

6 Old-Time Ways to Check If Your Food Has Spoiled

2018-04-02 09:06:17 By Lisa Tanner

Back in the day, people knew the importance of using what you had instead of always buying more. Because food was scarce, they didn't want any of it to go to waste.

Their ingenious minds turned vegetable peelings and leftovers into delicious soups. They preserved their abundant harvest carefully, knowing this food would feed their families over the winter.

But even with their diligence, problems with their food occurred occasionally. Whether it was a canning job gone bad, or food sitting too long in the hot sun, sometimes food spoiled.

When food was scarce, it was tempting to eat compromised food. It's hard to throw out food when there isn't much to eat. That's why deaths from spoiled foods often rise during times of famine.

To help keep their families safe, cooks learned the importance of checking their victuals before eating them. They became excellent at checking for spoilage. They knew how to quickly use their senses to determine if food was still safe for eating, without the aid of "best-buy" dates printed on goods today.

Here are six different methods cooks used to check for spoiled food.

1. Visually Inspect It

Fresh food has a certain look to it. Since cooks handle food frequently, they know what good food is supposed to look like.

They are familiar with the color of foods they use. They know if it's supposed to glisten or have a dull appearance.

By quickly inspecting their food visually, cooks can spot many types of spoilage. Because they are so familiar with their ingredients, they know when something looks different.

Here are nine visual signs that food is starting to spoil, or spoiled:

- Discoloration
- Mold throughout
- Rust on the can for canned foods
- Bulging lids on canned food
- Cloudy liquid in canned foods
- Fuzzy growth
- Rising bubbles in canned foods (not the typical bubbles you'd see when opening a can, but ones where gas pressure makes them rise to the surface.)
- Visual texture changes (for instance milk turning lumpy)
- Severe freezer burn

It's important to know what range of normal you might see in food. For instance, red meat starts off very red in color. As it's exposed to air, it slowly turns brown. This doesn't mean it's spoiled, it just means the protein is mixing with the oxygen from the air.

But, if your meat looks much more faded than normal, or way darker, both are signs of spoilage.

Likewise, potatoes that are turning green have an abundance of the toxin solanine. If it's a thin layer, you can often cut it away with the peels. But, sometimes the entire potato is affected. Consuming green potatoes can lead to gastrointestinal problems, and death.

No matter what is on the menu, take time to check it out visually before you eat it.

2. Smell It

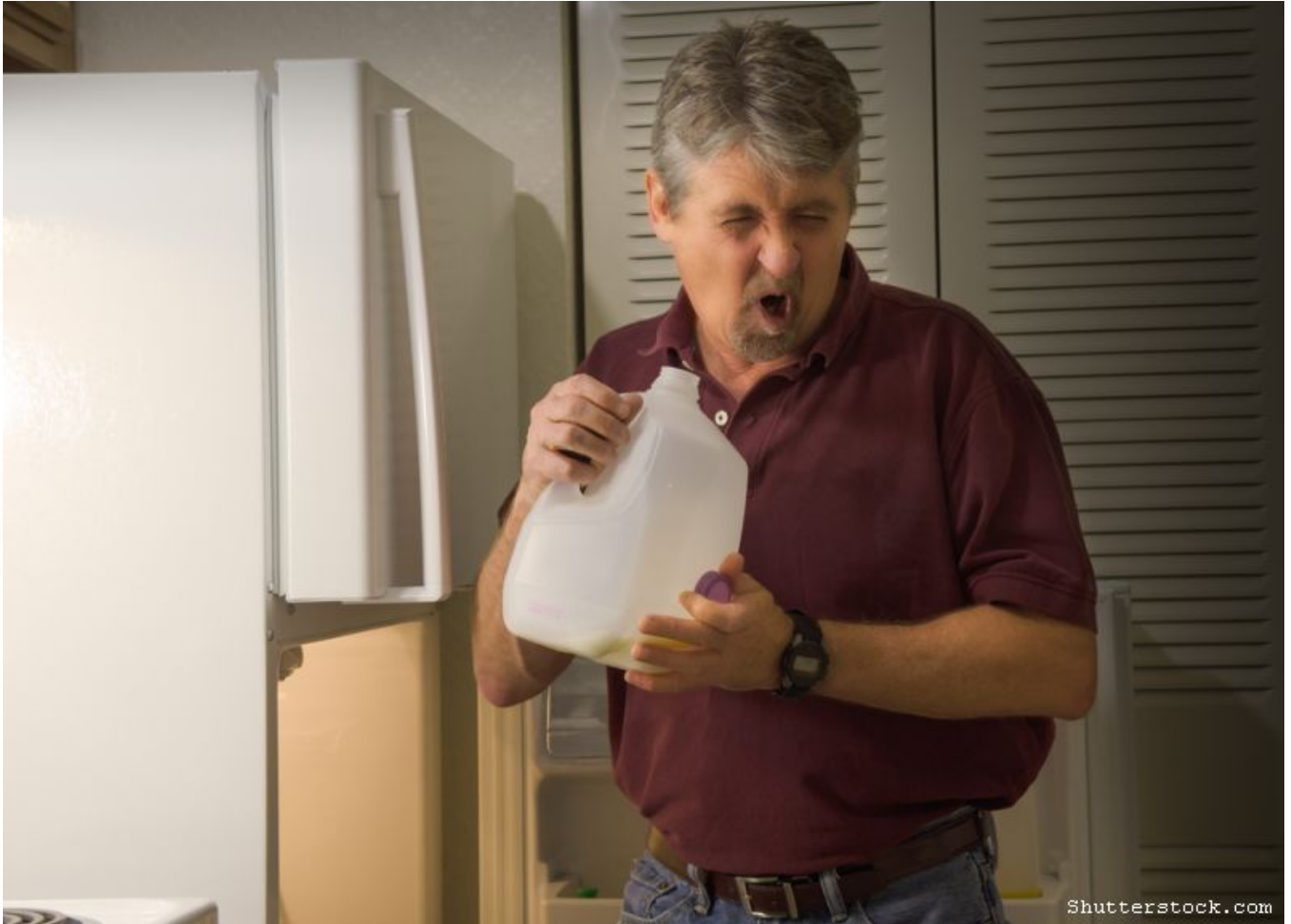
The nose knows. At least, most of the time it does. Old-time cooks smelled their food to make sure it wasn't rancid.

