; beer can.

Base plate for can making is manufactured using the cold reduction (CR) process. CR plates are more advantageous over hot reduced plates because of the following characteristics.

1. Superior mechanical properties – possible to use thinner plates without loss of strength

2. More uniform gauge thickness

3. Better resistance to corrosion

4. Better appearance

Aluminium cans

Pure aluminium of 99.5 to 99.7% purity is alloyed with one or more elements like magnesium, manganese, zinc, copper etc. to obtain the desired composition. Aluminium alloyed with mangnesium is the most commonly used material. Alloyed aluminium is first given an anticorrosive treatment; usually anodising in dilute sulphuric acid. The thin layer of oxides formed provides corrosion resistance. To enhance this, the sheet is further coated with a suitable lacquer.

Advantages of aluminium cans

⬜ Light weight, slightly more than 1/3 of the weight of a similar tinplate can

⬜ Nonreactive to many food products

⬜ Clear, bright and aesthetic image

⬜ Not stained by sulphur bearing compounds

⬜ Nontoxic, does not impart metallic taste or smell to the produce

⬜ Easy to fabricate; easy to open

⬜ Excellent printability

⬜ Recyclability of the metal

However, aluminium cans are not free from some disadvantages

⬜ Thick gauge sheet needed for strength

- Not highly resistant to corrosion, acid fruits and vegetables need protection by lacquering or other means

- Special protection needed during heat processing to avoid permanent distortion

- Aluminium has great tendency to bleach some pigmented products

- Service life is less than that of tinplate for most aqueous products

Tin free steel containers

Tin free steel (TFS) apart from aluminium, is a tested and proven alternate to tinplate in food can making. It has the same steel substitute as the tinplate. It is provided with a preventive coating of chromium, chromium oxide, chromate-phosphate etc. TFS is manufactured by electroplating cold-rolled base plate with chromium in chromic acid. This process does not leave toxin substrate such as chromates or dichromates on the steel and it can be formed or drawn in the same way as tinplate.

Advantages:

- The base chromium layer provides corrosion barrier

- The superimposed layer of chromium oxide prevents rusting and pick up of iron taste

- Provides an excellent base for lacquer adhesion

- Good chemical and thermal resistance

- Tolerance to high processing temperature and greater internal pressure

- Improved and more reliable double seam

Disadvantages:

- Low abrasion resistance; hence compulsory lacquering

- Difficulty in machine soldering

- The oxide layer needs removal even for welding

- Limitations in use for acid foods

An important problem associated with TFS can ends is scuffing of lacquer on the double seam. This may occur at the seamer or downstream at different stages of lacquering. TFS cans have been

found quite suitable for canning different fish in various media. Thus it holds good scope as an important alternate to tinplate cans.

Rigid plastic containers

The rigid plastic material used for thermal processing of food should withstand the rigors of the heating and cooling process. It is also necessary to control the overpressure correctly to maintain a balance between the internal pressure developed during processing and the pressure of the heating system. The main plastic materials used for heat-processed foods are polypropylene and polyethylene tetraphthalate. These are usually fabricated with an oxygen barrier layer such as ethylvinylalcohol, polyvinylidene chloride, and polyamide. These multilayer materials are used to manufacture flexible pouches and semi-rigid containers. The rigid containers have the advantage for packing microwavable products.

Retortable pouches

Retort pouch can be defined as a container produced using 2,3 or 4-ply material that, when fully sealed, will serve as a hermetically sealed container that can be sterilized in steam at pressure and temperature similar to those used for metal containers in food canning. Retort pouch has the advantages of metal can and boil-in plastic bag. Configuration of some typical pouches are:

        2 ply   12μ nylon or polyester/70μ polyolefin

        3 ply   12μpolyester/9-12μ aluminium foil/70μ polyolefin

        4 ply   12μ polyester/9-12μaluminium foil/12μpolyester/70μ polyolefin

3-ply pouch is most commonly used in commercial canning operations. This is a three-layer structure where a thin aluminium foil is sandwiched between two thermoplastic films. The outer polyester layer provides barrier properties as well as mechanical strength. The middle aluminium foil provides protection from gas, light and water. This also ensures adequate shelf life of the product contained within. The inner film which is generally polyproplyline, provides the best heat sealing medium.

