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Making pickles at home

Pat Kendall and Carol Schultz¹

Quick Facts

- Use only fresh, blemish-free fruits and vegetables and up-to-date, research-based recipes when making pickles.
- Use pure granulated non-iodized canning or pickling salt, high-grade vinegar of 5 percent acidity and fresh spices.
- Process pickled products in a boiling water bath for the altitude-adjusted length of time stated in the recipe.
- Store processed pickles in a dark, cool, dry place.
- Pickles may spoil if untested recipes, poor quality ingredients, or poor canning methods and equipment are used.

The many varieties of pickled and fermented foods are classified by types of ingredients and method of preparation.

Regular dill pickles and sauerkraut are fermented and cured for about 3 weeks. Refrigerator dills are fermented for about 1 week. During curing, colors and flavors change and acidity increases. Fresh-pack or quick-process pickles are not fermented; they are brined several hours to overnight, then drained and covered with vinegar and seasonings. Fruit pickles usually are prepared by heating fruit in a seasoned syrup acidified with either lemon juice or vinegar. Relishes are made from chopped fruits and vegetables that are cooked with seasonings and vinegar.

Ingredients

Cucumbers. Cucumbers grown for pickling—such as Volley, Armada, Blitz, Spear-it, Calypso

and SMR 58 will yield the best product. Seed catalogs are a good source of information about cucumber varieties suitable for pickling.

Select firm cucumbers of the appropriate size: about 1½ inches for gherkins and 4 inches for dills. Use odd-shaped and more mature cucumbers for relishes and bread-and-butter style pickles. Pick cucumbers very early in the day to help prevent a bitter flavor. Do not purchase commercially waxed cucumbers for pickling as acid or salt will not penetrate cucumbers properly.

Other fruits and vegetables. Select fresh, tender vegetables and fresh, firm fruits that are free of blemishes. Use as soon as possible after picking. If the fruits or vegetables cannot be used within one or two hours after harvesting, refrigerate without washing, or spread in a cool, well-ventilated place.

Thoroughly wash all fruits and vegetables just before pickling. Remove and discard a 1/16-inch slice from the blossom end of fresh cucumbers. Blossoms may contain an enzyme that causes excessive softening of pickles.

Caution: The level of acidity in a pickled product is as important to its safety as it is to taste and texture.

There must be a minimum, uniform level of acid throughout the mixed product to prevent the growth of botulinum bacteria.

Use only recipes with tested proportions of ingredients.

Do not alter vinegar, food, or water proportions in the recipe or use a vinegar with unknown acidity.

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Salt. Use non-iodized canning or pickling salt. Noncaking materials added to other salts may make the brine cloudy. Since flake salt varies in density, it is not recommended for making pickled and fermented foods.

For information on reduced-sodium pickles see Service in Action 9.302, *Food preservation without sugar or salt*.

Vinegar. Use a high-grade cider or white distilled vinegar of 5 percent acidity (50 grain). White distilled vinegar usually is preferred with light-colored fruits and vegetables to retain their light colors. Do not use homemade vinegars or vinegars of unknown acidity.

Spices. Spices lose their flavor quickly. For best results, always use fresh spices in canning or pickling.

Equipment

A 1-gallon container that does not react with acid is needed for each 5 pounds of fresh vegetables to be brined. A 5-gallon glazed stone crock is ideal for fermenting about 25 pounds of fresh cabbage or cucumbers. Food-grade plastic and glass containers are excellent substitutes for stone crocks. **Caution:** Do not use garbage bags or trash liners as brining containers. Fermenting sauerkraut in quart and half-gallon Mason jars is an acceptable practice, but may result in more spoilage. Wash, rinse and scald containers prior to use.

The kettle used to heat the pickling solution or product may be made of aluminum, stainless steel or unchipped enamel. Iron, copper, brass or galvanized utensils should not be used.

A long-handled, stainless steel spoon, wide-mouth funnel, jar lifter and bubble freer are necessary tools. A plastic or rubber knife-like utensil may serve as the bubble freer.

Standard canning jars that are free from cracks and chips should be used to store pickles. Mayonnaise jars or other jars and lids from commercially canned foods are not recommended since a proper seal is difficult to achieve. Screw bands can be reused if in good shape, but lids must be new.

