Received: 2 July, 2024 | Revised: 4 Aug, 2024 | Accepted: 29 Aug 2024
DOI: http://doi.org/10.61851/coas.v2i3.02 MANUSCRIPT ID: CoAS_V2IS3_02

REVIEW

Chronicle of Aquatic Science

# Sous Vide in Seafood: A Novel Approach to Modern Processing Techniques

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The authors assert that the manuscript was developed without any commercial or financial associations that could be interpreted as a potential conflict of interest.

**Authors Contribution**

All listed authors have contributed significantly, directly, and intellectually to the work and have endorsed it for publication.

## Abstract

Seafood's short shelf life is due to its high-water activity, neutral pH, and rich nutrient content. Sous vide technology, originating from the French phrase "under vacuum," is a method of cooking in which fish and fishery products are sealed in vacuum-packed bags and cooked at precisely controlled low temperatures over extended periods. Vacuum packaging prevents recontamination, oxidation, aerobic bacterial growth, and moisture loss while preserving aroma compounds. However, the anaerobic environment may promote the growth of spore-forming pathogens. This review aims to explore the current state of sous vide technology applied to fish and fishery products. It highlights its benefits, such as enhanced texture, flavour preservation, and retention of nutritional quality. Additionally, the paper examines the potential challenges associated with sous vide cooking, such as microbial safety and packaging concerns, while also offering insights into future research opportunities and commercial applications.

## KEYWORDS

Sous vide, cook-chill, cook-freeze, thermal processing, novel techniques

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, changes in consumer habits, economies, and technological advancements have transformed the food industry, with a growing demand for ready-to-eat meals. The sous-vide technique has gained prominence in meeting this demand (Kato et al., 2016). Meaning "under vacuum" in French, sous-vide involves cooking food in vacuum-sealed, heat-resistant bags at precise temperatures for specific durations, followed by low-temperature storage (Renna et al., 2014). Initially introduced in the 1960s for vacuum packaging and pasteurization to extend shelf life, sous-vide cooking enhances the quality of fish and seafood products. This method, favoured by researchers, food industry professionals, and culinary experts, ensures even heat distribution, reducing the risk of overcooking and preserving the nutritional and sensory qualities of delicate foods like fish, unlike traditional cooking methods. Given how quickly they can spoil, fish and fisheries products must be handled carefully to maintain quality and safety when being processed and cooked. By cooking fish in a vacuum-sealed environment at low, carefully controlled temperatures, sous vide offers a good substitute for conventional methods. Reviewing sous vide technology in detail, this paper addresses its microbiological safety, principles, advantages, and limitations as well as how it affects fish and fisheries in terms of their nutritional and sensory qualities.

## PRINCIPLES OF SOUS VIDE TECHNOLOGY

Sous vide cooking involves three key components:

**Vacuum Sealing:** The product is sealed in a plastic pouch after air removal to create a vacuum. This minimizes oxidation and prevents the leaching of water-soluble nutrients.

**Temperature Control:** Sous vide employs low, controlled temperatures, usually between 40°C and 85°C for fish. This precise control minimizes the risk of overcooking while preserving sensitive proteins and natural flavours.

**Time Control:** Cooking times in sous vide are typically longer than traditional methods, allowing heat to penetrate the product evenly.

In fish and fishery products, these factors are crucial for preserving texture, moisture, and delicate flavour compounds, while maintaining safety standards. The low temperatures also prevent the formation of certain harmful by-products that can occur in high-temperature cooking methods, such as frying or grilling.

## APPLICATION OF SOUS VIDE IN FISH AND FISHERY PRODUCTS

The growing demand for natural, minimally processed, and convenient seafood products has driven advancements in seafood processing, including the development of alternative cooking methods that ensure both safety and quality (Siddiqui and Rahman, 2014). Marine organisms are a rich source of bioactive components such as long-chain omega-3 fatty acids (PUFAs), easily digestible proteins, taurine, sterols, and pigments, many of which are unique to marine life (Hosomi et al., 2012). However, the high polyunsaturated fatty acid content in seafood makes it highly susceptible to oxidation, leading to rapid degradation in sensory and nutritional quality, resulting in rancidity and off-flavours without proper handling. During traditional cooking, especially at high temperatures, water-soluble nutrients like vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants are often lost through evaporation or exudation, impacting the nutritional value of the food (Puertollano et al., 2011). Additionally, proteins may lose their water-holding

capacity (WHC) due to shrinkage of myofibrillar proteins, affecting texture and juiciness (Schellekens, 1996). Sous-vide cooking, by contrast, can better preserve the structural integrity of proteins compared to conventional methods, maintaining the nutritional and sensory quality of seafood.