The normal design of a pouch is a flat rectangle with rounded corners with four fin seals around 1 cm wide. A tear notch in the fin allows easy opening of the pouch. The rounded corners allow safe handling and help to avoid damage to the adjacent packs. The size of the pouch is

determined by the thickness that can be tolerated at the normal fill weight. The size ranges (mm) available are:

A_1	130 x 160
A_2	130 x 200
A_3	130 x 240
B_1	150 x 160
B_2	150 x 250
B_3	150 x 240
C_1	170 x 160
C_2	170 x 200
C_3	170 x 240
D_1	250 x 320 (Catering pack)
D_2	250 x 1100
D_3	250 x 480

Advantages

⌗ Thin cross- sectional profile – hence rapid heat transfer – 30-40% saving in processing times – no over heating of the product near the walls

⌗ Better retention of colour, flavour and nutrients

⌗ Shelf life equal to that of the same product in metal can

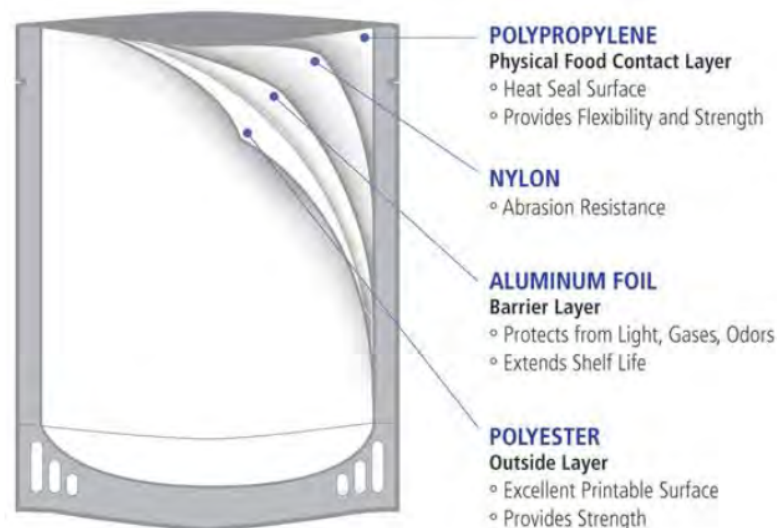⌗ Very little storage space for empty pouches – 15% of that for cans

⌗ Easy to open

Disadvantages

⌗ Pouches, seals more vulnerable to damage, can be easily damaged by any sharp material, hence necessitates individual coverage

¤ With an over wrap cost may go up above that of cans

¤ Slow rate of production, 30 pouches in place of 300-400 cans per minute

¤ Needs special equipment

¤ Higher packaging cost and low output push up the cost of production

Containers used for thermal processing

POLYPROPYLENE
Physical Food Contact Layer
◦ Heat Seal Surface
◦ Provides Flexibility and Strength

NYLON
◦ Abrasion Resistance

ALUMINUM FOIL
Barrier Layer
◦ Protects from Light, Gases, Odors
◦ Extends Shelf Life

POLYESTER
Outside Layer
◦ Excellent Printable Surface
◦ Provides Strength

Composition of Retortable pouch

Ideally, the container used for thermal processing should fulfill following characterisitcs:

- Should withstand the sterilisation pressure and temperature
- Should be impervious to air, moisture, dust and disease germs once the can is sealed air tight
- Internal lacquer should not impart toxicity to the contents
- Strong enough to protect the contents during transportation and handling
- Inexpensive, preferably cheap enough to discard after use
- Capable of sealing at high speed
- Pleasing and sanitary appearance