Processing

Pickling means increasing the acidity of a product so that food poisoning organisms, such as *Clostridium botulinum*, do not grow and produce toxin. This may be done either through a fermentation process and/or by the direct addition of an acid ingredient, such as vinegar or lemon juice. With either method, a reliable recipe should be followed to assure proper acidification.

Once the produce has been properly acidified, steps need to be taken to prevent spoilage from microorganisms that thrive in an acid environment and to inactivate enzymes that may affect flavor, color and texture. Refrigeration is an acceptable short-term (up to 6 months) storage method for fully fermented products such as

sauerkraut and long-brined dills. Canning is a better way to store fully fermented pickles and sauerkraut and is the only recommended procedure for fresh-pack pickle products. Processing times and procedures will vary according to food acidity and the size of food pieces.

Boiling water bath process:

To process in a boiling water bath, pack the fruit or vegetables into clean, hot glass canning jars according to recipe directions. (Pickles processed less than 10 minutes at sea level need to be packed into hot, sterilized jars; see method below).

Release air bubbles by inserting a flat plastic (not metal) spatula between the food and jar. Slowly turn jar and move spatula up and down to release air bubbles. Adjust headspace, then clean jar rim with a dampened paper towel.

Place lid, gasket side down, on jar sealing surface and add screw band. Follow the lid manufacturer's directions for preparing and tightening the jar lids properly.

Place jars on rack of canner or deep kettle half filled with hot (140° F) water for raw-packed foods or very hot (180° F) for hot-packed foods. Add more boiling water, if needed, so the water level is at least 1 inch above jar tops. Turn heat to its highest position until water boils vigorously.

Cover canner, set timer for processing time required and adjust heat settings to maintain a gentle boil throughout the process schedule, including the necessary adjustment for altitude. The products in this fact sheet have been adjusted for use at altitudes of 1001 to 10,000 feet. When only sea level processing time is given, use the following chart to make the necessary increase in processing time.

Altitude	Increase in sea level processing time	
	20 mins. or less	More than 20 mins.
1,000 feet	1 minute	2 minutes
2,000 feet	2 minutes	4 minutes
3,000 feet	3 minutes	6 minutes
4,000 feet	4 minutes	8 minutes
5,000 feet	5 minutes	10 minutes
6,000 feet	6 minutes	12 minutes
7,000 feet	7 minutes	14 minutes
8,000 feet	8 minutes	16 minutes
9,000 feet	9 minutes	18 minutes
10,000 feet	10 minutes	20 minutes

To sterilize empty jars: place right side up on rack in boiling-water bath canner. Fill canner and jars with hot water to 1 inch above jar tops. Boil 10 minutes plus 1 minute per 1,000 feet above sea level. Remove jars, drain and fill with product. Save hot water for processing filled jars.

Storage

When processing time is completed, remove jars and place upright about 2 inches apart on

wire racks or towels. Let cool, undisturbed, for 12 to 24 hours.

Before storing, remove the screwbands of two-piece lids, recheck the seals and wipe the jars clean. Then label the jars with the name of the product, processing method used and date. Store pickled products in a cool, dark, dry place where there is no danger of freezing.

Spoilage

Soft, slippery or slimy pickles are spoiled and should be destroyed so spoiled contents can not be eaten by people or animals. Problems such as insufficient heat treatment and poor jar seals lead to spoilage. Processing pickles in a boiling water bath and using standard canning jars with new lids will help prevent these problems.

Other factors that lead to spoilage include 1) failure to remove blossom ends; 2) failure to thoroughly wash products to be pickled; 3) not removing the scum that accumulates on curing brines; 4) using a too-weak brine or vinegar solution; 5) not keeping the pickles covered with brine throughout the curing process; 6) using deteriorated ingredients such as moldy garlic or decayed spices; or 7) storing the pickles at too warm a temperature.

Other Problems

Shriveling happens most often in very sweet or sour pickles and in large whole cucumber pickles. It is caused by using too strong a salt, sugar or vinegar solution at the beginning of the pickling process. Overcooking, overprocessing or not starting with fresh produce also may cause shriveling.