### Texture and Sensory Attributes

Due to the relative absence of connective tissue and the delicate muscle fibers of fish, the low level of texture is susceptible to alterations. When fish are pan fried or baked or when they are cooked with traditional methods, they often end up overcooked and are dry and flaky. Cooking fish sous vide reduces this problem as it keeps muscle fibers from contracting much, thus, retaining moisture, since it creates the ideal cooking temperature.

- **Texture:** Overall, relative to boiling, steaming or grilling methods the sous vide cooking method minimizes the drying out effects on fish meat, which has been confirmed thanks to studies improvement. And it's also possible to achieve the right doneness without overcooking because of the precise heating elements used thank to temperature control.
- **Flavour:** The vacuum-sealing process helps retain volatile flavour compounds, preventing them from escaping during cooking. This is particularly beneficial for lean fish like cod or pollock, where sous vide helps preserve subtle flavours and aroma profiles.
- **Moisture retention:** Sous vide prevents excessive water loss, a common issue in conventional high-temperature cooking. The method's closed-system environment ensures that natural fish juices remain intact, preserving the product's succulence.

### Nutritional Preservation

Fish is a nutrient-rich food, particularly in terms of omega-3 fatty acids, protein, vitamins, and minerals. However, conventional cooking methods often result in the degradation or loss of these valuable nutrients, primarily due to the high temperatures and the direct contact with water or oil.

- **Retention of Omega-3 Fatty Acids:** Sous vide cooking at low temperatures prevents the oxidation of omega-3 fatty acids, which are prone to degradation at higher temperatures.
- **Protein Denaturation:** The low-temperature cooking process prevents excessive protein denaturation, preserving both the texture and nutritional quality of fish.
- **Vitamin Retention:** Water-soluble vitamins, such as B-vitamins, are better preserved in sous vide cooking due to the lack of direct contact with cooking water. Moreover, fat-soluble vitamins like vitamin D, which are abundant in certain fish species, remain intact due to the low cooking temperature.

### Microbial Safety

One of the main concerns with sous vide cooking is the safety of fish and fishery products, particularly concerning microbial contamination. Since sous vide cooking operates at lower temperatures than conventional cooking, it may not always eliminate all pathogenic microorganisms, especially if proper procedures are not followed.

- **Temperature and Time Relationship:** The key to ensuring the microbial safety of sous vide-cooked fish is achieving a balance between time and temperature. Pasteurization occurs over time, even at lower temperatures, provided the product is held long enough to reduce the microbial load to safe levels.

- **Common Pathogens:** Fish may harbour pathogens like Listeria monocytogenes, Clostridium botulinum, and Salmonella. Studies suggest that sous vide cooking of fish at temperatures above 60°C for sufficient time can effectively reduce these pathogens to safe levels.
- **Storage and Handling:** Post-cooking storage conditions are crucial to maintaining the safety of sous vide fish products. Once cooked, fish should be rapidly chilled to below 3°C to prevent the outgrowth of surviving pathogens.

## PACKAGING CONSIDERATIONS

Packaging plays a crucial role in sous vide technology, particularly for fish and fishery products, where maintaining product quality and safety is paramount. The following key considerations are important when selecting and using packaging for sous vide:

### Material Selection

The packaging material used for sous vide must be food-safe and durable enough to withstand both vacuum sealing and exposure to cooking temperatures, which typically range from 40°C to 85°C for fish. The most common materials are:

- **Plastic Films:** These are made from multi-layered, heat-resistant plastics such as polyethylene (PE), polyamide (PA), or polyester (PET). These materials are BPA-free, flexible, and impermeable to air and moisture.
- **Barrier Properties:** The packaging must be impermeable to oxygen and moisture to prevent oxidation, spoilage, and moisture loss during cooking and storage.
- **Heat Resistance:** The packaging must be able to withstand the extended cooking times and temperatures of sous vide without breaking down or leaching harmful chemicals into the food.

### Vacuum Sealing

Effective vacuum sealing is essential for sous vide cooking. The vacuum process removes air from the package, which prevents the growth of aerobic bacteria and reduces the risk of oxidation that can degrade fish quality.