Thermal Processing of Fishery Products

The thermal processing is carried out for achieving two objectives; the first is consumer safety from botulism and the second is non-pathogenic spoilage which is deemed commercially acceptable to a certain extent. If heat processing is inadequate the possibility of spoilage due to C. *botulinum* is more and will endanger the health of the consumer. Safety from botulism is made possible by making the probability of C. *botulinum* spores surviving the heat process sufficiently remote and presents no significant health risk to the consumer. An acceptable low level in the context of this dangerously pathogenic organism means less than one in a billion (10^{-12}) chance of survival. Such a low probability of spore survival is commercially acceptable as it does not

represent a significant health risk. The excellent safety record of the canning industry with respect to the incidence of botulism through under processing, confirms the validity of this judgment. An acceptable low level in the case of thermophilic non-pathogenic organisms should be arrived at judiciously considering the factors like very high D value, risk of flat sour spoilage, commercial viability and profitability etc. Since non-pathogenic organisms do not endanger the health of the consumer process adequacy is generally assessed in terms of the probability of spore survival which is judged commercially acceptable. Considering all these facts, it is generally found acceptable if thermophilic spore levels are reduced to around 10^{-2} to 10^{-3} per g. Another reason for this acceptance is that the survivors will not germinate if the storage temperature is kept below the thermophilic optimum growth temperature i.e. below 35°C.

Fishery products, being categorized as low acid foods require heat processing severity with respect to *C botulinum* and F_0 value recommended is 5-20 min. Thermal processing of fishery products include various steps. These steps include, preparations like washing, beheading, gutting, removing scales / fins, cutting into required size, blanching (hot / cold), pre-cooking, filling fish pieces into containers, filling content or medium, exhausting to remove air, sealing, loading into the retort or autoclave, sterilization, washing and storing. Various packaging materials have been used from historically starting from glass container to metal container, flexible retortable pouches and rigid plastic containers. The sterilization process in the canned product can be subdivided into three phases. First one is heating phase, in which the product temperature is increased from ambient to the required sterilization temperature by means of a heating medium (water or steam). This temperature is maintained for a defined time (phase 2 = holding phasing). In (phase 3 = cooling phase) the temperature in the container is decreased by introduction of cold water into the autoclave. In order to reach temperatures above 100°C (sterilization), the thermal treatment has to be performed under pressure in pressure cookers, also called autoclaves or retorts. Simple autoclaves are generally vertical ones with the lid on top. Through the opened lid, the goods to be sterilized are loaded into the autoclave. The cans are normally placed in metal baskets. The autoclave and lid are designed to withstand higher pressures up to 5.0 bar. These types of autoclaves are best suited for smaller operations as they do not require complicated supply lines and should be available at affordable prices. Larger autoclaves are usually horizontal and loaded through a front lid. Horizontal autoclaves can be built as single or double vessel system. The double vessel systems have the advantage that the water is heated up in the upper vessel to the sterilization

