



PRESERVING BY PICKLING

What is a pickle?

Most people think of cucumber pickles when they think of pickles. But in canning terms, pickles are any fruit, vegetable or meat that has been preserved by the pickling method. Pickled products are either fermented in brine, or packed in vinegar. Heat processing is also required to make them shelf stable.

What is brine?

Brine is a water and salt solution that is used to preserve and/or flavor foods.

Brining can be applied to vegetables, cheeses and fruit in a process known as pickling. Meat and fish are typically steeped in brine for shorter periods of time, as a form of marinating, enhancing its tenderness and flavor.

When we refer to brining in the context of water-bath canning we'll be adding vinegar and often spices to the brine. The vinegar will allow us to can low acid foods in a water bath canner instead of a pressure canner.

Canning vs Fermenting

Brine for fermenting is salt and water (and maybe some spices) but vinegar is not necessary. During the fermenting process lactic acid is formed and that is the acid that helps preserve the vegetable or fruit. For the most part, fermented foods are stored in the refrigerator.

If you want to learn more about fermenting fruits and vegetables and even how to make your own fermenting kit, there are videos and printables the member's library. You can find that at the bottom of your dashboard.

In canning we add vinegar because we won't be letting it sit for weeks to develop its own acid and we want these low acid foods to be shelf stable. There are several ways to do this; some recipes use the actual brine from vegetables to can in. And other recipes have you salt and ice the pickles for several hours, then drain it off. Then make a separate vinegar solution to use to can with. This is how my granny's bread and butter pickles are made.

Salt

The best salts for canning are natural salts without any additives such as anti-caking agents or iodine. Sea salt, kosher salts, Redmond's Real Salt, and canning and pickling salt are all good options.

Vinegar

There are many types of vinegar but only vinegar with an acetic acid content of at least 5% is appropriate for pickling and canning. Apple cider vinegar has a mellow flavor that blends well with spices for canning but can discolor the end product.

Many recipes call for white vinegar because while it has a strong flavor, it doesn't discolor the produce.

Vinegars with less than 5%, such as Rice Wine Vinegar, can be used but must be in combination with other vinegars to increase the acid percentage.

Water

Soft water is generally recommended for pickle making. If you don't have soft tap water you can use distilled water. If you choose to use hard water just know that the minerals in the water may discolor the pickles or make them soft. But it shouldn't ruin them and many people use tap water to make pickles.

Sweeteners

Any natural sweetener can be used in the pickling process; cane or beet sugar, honey, brown sugar and maple syrup are all good choices. Artificial sweeteners should not be used.

Spices and Herbs

Spices and herbs flavor pickled food. Fresh herbs are best but dried herbs can also be used. I usually use dried herbs since my herbs like dill have long stopped growing by the time I have cucumbers ready. Herbs and spices can be tied up in cheesecloth or spice bag and used like a tea bag or you can just put the spices and herbs directly into the liquid. I just mix them into the liquid as I don't mind them floating around in my jars of pickles.

Some spices and herbs that are commonly used for pickles are whole cloves, peppercorns, cinnamon sticks, mace, dill, tiny red peppers, mustard seed, all spice, bay leaves, ginger root, turmeric root, and garlic.

Equipment

When using brine, it's important to use stainless steel, glass, wooden equipment such as utensils, pots and bowls or crocks. Enamelware can be used as long as it doesn't have any chips. Copper, cast iron, galvanize steel, and aluminum will all react with the salt and vinegar and discolor the foods and alter their flavors.

Vegetables and Fruits for Pickling

Of course, cucumbers can be pickled but so can okra, peppers, watermelon rind, squash and zucchini, green tomatoes, carrots, cauliflower, corn, cabbage and even fruit such as pears and peaches.

Tips for Pickling

- Use firm and, possibly, even a bit under-ripe produce.
- Don't use any produce that is diseased or shriveled up
- For cucumbers, cut the blossom end off the cucumber as that end might have an enzyme that can cause the pickles to be soft.
- Grape leaves can be added to each jar to help keep the pickles crisp.
- Dark pickles are the result of too much iron in the water or using iron utensils.