



The cooking instructions calendar

Keep on top of seasonal product deadlines with our annual planner for on-pack cooking instructions development.

From summer BBQ favourites to autumn comfort food and Christmas party ranges, every season brings specialist product launches. Timely development of on-pack cooking instructions plays a central role in seamless retail distribution as well as food safety and quality. This yearly planner from Leatherhead Food Research will help you get it right.

Aligning cooking instructions development with seasonal product cycles is often a challenge for food innovation teams.

There's a narrow window between product development and distribution during which manufacturers must ensure on-pack instructions consistently deliver a safe, ready-to-eat product with the desired sensory qualities.

Cooking trials must be performed on samples that accurately represent the final retail product in terms of weight, composition, and packaging. They also need to be completed ahead of labelling deadlines. Timings are tight and retailer cut-off dates are non-negotiable, so we've developed this cooking instructions calendar to help your scheduling.

“Seasonal launches are always a highlight for us. We love seeing the new flavours and formats that our clients bring to market, then developing simple, reliable cooking instructions so consumers can enjoy them at their best.”

Natasha Burton
Head of Cooking Instructions
Leatherhead Food Research

Science-led cooking instructions development

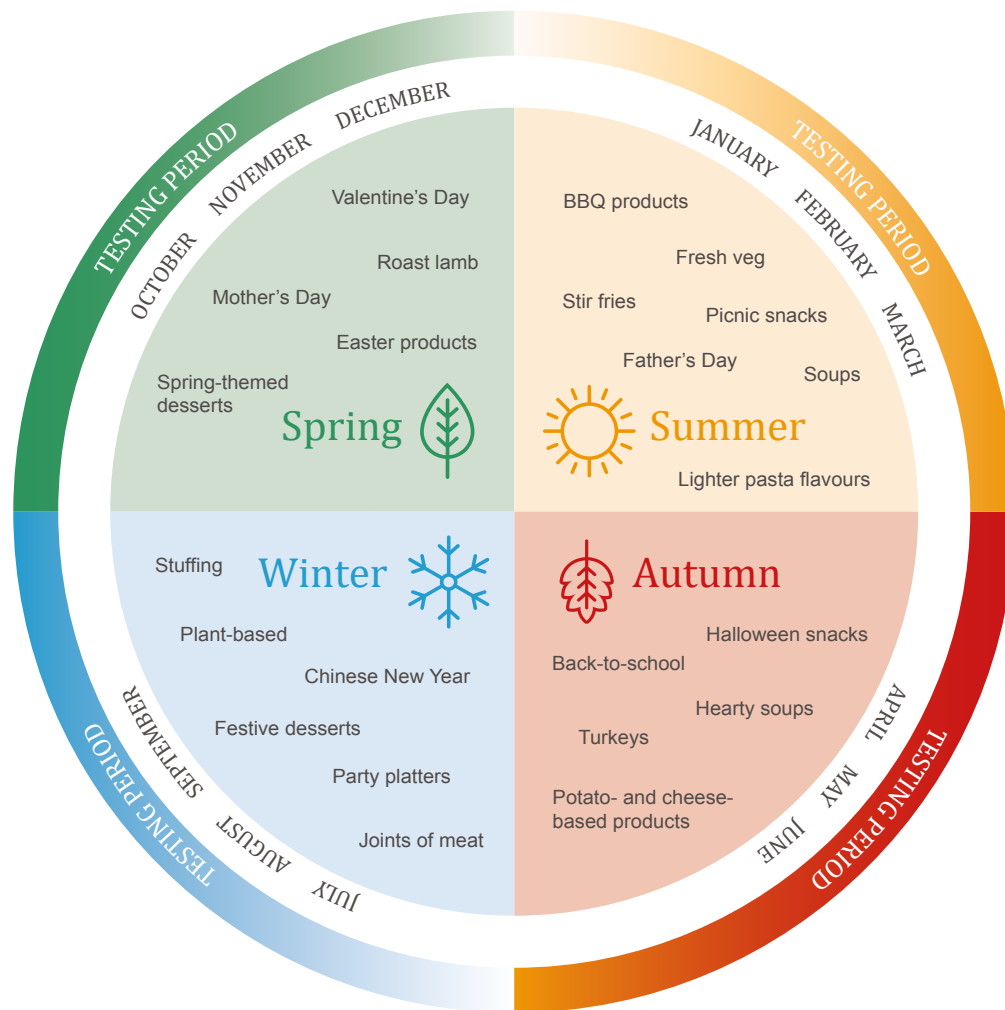
Leatherhead Food Research conducts more than 15,000 cooking trials per year. We can generate and verify cooking instructions on your behalf or validate cooking instructions that you have developed in house. Cooking trials are carried out in our UKAS-accredited testing laboratory (no. 9365). Our accredited status covers cooking instructions testing (microwave oven, gas and electric thermal oven, electric fan oven, gas and electric hob, gas and electric grill, deep fat fryer, air fryer, defrost) and in-cook temperature measuring techniques.



