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Perspective

Natural Food Preservatives: Sources, Applications, and Emerging Technologies for Food Preservation

Elowen Hartwell*

Department of Natural Food Preservation and Bioactive Ingredient Technology, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

DESCRIPTION

Natural food preservatives are substances obtained from plants, animals, microorganisms, minerals, or naturally occurring food components that can help maintain the safety, quality, and shelf life of food products. Their use has received increasing attention as food manufacturers and consumers seek alternatives to some conventional synthetic preservatives. Preservation is necessary because foods can undergo microbial growth, oxidation, enzymatic reactions, moisture migration, and other changes that reduce quality during storage. Natural preservation approaches can provide protection against selected forms of deterioration while also supporting the development of foods with recognizable and familiar ingredients.

Plant-derived compounds represent an important group of natural preservatives. Herbs, spices, fruits, seeds, leaves, and other botanical materials contain compounds with antimicrobial or antioxidant properties. Essential oils obtained from oregano, thyme, rosemary, clove, cinnamon, and other plants have been investigated for their ability to inhibit microorganisms and delay oxidation. Phenolic compounds, flavonoids, terpenes, and related substances may contribute to these effects. The effectiveness of a plant extract depends on its chemical composition, concentration, extraction method, food matrix, storage temperature, and target microorganisms.

Natural antioxidants are widely used to reduce oxidative deterioration in foods containing fats and oils. Oxidation can produce undesirable flavors, odors, color changes, and losses of nutritional quality. Rosemary extract, green tea compounds, tocopherols, ascorbic acid, and certain plant phenolics have been studied as antioxidant ingredients. These substances can interfere with oxidation reactions by reducing reactive compounds or limiting the processes that initiate lipid deterioration. Their application can be particularly useful in products such as edible oils, meat products, bakery foods, snacks, and processed foods containing unsaturated fats.

Organic acids and their naturally occurring forms also have applications in food preservation. Lactic acid, acetic acid, citric acid, and other organic acids can influence microbial growth by changing the pH of food or affecting microbial cellular processes. These acids may occur naturally in fermented foods or can be produced through controlled fermentation. Fermentation itself is an important biological preservation method because beneficial microorganisms can produce acids, alcohols, bacteriocins, and other compounds that limit the growth of undesirable organisms. Fermented vegetables, dairy products, cereals, and beverages demonstrate how microbial activity can contribute to food stability.

Certain microorganisms produce natural antimicrobial substances known as bacteriocins. Nisin, produced by selected strains of lactic acid bacteria, is one example that has been used in food applications. Bacteriocins can act against particular groups of microorganisms and may be useful in products where control of spoilage or pathogenic bacteria is required. Their effectiveness is influenced by food composition, processing conditions, storage temperature, and interactions with other ingredients. Research continues to explore additional bacteriocins and microbial metabolites that could provide broader applications.

Natural preservatives can also be incorporated into edible coatings and films. These materials form a protective layer around food and can act as carriers for antimicrobial or antioxidant compounds. Chitosan, obtained from chitin-containing sources, has received attention because of its film-forming properties and antimicrobial activity. Edible coatings containing plant extracts, essential oils, organic acids, or other natural compounds can be applied to fruits, vegetables, meat products, cheese, and other foods. Such systems may reduce direct exposure to oxygen and moisture while delivering preservation compounds at the food surface.

Natural preservation strategies can be combined with other processing methods to improve performance. Refrigeration,

Correspondence to: Elowen Hartwell, Department of Natural Food Preservation and Bioactive Ingredient Technology, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia, E-mail: elowen.hartwell@uq.edu.au

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modified-atmosphere packaging, drying, fermentation, high-pressure processing, and mild thermal treatments can work together with natural antimicrobial or antioxidant compounds. Such combined approaches may allow lower concentrations of individual preservatives to be used while maintaining product quality. The success of these systems depends on selecting compatible technologies and understanding how each preservation method affects microorganisms and food characteristics.

In conclusion, natural food preservatives provide diverse possibilities for extending shelf life and maintaining food quality through antimicrobial, antioxidant, acidifying, and protective mechanisms. Plant extracts, essential oils, organic acids, bacteriocins, fermentation products, and edible coatings can be incorporated into different preservation systems according to the characteristics of the food. Their successful application requires careful consideration of concentration, sensory effects, food composition, stability, safety, and regulatory requirements. Continued research into extraction, encapsulation, active packaging, and combined preservation technologies can support the development of effective natural preservation systems for modern food processing.