

# no can do

if sterilizing jars  
scares you,  
try drying  
and pickling  
to preserve  
the harvest



HAWLEY WRIGHT ART

By Kathryn Kingsbury

In my kitchen lies the secret to long life. Long shelf life, that is.

In other people's kitchens, tomatoes might last only a week or two before turning mushy and overripe. Give onions a couple more weeks and they sprout green shoots, then start to rot. Fresh cider goes fizzy and gets poured down the drain.

Not in my kitchen. Last month I ate some tomatoes I'd picked in 2003. A week ago I sipped cider pressed last fall. Yesterday I snacked on local sweet cherries, even though the season ended in July. And later today I think I'll munch on a spring radish.

Okay, so the tomatoes were canned, the cider was hard, the cherries were dried, and the radishes were pickled. Are you calling me a cheater? You might be right. Perhaps I'm cheating the fate of the typical Wisconsinite, doomed to a diet void of local produce from November through April. I don't mind being that kind of cheater. How about you come along and cheat winter with me?

I wasn't always this way. My first attempt at canning was an unmitigated disaster. It was 1998 and I had a bumper crop of jalapeños, so I decided to can jalapeño jelly. The only problem was, I had never canned, never seen anyone can, and never read a book about canning. Three hours and two leaking jars of jelly later, I realized there must be a better way.

I called the professionals at Dane County Extension Office, who suggested I read the pamphlets on food preservation put out by the University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension (see sidebar). Pretty soon I had a reputation among my friends as a canning whiz.

Although canning is straightforward once you know the steps, it does require a certain amount of commitment. Even the quickest canning recipes take a couple hours of kitchen time, and most are designed for large quantities of food. (For instructions on canning, see the resources on the next page.) But there are other food-preservation methods that are perfect for small quantities, require no special equipment and involve just a few minutes of prep time.

## Drying

Drying is the perfect example. Most herbs dry just fine if you tie small amounts in loose bundles and hang them in an area protected from dust and direct sunlight, and fruits and vegetables dry well in the oven — though once you get hooked, you might want to buy a food dehydrator.

To oven-dry produce, set the oven to a temperature between 120 and 145 degrees. Often this is the "warm" setting, though some "warm" settings are hotter. Slice produce 1/4- to 1/2-inch thick. Peeling fruit first helps it dry more evenly, but it's optional. Most vegetables dry better if you steam them for a couple minutes, and most fruit keeps its color better if you dip it in a bowl of water with a splash of lemon juice or vinegar after slicing. Stick your prepared produce in the oven on racks or cookie sheets and leave the oven door slightly ajar so steam can escape. Rotate the produce every couple hours for more even drying, and flip over produce if you're using cookie sheets. After 4 to 16 hours, it should be dry. Most fruits should be leathery, while most vegetables will be crispy. They will be 60% to 90% smaller than what you started out with.

Oven drying won't produce dried fruit with the raisin-like texture you get at the grocery store — you need the fancy dehydrators for that. But fruit leather turns out just fine. Apples, plums, peaches and

grapes make excellent fruit leathers, and berries work well if you strain out the seeds and combine the pulp half-and-half with apple pulp or sauce. Pears, for a reason I have not yet figured out, create a very grainy texture in the final product.

Store dried food in airtight containers at room temperature. After one week, check to see if moisture has condensed inside the container. If so, pop the produce in the oven for a few more hours. Your food should last for several months at room temperature. Dried vegetables are good in soups and stews, or powdered in a food processor and sprinkled into casseroles or on pizzas. Dried fruits make nice snacks, or you can rehydrate them in boiling water for cobblers and other yummys.

A simple food dehydrator costs about \$40 and consists of a plastic shell, metal heating coils and several racks. (Models with more bells and whistles can cost \$150 and more.) The best kind of dehydrator includes a fan as well as heating coils. The fan distributes heat more evenly and whisks away moisture.

Food dehydrators dry produce more quickly than the oven will. You won't need to flip food over. And a fan cuts drying time by up to two-thirds, produces the best texture and eliminates the need for rotating trays.