Hollow pickles are the result of faulty growth or curing. Since hollow cucumbers usually float they can be picked out easily when the cucumbers are washed. Cucumbers that stand for more than 24 hours before processing may become hollow. For best results, use these for relishes rather than whole pickles.

Discolored pickles may be caused by iron from hard water or an iron cooking utensil. Use of iodized salt, ground spices, too much spice, or packing the spice bag in jars will darken pickles. Pickles prepared in a copper utensil will turn an abnormal green and those made in a zinc pan will lose their color. Use of over-mature dill may cause pickle liquid to turn pink shortly after canning. Sunburned or over-mature cucumbers may produce a product that is dull or faded in appearance. Pickles that have small, brown spots have been held too long before pickling.

A white sediment at the bottom of the jar may occur during fermentation due to the bacteria that causes fermentation. A white sediment also may be caused by using a pickling salt that contains an anticaking agent. Both kinds of sediment are not harmful and will not affect the pickles.

Blue, purple or blue-green garlic may result if

immature garlic or garlic that is not fully dry is used, if pickle solutions are cooked in copper pans or if there is a high amount of copper in the water used in pickling. Garlic contains anthocyanins, a water-soluble pigment that under acid conditions may turn blue or purple. A blue-green color also may develop in pickles made with stored garlic of the red-skinned variety. Except in the case of a blue-green color resulting from an abnormally high concentration of copper-sulfate, such color changes do not indicate the presence of harmful substances.

Quick Fresh-Pack Whole Dill Pickles

8 pounds of 3- to 5-inch pickling cucumbers
1¼ cups canning or pickling salt (divided)
2 gallons cold water
1½ quarts vinegar (5 percent acidity)
¼ cup sugar
2 quarts water
2 tablespoons whole mixed pickling spices
5 tablespoons whole mustard seed
21 heads of fresh dill or 7 tablespoons dill seed
Yield: 7 quarts or 14 pints.

Wash cucumbers. Cut 1/16-inch slice from blossom end and discard. Leave ¼ inch of stem attached. Dissolve ¾-cup salt in 2 gallons water. Pour over cucumbers and let stand 12 hours. Drain.

Combine vinegar, ½ cup salt, sugar and 2 quarts water. Add mixed pickling spices tied in a clean white cloth. Heat to boiling.

Fill jars with cucumbers. Add 2 teaspoons mustard seed and 3 heads fresh dill (or 1 tablespoon dill seed) to each quart. Use half the amount for pints. Cover with boiling pickling solution, leaving ½-inch head space. Remove air bubbles. Wipe jar rims. Adjust lids.

Process in a boiling water bath: pints—15 minutes at 6,000 feet or less, 20 minutes above 6,000 feet; quarts—20 minutes at 6,000 feet or below, 25 minutes above 6,000 feet.

Quick Sweet Pickles

8 pounds of 3- to 4-inch pickling cucumbers
1/3 cup canning or pickling salt
Crushed or cubed ice
4½ cups sugar
3½ cups vinegar (5 percent acidity)
2 teaspoons celery seed
1 tablespoon whole allspice
2 tablespoons mustard seed
Yield: 7 to 9 pints

Wash cucumbers. Cut 1/16 inch off blossom end and discard. Cut cucumbers into slices or strips. Place in large bowl and sprinkle with 1/3 cup salt. Cover with 2 inches of crushed or cubed ice. Refrigerate 3 to 4 hours. Add more ice as needed.

Combine sugar, vinegar, celery seed, allspice and mustard seed in 3-quart saucepot. Heat to boiling.

Drain cucumbers and pack without heating into clean jars, leaving ½-inch headspace. Fill jars to ½ inch from top with hot liquid. Remove

any air bubbles with a plastic spatula. Wipe jar rims. Adjust lids.

Process in a boiling water bath: pints—15 minutes at 6,000 feet or below, 20 minutes above 6,000 feet; quarts—20 minutes at 6,000 feet or below, 25 minutes above 6,000 feet.

After processing and cooling, store jars 4 to 5 weeks before opening to allow for flavor development.

Add 2 slices of raw onion to each jar before filling, if desired.