- **Strong Seals:** The packaging must form airtight seals that remain intact during both cooking and storage. This prevents the risk of water leakage into the package and helps ensure even heat transfer.
- **Compression:** Vacuum sealing also compresses the product, which helps achieve uniform cooking by keeping the food in close contact with the water bath.

### Food Safety Compliance

Packaging materials used in sous vide must comply with food safety regulations to avoid chemical migration from plastic into the food. Regulatory agencies, such as the FDA and EFSA, have guidelines governing the safety of plastics used in cooking.

- **Non-toxic and BPA-free:** The packaging must be free from harmful chemicals like BPA or phthalates, which can leach into the food at high temperatures.

### Environmental Impact

As sous vide packaging is typically single-use, environmental concerns regarding plastic waste are significant. Many companies are working on developing:

- **Biodegradable Packaging:** New materials are being developed that are compostable or biodegradable, reducing the environmental footprint of sous vide packaging.
- **Recyclable Options:** Some packaging films are made from recyclable plastics, offering a more sustainable option for large-scale commercial use.

### Storage and Shelf Life

After sous vide cooking, the packaging often serves as the storage container. Vacuum-sealed sous vide fish products can have an extended shelf life, particularly when stored at appropriate temperatures.

- **Chilled Storage:** Sous vide-cooked fish, if not consumed immediately, should be rapidly chilled to below 3°C to prevent microbial growth. The packaging must remain intact during refrigeration.
- **Frozen Storage:** The packaging should also withstand freezing temperatures if the sous vide fish products are frozen for long-term storage.

### Labelling and Consumer Information

For retail sous vide fish products, the packaging must provide clear information about proper storage, reheating, and shelf-life recommendations. Vacuum-sealed sous vide products often require special reheating instructions to maintain optimal texture and flavour.

## DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SOUS VIDE COOK-CHILL AND COOK-FREEZE TECHNIQUES

Sous vide cook-chill and sous vide cook-freeze are two preservation techniques used in the food industry to extend the shelf life of sous vide-cooked food. Both methods involve cooking food in vacuum-sealed bags using sous vide, but they differ in the post-cooking handling, storage temperatures, and shelf life. Here's how they compare:

### Sous Vide Cook-Chill

**Definition:** In the cook-chill method, the food is cooked sous vide, then rapidly chilled and stored at low temperatures for a limited time.

**Process:** The food is vacuum-sealed and cooked using the sous vide technique. After cooking, it is quickly cooled to below 3°C within 90 minutes to prevent bacterial growth. The food is then stored in a refrigerated state (typically between 0°C and 3°C) (Evans et al., 1996)

**Shelf Life:** Typically, 5 to 21 days, depending on the type of food, storage conditions, and packaging integrity. The extended shelf life is restricted to 28 days due to the risk of toxin production by non-proteolytic Clostridium botulinum strains at 3.3°C within 31 days (Schmidt et al., 1961).

**Usage:** Commonly used in restaurants, catering services, and food production where products are prepared in advance and reheated before serving. It offers flexibility in storage without sacrificing the quality and freshness of the product.

**Reheating:** The chilled product is reheated just before serving, typically in the same vacuum-sealed bag using a water bath or microwave.

### Sous Vide Cook-Freeze

**Definition:** In the cook-freeze method, the food is cooked sous vide, then rapidly frozen for long-term storage.

**Process:** The food is vacuum-sealed and cooked using the sous vide technique. After cooking, it is rapidly frozen to -18°C or lower to halt bacterial growth and extend shelf life. The frozen product is stored at freezing temperatures (-18°C or below) (Redmond et al., 2004)

**Shelf Life:** Can be up to 6 to 12 months, depending on the type of food and packaging used. The shelf life of cook-freeze products is constrained by structural changes in the food, such as ice crystal formation and the development of off-flavors. These changes result from the production of chemicals like formaldehyde and free fatty acids through hydrolysis and oxidation. The shelf life is influenced by the food's chemical composition, packaging system, and storage conditions, including time and temperature (Rajkovic et al., 2010)

**Usage:** Suitable for long-term storage and large-scale production where bulk quantities of food are prepared and distributed over time. Used by manufacturers of frozen ready-to-eat meals, in institutional kitchens, or in industries requiring prolonged storage.

**Reheating:** The frozen product must be thawed before reheating, either in a refrigerator or in a sous vide water bath, ensuring even reheating without compromising food texture or safety.

## CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS OF SOUS VIDE IN FISHERY PRODUCTS

While sous vide technology offers numerous benefits for cooking fish and fishery products, there are several challenges and limitations that need to be addressed:

### Microbial Risks

Sous vide operates at lower temperatures compared to traditional cooking methods, which may not always eliminate harmful pathogens like Listeria monocytogenes, Clostridium botulinum, or Salmonella. Although pasteurization occurs at lower temperatures over extended cooking times, improper handling, cooking, or storage can lead to microbial contamination. Additionally, spore-forming bacteria may survive the cooking process if temperatures are not adequately controlled, especially if the products are not rapidly cooled or stored properly post-cooking.

### Packaging Concerns

Vacuum-sealed plastic packaging is essential for sous vide cooking, but there are concerns regarding the potential leaching of harmful chemicals, such as bisphenol A (BPA), from plastic into the food. Additionally, the environmental impact of single-use plastics presents a significant challenge. While there are food-safe alternatives available, developing biodegradable or recyclable packaging that withstands the sous vide process is still an area of ongoing research.

### Limited Flavour Development

Sous vide cooking preserves the natural flavours of fish but does not promote browning or the Maillard reaction, which typically occurs at higher temperatures and is responsible for the development of rich, savoury flavours in roasted or grilled fish. As a result, sous vide fish may lack the depth of flavour and texture variations that some consumers expect from traditional cooking methods, requiring additional searing or finishing steps to enhance flavour.

### Equipment and Cost

Sous vide requires specialized equipment, including a water bath, immersion circulator, and vacuum sealer. While the technology is becoming more accessible, the initial investment and operational complexity can be a barrier for home cooks and small-scale producers. Additionally, maintaining precise temperature control over long cooking periods can increase energy consumption and costs, particularly in industrial applications.

### Limited Culinary Applications

While sous vide excels at preserving texture and moisture in delicate fish, it may not be suitable for all culinary applications. The lack of crispness or char that comes with traditional high-heat methods may limit its appeal in certain dishes. Furthermore, sous vide does not allow for quick, high-temperature cooking, making it less versatile in time-sensitive cooking environments.

## COMMERCIAL APPLICATIONS

Sous vide technology has found a growing niche in both the high-end culinary world and the broader food industry, offering significant advantages in the preparation of fish and fishery products. Its precise temperature control, uniform cooking, and ability to retain the delicate texture and flavor of fish make it an attractive option for various commercial applications. Below are some of the key areas where sous vide technology is being applied in the fishery industry:

### Restaurant and Catering Industry

Sous vide is widely used in restaurants, particularly in fine dining establishments, to ensure consistent quality in fish dishes. Chefs rely on sous vide to maintain the delicate texture of fish, prevent overcooking, and enhance flavor retention. The method also allows for efficient batch cooking, where multiple portions of fish can be prepared in advance, vacuum-sealed, and finished quickly before serving. This is particularly beneficial for maintaining consistency during busy service periods or catering events.

- **Portion control:** Restaurants can precisely portion fish fillets, vacuum-seal them, and cook them sous vide. This ensures uniformity in cooking times and quality, reducing food waste and offering consistent portions for customers.
- **Pre-cooked Fish Products:** In catering services, pre-cooked sous vide fish products can be quickly reheated and finished, making it ideal for large-scale events while preserving the product's sensory qualities.

### Food Processing Industry

The food processing industry is increasingly adopting sous vide technology to prepare ready-to-eat fish products that maintain high quality and extended shelf life. Pre-packaged sous vide fish fillets, fish stews, and seafood mixtures are gaining popularity in retail markets due to their convenience, superior texture, and nutritional retention. These products are particularly appealing to health-conscious consumers who prioritize high-quality protein sources without added preservatives or excessive fat.

- **Ready-to-eat Meals:** Sous vide-cooked fish is vacuum-sealed and pasteurized, making it suitable for chilled or frozen ready-to-eat meals. These meals retain the flavor, moisture, and nutritional value of freshly cooked fish and require only reheating by the consumer.
- **High-end Frozen Products:** Sous vide-cooked fish products can be frozen and distributed in premium frozen food lines, with significantly improved quality over traditionally frozen fish. When reheated, sous vide fish retains its texture and flavor, providing a "restaurant-quality" meal at home.

### Retail Markets

In retail, sous vide technology is being used to produce packaged fish products for supermarkets and gourmet food stores. Pre-cooked sous vide fish fillets and seafood meals are marketed as high-end, healthy, and convenient options for consumers who want quality meals with minimal preparation time.

