

INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

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A Collection of....Food?

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“No Food or Drink.” A very familiar sign in museum areas where collections are present. But, what if the food or drink is actually part of the collection? It is not surprising to find edible elements in museum collections. From obvious food items, like hardtack, to the less obvious, like seeds or items made of salt dough, these edible items need a bit different care.



Flanner House Cannery (Indiana Historical Society, P0266)

There are a variety of things to consider when thinking about food in museum collections. First, make sure any food items in the museum are necessary. Consider a jar of honey from a local honey farm. The jar has a beautiful label from the farm and, is full of honey. If the item is accepted into the collection, is it to preserve the jar, the honey, or both? This can be a helpful

conversation to have. If the reason for keeping the item has nothing to do with the honey inside, it can be best to safely and carefully discard the edible portion of the item.

If it is determined that the food can be discarded, there are a few things to do. First, take high resolution images of the food component. Second, clean the food particles out as thoroughly as possible. Containers made of glass or earthenware, can likely be cleaned with a damp cloth. If there are any paper elements, such as paper labels, or if the container being kept is made of a material that can be harmed by water, carefully vacuum out any residual food particles and wipe with a dry cloth.



Mexican food, 1979 (no Bass #) (Bass Photo Co Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

However, there are times when the food is a valuable part of the story or even the entire story. In those situations, caring for the food becomes of primary importance. Spoilage and pest infestation are two of the biggest concerns with food in collections. Keeping food items stored in a designated area makes it easier to keep an eye on them for possible infestation or spoilage. Set designated times throughout the year to check in on these items. Take careful notes (photos are great) of existing damage from pests. This can be important when doing infestation checks to help track what was already there and is evidence of an old infestation versus new damage and evidence of a current one.

Provide as much protection as makes sense for edible collection items. Keep food in polyethylene bags within boxes to decrease the attractiveness to pests. This will also help if the seal on a liquid item is compromised and the item begins to leak.



[*Kemp's Sun-Rayed the Non-Separating Tomato Juice*](#) (Indiana Historical Society, M1024)

Take high resolution photographs of food items. This way if the item gets to a point where it absolutely must be disposed of, images of the item serve as a way to preserve what it looked like.

Make special handling notes both in a collections management system and on paper. Keep a copy of the paper notes with the items. This will help people to remember not to do things like turn a jar upside down.

Finally, pay special attention to the temperature and humidity levels in areas storing food. Both factors can combine to promote mold growth on items already predisposed to it. Keep in mind that some of the same things that spoil food in your kitchen can spoil food in your collection. Light, temperature, humidity, and exposure to air can all speed up the potential for food to spoil.



Lard Exhibit at the 1938 Indiana State Fair (Indiana Historical Society, P0490)

When keeping food in museum collections, taking the above precautions can help make sure that keeping these items does not put others at risk.

Further Resources

- [Collections Advisors](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Timely Tips](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [The Accidental IPM Program](#) (The Andy Warhol Museum)
- [Beyond “No Food or Drink in the Gallery”: Food Management Strategies for the Real World](#) (Connecting to Collections Care)
- [How do we look after edible items in the collection?](#) (Royal Museums Greenwich)
- [How Food Spoils](#) (Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources)
- [Keeping Food in our Collections](#) (Horniman Museum & Gardens)
- [Why Museums Display Ancient Pastries and Beef Older Than Christ](#) (Gastro Obscura)

Collection Trainings

[Old Wives Tales and Urban Legends: As a Conservator Day](#)

Nov. 4 – (Connecting to Collections Care)

[Introduction to Fundraising and Grant Writing](#)

Nov. 9 – (Indiana Historical Society at North Manchester Center for History)

[Our Planet. Our Collections](#)

Nov. 14–15 – (Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts)

[Webinars](#)

Recorded – (Indiana Historical Society)

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