Pickled Bread-And-Butter Zucchini

16 cups fresh zucchini, sliced (3/16-inch thick)
4 cups onion, thinly sliced
1/2 cup canning or pickling salt
4 cups white vinegar (5% acidity)
2 cups sugar
4 tablespoons mustard seed
2 tablespoons celery seed
2 teaspoons ground turmeric
Yield: About 8 to 9 pints

Cover zucchini and onion slices with 1 inch ice water and salt. Let stand 2 hours; drain thoroughly.

Combine vinegar, sugar, mustard seed, celery seed and turmeric. Bring to a boil; add zucchini and onions. Simmer 5 minutes.

Fill jars with mixture and pickling solution, leaving 1/2-inch headspace. Remove air bubbles. Wipe jar rims. Adjust lids.

Process pints or quarts in a boiling water bath canner for 15 minutes at 6,000 feet or less; 20 minutes above 6,000 feet.

Pickle Relish

3 quarts finely chopped cucumbers
3 cups finely chopped green peppers
3 cups finely chopped red peppers
1 cup finely chopped onions
3/4 cup canning or pickling salt
4 cups ice
8 cups water
4 teaspoons each of mustard seed, turmeric, whole allspice and whole cloves
2 cups sugar
6 cups white vinegar (5% acidity)
Yield: about 9 pints or 18 half-pints

Add cucumbers, peppers, onions, salt and ice to water and let stand 4 hours. Drain and re-cover vegetables with fresh ice water for another hour. Drain again. Combine spices in a spice or cheese-cloth bag. Add spices to sugar and vinegar. Heat to boiling and pour mixture over vegetables. Cover and refrigerate 24 hours.

Heat pickle mixture to boiling and fill hot into clean jars, leaving 1/2-inch headspace. Remove air bubbles. Wipe jar rims. Adjust lids.

Process pints or half-pints in a boiling water bath canner for 15 minutes at 6,000 feet or less; 20 minutes above 6,000 feet.

Pickled Sweet Green Tomatoes

10 to 11 pounds of green tomatoes (16 cups sliced 1/4-inch thick)
2 cups thinly sliced onions
1/4 cup canning or pickling salt
3 cups brown sugar
4 cups vinegar (5% acidity)
1 tablespoon each of mustard seed, allspice, celery seed and whole cloves
Yield: about 9 pints or 4 1/2 quarts

Wash and slice tomatoes and onions. Place in bowl, sprinkle with 1/4 cup salt and let stand 4 to 6 hours. Drain.

Heat and stir sugar in vinegar until dissolved. Tie mustard seed, allspice, celery seed, and cloves in a spice bag. Add to vinegar with tomatoes and onions. If needed, add minimum water to cover pieces. Bring to boil and simmer 30 minutes, stirring as needed to prevent burning. Tomatoes should be tender and transparent when properly cooked. Remove spice bag.

Fill jars and cover with hot pickling solution, leaving 1/2-inch headspace. Remove air bubbles. Wipe jar rims. Adjust lids.

Process in a boiling water bath: pints—15 minutes at 6,000 feet or below, 20 minutes above 6,000 feet; quarts—20 minutes at 6,000 feet or below, 25 minutes above 6,000 feet.

Pickled Dilled Beans

4 pounds tender green or yellow beans
8 cloves garlic (optional)
8 heads of fresh dill or 8 tablespoons dill seed
1/2 cup canning or pickling salt
4 cups white vinegar (5 percent acidity)
4 cups water
1 teaspoon hot red-pepper flakes (optional)
Yield: 8 pint jars

Sterilize pint canning jars. Wash, trim ends and cut beans into 4-inch pieces.

Place 1 clove garlic and 1 dill head or 1 teaspoon dill seed in each pint jar. Pack beans upright in jars, leaving 1/2-inch head space. Combine salt, vinegar, water and pepper flakes (if desired). Bring to a boil. Pour hot liquid over beans, leaving 1/2-inch head space. Remove air bubbles. Wipe jar rims. Adjust lids.

Process in a boiling water bath canner for 10 minutes at 6,000 feet or less; 15 minutes above 6,000 feet.

Let beans stand for at least 2 weeks before tasting to allow the flavor to develop.

References

The Complete Guide to Canning, AIB-539, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, 1989.

Reynolds, S. and Ybarra, P. W., *So Easy to Preserve*, Cooperative Extension Service, The University of Georgia, 1988.