These products are typically vacuum-sealed and refrigerated or frozen, ready to be reheated by customers in sous vide baths or via traditional reheating methods such as microwaving or grilling.

- **Meal Kits:** Some companies offer sous vide fish as part of meal kits, where consumers receive pre-cooked fish along with other ingredients to finish the dish at home. This adds convenience for consumers who want gourmet meals without the hassle of cooking from scratch.
- **Gourmet Products:** Premium fish products like salmon, cod, or halibut are sold sous vide-cooked and packaged in vacuum-sealed bags with flavor-enhancing ingredients like herbs, citrus, or butter. These ready-to-eat products cater to discerning customers who seek gourmet meals with ease.

### Extended Shelf-life Products

One of the significant commercial advantages of sous vide technology is the extended shelf life it offers. The vacuum-sealing process minimizes oxidation and bacterial growth, while the pasteurization effect of sous vide cooking reduces spoilage. This makes it possible to produce fresh-tasting fish products with a longer refrigerated shelf life, reducing waste and improving logistics for both manufacturers and retailers.

- **Reduced Spoilage:** Vacuum-sealed sous vide fish can last longer than traditionally prepared fish, which is beneficial for both retailers and consumers. This reduces waste, increases product availability, and enhances profitability.
- **Chilled and Frozen Distribution:** Sous vide products can be distributed in either chilled or frozen states, providing flexibility in supply chain management. For example, frozen sous vide fish can be thawed and used in retail or foodservice with minimal quality degradation.

### Institutional and Healthcare Services

Hospitals, schools, and nursing homes are using sous vide technology to provide nutritionally balanced, high-quality meals to patients and residents. Sous vide-cooked fish offers a healthier alternative to fried or grilled fish, with enhanced nutrient retention and texture, making it easier for those with dietary restrictions or specific health needs to consume. Additionally, the extended shelf life of sous vide products makes them more convenient for institutions that require safe, ready-to-serve meals.

- **Dietary and Nutritional Applications:** For institutions where food safety and nutritional content are paramount, sous vide fish ensures consistent, controlled cooking, preserving omega-3 fatty acids, vitamins, and proteins. This is particularly beneficial for patients with specific dietary needs, such as those on soft or nutrient-dense diets.
- **Safe Food Preparation:** Since sous vide involves precise temperature control and vacuum-sealing, it minimizes cross-contamination risks, which is crucial in institutional settings where food safety is a priority.

### Marine and Fish Export Industry

For countries or companies involved in the export of fish products, sous vide technology offers a way to prepare fish in a manner that can withstand long transit times while maintaining high quality. Vacuum-sealed sous vide fish products can be exported in either frozen or chilled form, preserving the texture, flavour, and nutritional content for consumers in distant markets.

- **International Markets:** Sous vide offers a way for fishery industries to expand their market reach by providing high-quality, pre-cooked fish products that maintain freshness during long-distance transportation. This can be particularly useful for countries with large seafood export industries.
- **Gourmet Export:** High-end sous vide-cooked fish products can be sold to gourmet food stores and restaurants around the world, allowing exporters to offer premium seafood experiences with consistent quality.

## FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

While sous vide technology has demonstrated numerous benefits in fish and fishery product preparation, further research is needed to address the following areas:

Microbial Safety Optimization: Developing new techniques and standards for ensuring microbial safety in sous vide fishery products, particularly for large-scale commercial production.

Packaging Innovations: Advances in sustainable and safe packaging solutions are critical for the widespread adoption of sous vide technology in fish processing.

Consumer Preferences: Understanding how consumer preferences for texture, flavour, and cooking convenience evolve with the increasing availability of sous vide products.

## CONCLUSION

Sous vide technology has proven to be an innovative and effective method for cooking fish and fishery products. Its ability to enhance texture, preserve nutrients, and maintain the delicate flavours of fish makes it highly appealing for both culinary and commercial purposes. However, attention must be given to microbial safety, proper packaging, and environmental concerns to fully harness the potential of this technology in the fish industry. Continued research and development will help refine sous vide methods and address current limitations, ultimately making it a more viable option for mainstream food processing and preparation.

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**How to cite this article:** Bhattacharya A, Chowdhury S and Ikbal I. Sous Vide in Seafood: A Novel Approach to Modern ProcessingTechniques. Chron Aquat Sci. 2024; 2(3): 8-17. DOI: http://doi.org/10.61851/coas.v2i3.02