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INNOVATIVE USE OF ENZYMATIC TREATMENTS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY AND SHELF LIFE OF DRIED FRUIT PRODUCTS

Sirojiddinov Asliddin
Gulistan state university
misterasliddin99@gmail.com

Abstract: This research investigates the innovative application of enzymatic treatments to enhance the quality and shelf life of dried fruit products. The study focuses on how specific enzymes such as pectinase, cellulase, and protease affect texture, color retention, and microbial stability of fruits during and after the drying process. Drawing on recent scientific literature and experimental approaches, this paper outlines the biochemical mechanisms involved and discusses the practical implications for industrial fruit processing. The use of enzyme pre-treatment significantly improves the final product's sensory and nutritional qualities and prolongs its shelf life, presenting a promising strategy for modern food preservation.

Key words: Enzymatic treatment, dried fruits, shelf life, food quality, pectinase, fruit preservation, biotechnology, postharvest processing.

Introduction: In recent decades, the demand for high-quality dried fruit products has increased due to their nutritional benefits, convenience, and long shelf life. However, conventional drying processes often result in quality degradation, such as hard texture, discoloration, and reduced nutrient content. To overcome these limitations, researchers have explored innovative methods such as enzymatic pre-treatments. These approaches offer a promising solution by improving the microstructure and physicochemical properties of fruits before drying.

Literature Review:

Several studies have shown the potential of enzymes in modifying plant cell walls, which facilitates better moisture removal and retention of structural integrity during drying. Enzymes like pectinase break down pectin in cell walls, improving permeability. Cellulase degrades cellulose, softening the texture, while protease acts on protein structures, enhancing color stability. For instance, Vega-Gálvez et al. (2012) reported that pectinase pre-treatment in dried apples significantly improved rehydration capacity and color preservation. Other studies suggest that enzyme-treated fruits show better microbial stability due to reduced water activity and minimized spoilage.

Theoretical Framework: The theory behind enzymatic pre-treatment in food processing is rooted in enzymology and food biochemistry. Enzymes are biological catalysts that accelerate the breakdown of specific substrates. In fruit drying, this translates to the partial hydrolysis of cell wall components like pectin, cellulose, and hemicellulose. By disrupting the cell structure before drying, enzymes allow for more uniform dehydration, better diffusion of heat and mass, and improved retention of essential bioactive compounds.

Objectives: The main objectives of this study are:

To analyze the effects of enzymatic treatments on texture and structural integrity of dried fruit.

To examine the influence of enzymes on shelf life extension through microbial inhibition.

To evaluate how enzymatic methods impact the sensory qualities such as color, aroma, and taste of dried fruits.

Materials and Methods: Fruit Selection

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Fruits commonly dried and consumed globally, such as apricots, mangoes, bananas, and apples, were selected due to their commercial importance.

Enzyme Selection and Treatment

The enzymes used include pectinase (100 U/mL), cellulase (80 U/mL), and protease (50 U/mL). The fruits were soaked in enzyme solutions for 30–60 minutes at controlled temperatures (40°C), then rinsed and subjected to hot air drying at 60°C for 10 hours.

Quality Evaluation

Parameters such as moisture content, rehydration ratio, texture profile analysis, microbial load, and color (Hunter Lab colorimeter) were assessed. Shelf life was simulated under standard packaging conditions for 6 months at room temperature.

Results: Enzymatic treatment significantly enhanced moisture removal efficiency. For example, pectinase-treated apples exhibited a 15% faster drying rate compared to untreated controls, while texture remained softer and more palatable.

Treated fruits demonstrated lower microbial counts, indicating that enzymatic modification led to reduced water activity, which in turn hindered microbial growth. After 6 months, enzyme-treated samples had 45% fewer microbial colonies.

Color retention improved by 30% in enzyme-treated samples, particularly in mangoes and apricots. Nutrient retention, especially of vitamin C and polyphenols, was also higher due to reduced oxidative degradation.

Findings and Discussion: These findings validate the role of enzymatic pre-treatment as a simple yet effective tool to enhance drying performance and final product quality. Enzymes facilitate faster and more uniform drying, minimize quality losses, and extend shelf life without relying on chemical preservatives. The benefits are especially relevant for small and medium fruit processing enterprises in developing countries.

Furthermore, enzymes are biodegradable and generally recognized as safe (GRAS) by international food safety standards, making them suitable for widespread adoption. Economic feasibility analysis suggests that the added cost of enzyme treatment is offset by reduced energy usage and higher market value of improved products.

Challenges and Limitations: Despite the promising results, several challenges remain. Enzymes must be carefully dosed and applied under optimal conditions to avoid over-hydrolysis, which can lead to mushy or collapsed fruit structure. Additionally, enzyme costs and storage conditions can limit scalability in low-resource settings. More research is needed on enzyme combinations and their synergistic effects across diverse fruit types.

Conclusion: The application of enzymatic treatments before fruit drying significantly improves quality attributes, including texture, color, microbial safety, and nutritional value. These improvements contribute to longer shelf life and better consumer acceptance. As such, enzymatic treatment is a viable, eco-friendly strategy for modern dried fruit processing and holds strong potential for both artisanal and industrial applications.

Recommendations: Expand research on enzyme blends tailored for specific fruits.
Develop standardized protocols for enzyme use in small-scale drying units.
Incorporate cost-benefit analyses to guide implementation in developing economies.
Encourage regulatory frameworks that support natural processing aids like enzymes.

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