

A CANNING & PICKLING PRIMER

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Tips for good pickles:

Homemade pickles aren't complicated, but there are a few things you should know before you get started.

- Always start with the freshest produce you can find. The less time your produce spends in the crisper drawer, the crunchier your finished pickle will be.
- When you're working with cucumbers, make sure to slice off the blossom end. It can harbor an enzyme that will lead to softer pickles. And no one likes a soggy pickle.
- When you're chopping your pickles before packing them into the jars, take into consideration the number of cuts you're making. The larger the pieces, the more structural integrity the pickles will retain, again protecting that crunch. This means that whole pickles will always have more bite than spears, which will have more texture than slices. It's just something to keep in mind.
- One of the joys of making your own pickles is that you can customize the flavor to suit your taste buds. This doesn't mean you should go monkeying around with the balance of vinegar to water (that ratio needs to stay stable to keep your pickles safe), but you can alter the amounts of garlic, dill, peppercorns and chili flakes you add to each jar. Love garlic? Throw a couple more cloves in there! Can't stand spice? Skip the hot stuff altogether.
- Don't mess with the amount of salt. Salt does two necessary things in these recipes. First, it helps draw the water out of the cucumbers, creating space that the vinegar brine will then occupy. Second, it acts as a preservative, keeping your pickles fresher longer.
- Finally, many recipes can either be made shelf stable or as a refrigerator pickle. For the shelf stable version, you give the jars a dip in a boiling water bath (typically, it's 10 minutes for pints and 15 minutes for quarts. Consult your recipes before processing) in order to sterilize and put enough heat in the jars to create a seal (this does make for a slightly softer pickle). For a refrigerator pickle, once the jars have cooled, they can go into the fridge.
- Either way, give pickles at least a week before you crack open the jar, so that they get nice and puckery.

How to prep and process:

1. Find a recipe from a reliable source like the Ball website, the National Center for Home Food Preservation or a cookbook with tested recipes.
2. Gather your ingredients. Always work with the freshest produce you can find.
3. Remove lids and rings from jars.
4. Place the number of jars you'll need on top of the rack in your stock pot.
5. Fill pot (and jars) with water to cover, place a lid on the pot and bring it to a boil.
6. Put your lids in a small saucepan and bring them to the barest simmer on the back of the stove.
7. While the canning pot comes to a boil, prepare your product.
8. When your recipe is complete, remove the jars from the canning pot (pouring the water back into the pot as you remove the jars) and lay them out on a clean towel on your counter.
9. Carefully fill your jars with your product. Depending on the recipe, you'll need to leave between $\frac{1}{4}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$ an inch of headspace (that's the room between the surface of the product and the top of the jar).
10. Wipe the rims of the jar with a clean, damp paper towel or the edge of a kitchen towel.
11. Apply lids and screw the bands on the jars to hold the lids down during processing.
12. Carefully lower the filled jars into the canning pot. You may need to remove some water as you put the jars in the pot. A heat-proof Pyrex measuring cup is the best tool for this job.
13. Once the pot has returned to a boil, start your timer. The length of the processing time will vary from recipe to recipe.
14. When your timer goes off, remove the jars from the water bath promptly. Place them back on the towel-lined countertop and let them cool.
15. The jar lids should begin to ping soon after they've been removed from the pot. The pinging is the sound of the seals being formed and the center of the lids will become concave as the vacuum seal takes hold.

16. After the jars have cooled to room temperature, remove the bands and check the seals. You do this by grasping the jar by the edge of the lid and gently lifting it an inch or two off the countertop. The lid should hold fast.
17. Once you've determined that your seals are good, you can store your jars in a cool, dark place (with the rings off, please) for up to a year.
18. Jars that don't seal can be refrigerated and used first.

Garlic Dill Pickles (preserved pickle)

2 overflowing pints of Kirby cucumbers
3 cups apple cider vinegar
3 cups water
3 tablespoons pickling salt
16 garlic cloves, peeled
¼ teaspoon crushed red pepper per jar
1 teaspoon dill seed per jar
½ teaspoon black peppercorns per jar

- Prepare jars and canning pot. Put lids in a small pot and set to a bare simmer.
- Wash and slice the cucumbers into spears.
- In a large saucepot, combine vinegar, water and salt. Bring to a simmer.
- Arrange jars on counter and dole out the spices to each. Pack the cucumber spears firmly into the jars. You don't want to damage the cukes, but you do want them packed tight.
- Pour the brine into the jar, leaving ½ inch headspace.
- Wipe rims, apply lids and rings and process in a boiling water bath for 10 minutes.
- When 10 minutes are up, promptly remove the jars from the pot and allow them to cool on the countertop. When the jars are cool, check the seals (by pushing/tapping on the lid).

Pickles can be stored in a cool, dry place for up to a year.

Asian-Inspired Quick Pickles (quick pickle)

4 cups rice wine vinegar
1 1/2 cup sugar
2 tablespoons pickling salt
2 overflowing pints of Kirby cucumbers
2 bundles cilantro
12 garlic cloves, peeled
6 green onions, cut into 3-inch lengths
1/4 teaspoon red chili flakes per jar
4 limes, cut into wedges

- Combine rice wine vinegar, sugar and salt in a pot. Bring to a simmer.
- While the brine heats, divide cilantro, garlic, green onions and red chili flakes evenly between jars.
- Pack cucumber slices in on top of the aromatics.
- When brine is hot, pour over the vegetables, stopping 1/2 inch away from the top of the jars.
- Using a chopstick, try and remove any air bubbles that might be trapped around the cucumber slices. If necessary, add a bit more brine so that the vegetables are covered.
- Place a lid on the jar and screw it down tightly. When pickles are cool, place jar in refrigerator and let them sit for at least 24 hours before eating.

Makes 5 pints