temperature and released into the lower (processing) vessel, when it is loaded and hermetically closed. Using the two–vessel system, the heat treatment can begin immediately without lengthy heating up of the processing vessel and the hot water can be recycled afterwards for immediate use in the following sterilization cycle. In rotary autoclaves, the basket containing the cans rotates during sterilization which enhances the heat penetration resulting in reduced process time. This technique is useful for cans with liquid or semi-liquid content as it achieves a mixing effect of the liquid/semi-liquid goods. Water immersion retorts are also used in the industry for thermal processing which is advantageous over steam retorts due to its uniform temperature distribution as there is no possibility of forming air pockets in the retort which limits the heat transfer in steam retorts. At the final stage of the sterilization process the products must be cooled as quickly as possible by introducing cold water. The contact of cold water with steam causes the latter to condense with a rapid pressure drop in the retort. However, the overpressure built up during thermal treatment within the cans, jars or pouches remain for a certain period. During this phase, when the outside pressure is low but the pressure inside the containers is still high due to high temperatures there, the pressure difference may induce permanent deformation of the containers. Therefore, high pressure difference between the autoclave and the thermal pressure in the containers must be avoided. This is generally achieved by a blast of compressed air into the autoclave at the initial phase of the cooling. Sufficient hydrostatic pressure of the introduced cooling water can also build up counter pressure so that in specific cases, in particular where strong resistant metallic cans are used, the water pressure can be sufficient and compressed air may not be needed unlike in flexible retortable pouches. After thermal processing, the containers are washed with chlorinated potable water and stored for conditioning for 2 – 4 weeks. Conditioning helps in proper mixing of the ingredients with the fish products and helps in assessing the extent of thermal process severity. If the containers do not show any deformation, it indicates the effectiveness of the thermal processing.
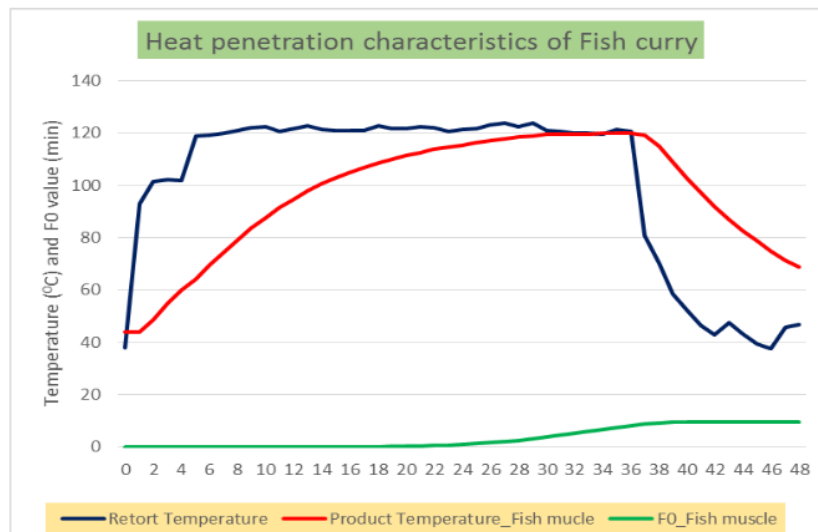
The important steps in canning process are:

1. Raw material preparation
2. Blanching/ Precooking
3. Filling into containers
4. Addition of fill (brine/ oil/ gravy)
5. Exhausting

6.   Seaming/ sealing

7.   Retorting (heat processing)

8.   Cooling

9.   Drying

10.   Labelling and storage
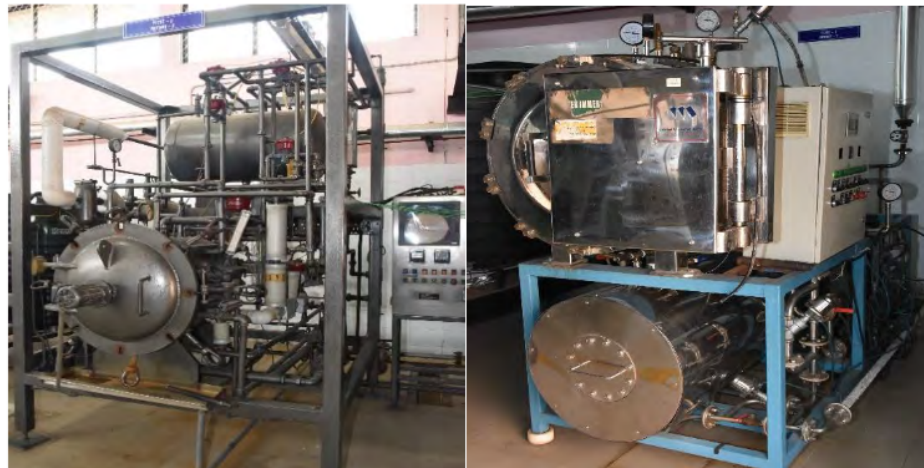
Steam retort and water immersion retort

Typical heat penetration curve of fish curry in retortable pouches

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