

How Old Is This Stuff?

Written by Vivian Bikulege

There are eight snack paks of sugar free pudding sitting on the top shelf in my refrigerator. They have been there at least a year and a half. I could begin to measure my life by the amount of time that passes and no one touches those orphaned treats. I bought them for my diabetic mother when she was living with us, and this coming July, it will be two years since she moved into her own home. The pudding paks still live in my refrigerator.



Like a lot of people, I had a decent amount of ham left over after Easter. Ham ranks right up there with pudding in relationship to its rate of consumption at my house. But tradition reigns, and the rare taste of ham two or three times per year satisfies some seasonal swine requirement that results in a clod of pork sitting on a plate in the fridge waiting to be consumed. This year, I made ham salad for the first time and the best compliment I received for my efforts was that the ham salad did not taste like ham. My mom ate one sandwich. My husband whined one night at the dinner table that I did not bother to ask him if he liked ham salad, and therefore, he would continue eating his daily luncheon of mixed greens and skip the culinary delight of ham salad sandwiches. So, I am eating most of my disguised leftovers by myself. I froze two other pieces of ham for a summer country breakfast and a future dinner of ham, macaroni and cheese casserole because woman cannot live on ham alone.

I do not routinely read the expiration dates on food products when I shop. I am just recently paying attention to them at the grocery store, reaching for the half gallon of skim milk stamped with the date furthest away from the day I am making my purchase. I tried this with shredded cheese but didn't want to dislodge every package of cheddar hanging from the metal bracket to locate the freshest bag in the back of the fromage lineup. Every once in awhile, a free loaf of Pepperidge Farms Lite Wheat Bread from the YMCA magically appears in my bread box. I do not look at the expiration date on the manna from heaven. In fact, I feel a bit guilty consuming the gratis carbs because I suspect that the intent of free bread made available at the Y is probably not to feed middle-class families making enough income to buy their own outdated bread. Still, it's always nice to receive, and as long as you consume your peanut butter and jelly sandwiches before the bread gets moldy, there is no harm done.

I recently purged the Lazy Susan in the corner of my kitchen of outdated products but not before my sister-in-law made pancakes for my nephew from an expired mix moved from Chicago in 2004. I do not like pancakes and don't have a habit of reaching for the flour mixture. They must have tasted like old cardboard fresh off the griddle. My brother ate a mouthful and wondered why I was trying to poison his son. I bought sour milk for my mom once because I did not examine the date on the carton. Every once in awhile, I work up the courage to make an assessment of the smell and color of containers of sour cream, cottage cheese and cream cheese that nest in the corners of the refrigerator. I am proud to say I do a good job of tossing green or gross dairy products.

Does beer go flat after a year? There was a time when beer would not have lasted two days but now it sits to the far left on the top shelf of the refrigerator waiting for an aging party animal to visit my lowcountry home and partake. Pickle jars and butter survive expiration but grapefruit, apples and lemons do die over time and the pomegranate from Thanksgiving is wondering what it did wrong to have earned a sentence of six months, sharing a cell with browning green grapes, confined to the fruit drawer on the bottom floor of a chilly prison.

It is imperative to be conscientious in the care and concern for my family's health and well-being but I hate to waste anything and would rather stand witness to the slow death of

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expiring groceries, risking food poisoning. Of course, I am exaggerating. I suspect my sister-in-law would attest otherwise.

By the way, our beagle Toby is on an antibiotic and was prescribed two Benadryl's per day for allergies and a skin irritation. He is adept at consuming his bowl of dog food leaving the pills behind. I tried to conceal the medicine in peanut butter but Toby doesn't like Jif. I buried the Benadryl inside of string cheese and I would find half-dissolved pills lying on the living room floor, Toby and the cheese having vanished. One morning, I pulled out the ham salad and buried the pills in diced ham, mayonnaise and chopped celery. He gobbled the mixture up. When I run out of ham salad, I am going to see if Toby likes pudding. Just kidding. I suspect The Beaufort Gazette and all of us can forego the headlines - Lady's Island Woman Feeds Beagle Pudding Poison. I'm throwing the snack paks out today.