But, they also were familiar with how food was supposed to smell. They used their noses in the kitchen daily, not just when they suspected a problem. This gave them the ability to quickly determine if a scent was a problem or not.

Here are five words used to describe the smells of spoiled food. If you would describe the food you're smelling with any of these, it is past its prime:

- Pungent
- Acrid
- Putrid
- Sulfuric
- Disagreeable

These words are similar, but distinct. And once you've smelled the sulfuric odor of rotten eggs, your brain will never forget what it smells like.



3. Listen Carefully

Do you know what your canned food sounds like when you open it? Cooks in the past sure did. They knew that when they used a can opener to open a can, there was a little hiss. When they took the lid off of a jar, they expected a little popping sound.

But, if either the hiss or the pop is really loud or lasts longer than normal, these cooks knew it was a problem. Both are signs that gas has built up from harmful bacteria. It means the food is compromised and not safe for consumption.

This is an easy sign to miss, so as you open your food make sure you're listening.

If you're interested in more old-time skills to help keep you alive during hard times, be sure to check out the Forgotten Lessons of Yesterday.

4. Touch It

Foods have texture. As you handle food, you get a sense of what it should feel like. When you notice something different, it's a sign of spoilage.

Here are four common textural problems with spoiled food.

- Slimy
- Mushy
- Sticky or tacky
- Wrinkles

Spoiled meats often develop a film, which is what makes it feel slimy. You might notice this in lunch meat that's been left in your fridge for too long.

As produce starts to spoil, it often turns mushy or wrinkly. It won't take over the entire piece all at once, but you will feel the change if you check.

You can also use your sense of touch to test the lids on canned food. If they move up and down before you open them, they didn't seal properly. This is a sign the food is spoiled.

5. Float It

Back in the day, all cooks relied [on farm-fresh eggs](#). They needed a quick way to determine if these were still good.

These cooks used the float test.

They gathered the eggs they wanted to test. Then, they filled a container with enough water to completely cover the eggs.

By carefully placing each egg in the water, the cooks could see how it behaved. If the egg sank to the bottom, it was still good. If it floated, it meant there was air inside and the egg needed thrown out.

Eggs that sort of bobbed on the bottom were beginning to spoil and needed used quickly.

The same principles hold true today. Eggs last a long time when stored properly, but they don't last forever. If you aren't sure about the quality, go ahead and see if it floats.

6. Taste It

When they weren't quite sure about the state of food, old-time cooks would taste a small amount. The tongue is good at detecting many foods that have spoiled.

This is a good way to test dairy products, or other fresh foods. You can tell with just a small amount if the food is still edible.

However, there are pathogens, like [botulism](#), that are undetectable in flavor. If you have reason to suspect pathogens, don't risk tasting the food. Even taking a small test bite could have disastrous

consequences.

Instead, play it safe and throw it out.

Sometimes It Takes More Than One Test

Sometimes, it took more than one quick test for cooks to determine if their food was safe. Here's an example, using eggs.

Occasionally, you might have a spoiled egg that didn't float for some reason. So, old-time cooks made it a point to break eggs opened into a separate bowl. This allowed them to quickly do a sniff test on each before adding the egg to the rest of the ingredients.

If there was a problem, they didn't contaminate the entire recipe. By combining tests, cooks were much more likely to notice problems with their food supply.

You Must Be Familiar with Normal

The important thing about all these tests, is that cooks back then knew what food was supposed to be like. They were in their kitchen several times a day, using their senses to help them cook.

This knowledge was indispensable when determining if food was safe or not. They had to have a solid foundation of what is "normal" so they could quickly and accurately decide if something wasn't right.

You also can gather this knowledge today. The more time you spend cooking, the more familiar you'll become with all the ingredients you use.

Does It All Need Tossed?

Once these old-time cooks noticed a problem area, they had to decide what to do.

If mold was just beginning to grow on cheese or bread, they almost always just cut off the problem area. This helped minimize waste, while keeping their families from eating the moldy bits.

The same concept holds true with produce. It was easy for cooks to cut off a bad spot or two as they were preparing the food. The rest of the food was fine.

However, if mold had spread throughout the food, it was time to throw it out.

And, if the cooks suspected a problem with a can or jar of food, they didn't use it. You can't just take out the botulism spores from canned green beans and eat the rest. It doesn't work that way.

If a can has spoiled, it all needs to be properly disposed of. Otherwise, [it could kill you](#).

The Importance of Sanitation

In both the olden-days and today, sanitation plays a significant role in preventing food spoilage.

When preserving food, you must properly sanitize equipment and jars. You need to wash your

produce and ensure you don't let the meat sit out for too long before canning it. Follow the directions for canning food, and always use pressure to can low-acid food.

Keep the kitchen clean and store your food where pests can't get it. This will help keep your food, and you safe.

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