



10 Tips for Starting a Canned-food Business

If you're ready to take your canning to the next level, use these key ingredients to start a successful canning business.

A great way to be successful in your canning business is to start small. If your canned-food specialty is dill pickles, start there and expand later.

Do canning jars and garden abundance line every inch of your kitchen counter space during the harvest season? Is the "plink plink" sound of lids sealing music to your ears? Do your friends and family arm-wrestle over your sweet pickles, peach salsa or other canned-food specialties? These may be strong signs of a fledgling canning business, blending your passion for preserving with a viable farm-based income source.

One appealing advantage of starting a canned-food business is it can strategically add to your farm's income mix. By starting small and experimenting with produce you already have readily available, you can enable your canning business to grow and develop strategically according to your priorities.

Just as you organize all your jars, produce and ingredients before you start canning a batch of pickles, assemble the key ingredients for your business' success. Here are 10 tips to get you started:

1. Be State Regulation Savvy

The good news: An increasing number of states today support "cottage food industries," legislating requirements that make it more accessible for small food entrepreneurs to get started. To support such micro-businesses, many states have passed or are in process of passing laws that enable specific forms of canned items to be processed for sale in a home kitchen rather than needing to rent or invest in commercial kitchen space.

The more complicated news: These laws vary tremendously by state and can change at any time. It remains your responsibility as a business owner to research and understand all aspects of your state's laws. A state's department of agriculture, health or commerce is typically the agency that enforces these laws. Call your local extension office for first-step guidance.

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Share the details of your canning business with customers so they can get to know you and your canned product better. Start a blog or share your favorite recipe.

2. Start Your Canning Business Small

Instead of jumping full-force into your start-up canning business and investing in equipment and committing to multiple farmers' markets, start small and harvest learning along the way. You may find you don't like the weekend market schedule because it takes too much time away from your family and you'd rather focus on having a booth at a few larger events.

3. Develop Your Canning Niche

Think out of the strawberry jam and dill pickle jar. The American palette and food preferences constantly evolve with an increasing number of "foodie" shoppers seeking unusual and distinct flavors. So experiment with unique flavor combinations for your canned food. Think about creating distinct "limited edition" batches that pair sweet and savory, such as pears with ginger.

4. Access Quality Canning Ingredients

You already have high-quality, fresh produce. Now, research your other canning ingredients, like sugar, and find an organic, sustainably harvested and Fair Trade option when possible. You may be able to order wholesale direct from the supplier or bulk through a local food co-op or buying club, which will bring down the cost.

5. Price Canned Food Accurately

Remember the long list of inputs that go into your canned product when setting a fair price. Don't forget things like canning equipment, storage, transportation, marketing and, importantly, your time spent making the canned product.

6. Sell Your Canning Story

Here's the secret to a strong marketing plan: Tell your story. Sharing your farm and explaining why your canned product is distinctly different (and better!) than the mass-produced canned food at the supermarket will draw interest to your canning business. Bring garden pictures to the farmers' market. Start a blog to narrate your experience starting up canning business. Share your raspberry bar cookie recipe that features your jam.



7. Manage Your Time and Resources

Keep thinking of ways to make the best use of your time to most efficiently produce your canned product. Look at the weather a week in advance, plan a sunny harvest day, and hit the kitchen for canning when it rains. Write a detailed checklist of everything you need for going to market, and identify ways to best transport your canned product, like reusing the boxes the canning jars came in.

8. Market Your Canning Business Year-round

A big benefit to canned food businesses is the ability to sell your product year-round, particularly during the holiday season when folks seek unique gifts. Identify local fall craft fairs and winter farmers' markets that might be a good outlet for your wares.

9. Kids Can, Too

Canned-food business ventures provide abundant opportunity to instill the farmstead entrepreneurial spirit in your children. The more you involve everyone from the start—from deciding your business name to taste-testing recipes—the more skills your kids develop. Implement a profit-sharing program with your kids. Kids can make compelling salespeople at a market.

10. Share the Can-do Spirit

As you rack up business experience, mentor others in the process. The more we support each other in growing this artisan, hand-crafted, seasonal and local food movement, the more all our ventures grow.

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