Year-round cooking instructions planning

If you produce seasonal ranges, a robust, well-planned cooking trial schedule is essential.

The graphic below summarises optimum timeframes for seamless new product launches. Read on for a more detailed quarterly breakdown of themes, product types, and important considerations for effective cooking instructions development.



Align with cooking trends to enhance flexibility

It's a good idea to ensure seasonal products' on-pack instructions reflect consumer cooking trends. For instance, our research shows that 65% of UK households now own an air fryer, and just over a quarter of households with an air fryer use it daily. Exploring products' compatibility with air fryers as well as conventional devices can result in multiple on-pack cooking options. This gives consumers more flexibility and ensures they can prepare products safely using their preferred technique.

Steaks are a prime example. There is a growing online trend for air fryer steak recipes with many influencers claiming it's a simple way to achieve a crisp sear on the outside and a tender inside. Including air fryer cooking instructions alongside those for the frying pan or grill leans into this trend while ensuring consumers are provided with clear guidance on safe preparation.



Q1: January to March

In the depths of winter, all eyes are on early summer product ranges. January and February are core months for developing cooking instructions for summer soups, stir fries, and fresh vegetables. Grill and/or oven pre-cooking instructions are a top priority for marinated meats, burgers, kebabs and other products that may be finished on the BBQ.

Towards the end of February and into March, attention needs to turn to products aligned with summer holidays.



Q2: April to June

During April, innovation teams need to wrap up time-sensitive launches for the back-to-school period, such as cooked lunchbox fillers and spooky-themed or pumpkin-flavoured Halloween products.

In May, the development of cooking instructions for Autumn comfort food comes to the fore. This includes potato products – from frozen roasties to dauphinoise – as well as cheese products including breaded mozzarella sticks and whole cheeses for baking such as brie and camembert.

By June, the Christmas category needs to be firmly on the agenda. Whole turkeys, turkey crowns and joints can be complex especially when dual instructions are needed for defrost and cooking. Stuffed formats or products with multi-step instructions may also require extensive fine-tuning. The same is true of party platters where retailers often demand coordinated cooking temperatures and times for multiple products to maximise consumer convenience.



Q3: July to September

July is the peak month for completing cooking trials on festive products. This includes Chinese New Year lines as well as Christmas meat, fish, sides, and seasonal snacks and desserts.

August sees a shift towards plant-based and wellness products aligned with healthy new year consumer trends such as Veganuary. Retailers need a quick turnaround between festive and new year ranges, so there is often an overlap in cooking instructions development for these products.

September is the ideal time to focus on cooking trials for products or dine-at-home packages linked to Valentine's Day.



Q4: October to December

During October and into November innovation teams are finalising springtime ranges for the following year. Cooking trials for special products linked to Mother's Day and Easter celebrations need to be a high priority. Roast lamb often takes centre stage, so ensuring on-pack instructions consistently deliver a safe, ready-to-eat product with the succulence and tenderness that consumers expect is key.

By December, the summer months are commanding attention again. Picnic-friendly cooked products are often a focal point, as are pasta sauces and ready meals with a summer twist.

Precision time-and-temperature combinations can boost sensory appeal

The 70°C for two minutes rule is often used as a benchmark for the food safety of cooked products. However, other time-and-temperature combinations are also valid. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) recognises alternative equivalents, such as ensuring food holds a lower temperature for longer (e.g. 60°C for 45 minutes) or a higher temperature for a shorter length of time (e.g. 80°C for six seconds).

Applying this logic to cooking trials results in on-pack instructions that deliver the optimum sensory qualities, such as tender slow-cooked meat or succulent quick-cooked seafood. Sometimes it's better to measure the temperature of food while it cooks, not just after it's been cooked. This is where our in-cook temperature measurement technique adds value, enabling more precise determination of how long a product has held a given temperature.

Experimenting with different time-and-temperature combinations is the best way to ensure seasonal product ranges hit all the right sensory notes.



How Leatherhead Food Research can help

We are here all year round to support cooking instructions development for seasonal ranges and core products alike. Our expert food technicians have the knowledge and experience to find the sweet spot between safety, simplicity, and quality. Every step of the process – including shaking, stirring, or turning products during cooking – is carefully refined to deliver the best possible outcome.

Contact us to discuss ad hoc or ongoing requirements for cooking trials. Our standard service has a five-day turnaround, but we offer express and priority options when faster delivery is needed. We can also help planning your schedule for the year ahead.

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About Leatherhead Food Research

Leatherhead Food Research provides regulatory and scientific support to the global food and beverage industry. We work with all stakeholders in the sector including retailers, food service companies, food & beverage manufacturers, brand owners, ingredients businesses and regulatory bodies. Our specialist team of food scientists, toxicologists and multi-lingual regulatory affairs professionals work closely with clients to provide practical solutions across all stages of the product innovation lifecycle, from reviewing concepts to horizon scanning for future regulatory change.

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