## resources

### Pickles and Vinegar

*Nourishing Traditions* by Sally Fallon with Mary Enig

*Keeping Food Fresh: Old World Techniques and Recipes*,  
The Gardeners and Farmers of Terre Vivante

*The Permaculture Book of Ferment and Human Nutrition*  
by Bill Mollison

*Wild Fermentation* by Sandor Katz

*Vinegar: The User Friendly Standard Text and Guide  
to Appreciating, Making, and Enjoying Vinegar*  
by Lawrence J Diggs

Vinegar Connoisseurs International: [www.vinegarman.com](http://www.vinegarman.com)

Ohio State University Extension:  
[ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/5000/5346.html](http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/5000/5346.html)

### Drying

*The Complete Guide to Home Canning and Preserving*,  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
[www.uga.edu/nchfp/publications/publications\\_usda.html](http://www.uga.edu/nchfp/publications/publications_usda.html)

*Preserving Summer's Bounty* by Susan McClure

Dane County Extension Food and Nutrition, 224-3708

UW-Extension Cooperative Extension Publications  
[cecommerce.uwex.edu/showcat.asp?id=19](http://cecommerce.uwex.edu/showcat.asp?id=19)  
Food preservation instructions and recipes.



## Pickling

I was never a pickle lover until I discovered Euell Gibbons. The wild-food forager and prolific author dedicated a chapter of his 1966 book *Stalking the Good Life* to what he calls "the dill crock." "And just what is a dill crock?" he writes. "It is a way to enjoy some of the finest food you have ever tasted." Well, then, I had to try it.

Gibbons' method called for filling a jar or crock with any combination of vegetables and herbs you please (dill is optional) and covering it with a mix of "one measure of salt to a half measure of vinegar and 10 measures of water" (a little over three tablespoons salt and five teaspoons vinegar to a quart of water), weighing the vegetables down with a plate or clean rock so that they stayed completely submerged in the brine, and setting the whole thing in a dark place for a few weeks. All I had to do, he said, was occasionally check to see if any white, fuzzy yeast was forming on the surface of the brine; if it was, I should skim it off.

The resulting pickles were pleasantly — in fact, addictively — tangy, not overwhelmingly sour like store-bought pickles. What magic had produced this result? I read up on pickling and discovered that the same genus of bacteria that produces yogurt — lactobacilli — is responsible for the transformation that vegetables undergo in the dill crock. Salt in the brine dissuades spoilage bacteria as the lactobacilli gain a foothold. Most store-bought pickles are never fermented, but simply stewed in a concoction of vinegar, water and sugar. The high acidity of the vinegar prevents them from going bad.

In lactic acid pickles, it's the combination of lactic acid and beneficial bacteria that keeps food-spoiling microorganisms at bay. I have kept dill crocks going for up to a year by continuously replenishing them with vegetables and salt every time the pickle supply dwindled. Whenever you

want to slow down or stop the fermentation process, just stick your crock in the fridge.

A note on salt: Use canning or kosher salt, since regular table salt has fillers and extra minerals that can interfere with pickling or produce off-colors. Sea salt works in a pinch.

Any ceramic, glass or food-grade plastic container works fine as a crock. Avoid metal, which can interact with brine. I prefer wide-mouthed gallon-sized glass jars, but I've used everything from mixing bowls to large lemonade glasses.

You'll also need a weight to hold the veggies under the brine. A plate or glass that is just small enough to slip through the mouth of the crock is perfect. You can also fill a leak-proof plastic bag with brine, double bag it, and use that as a weight. (You fill it with brine rather than water in case its leak-proof feature fails.) Your weight should be heavy enough to keep the vegetables fully submerged. And your veggies should have no contact with the air, or they will succumb to yeasties and other microorganisms incompatible with good pickle-making. Finally, cover the crock and weight with a towel to keep light and dust out.

Gibbons' dilled vegetables are on the salty side. In cool weather you can cut the salt back to as little as one tablespoon per quart. And don't worry about accidentally eating spoiled pickles. In the words of author Sally Fallon (see sidebar), "The occasional batch that goes bad presents no danger — the smell will be so awful that nothing could persuade you to eat it."

## Vinegar

Just because I don't like vinegary pickles doesn't mean I don't like vinegar. In fact, vinegar is one of my favorite methods for preserving the flavors of summer fruits



## No can do CONTINUED

for winter use in salads, soups or a lemonade-type drink called switchel (one part vinegar, 2 parts sugar, and 10 to 20 parts water).

Here is the easiest way to make vinegar:

Buy a jug of preservative-free cider.

Pasteurized is okay, but unpasteurized is better. Pour out a glass or two for drinking. Leave the rest in the jug. Cap the jug loosely — don't twist the cap shut — and stick it in a cupboard.

Forget about it for a few months.

Find it one day while you are looking for your potato masher. You will notice that most of the pulp has settled out to the bottom and a gelatinous film or rubbery mass is floating in the cider. Don't let it scare you.

Pour out some cider. Taste it. Voilà! It is vinegar.

What just happened? When you opened the jug, you exposed it to the little yeast organisms and acetobacter that are omnipresent in the air. Yeast turned the sugar in the cider to alcohol. Acetobacter — a harmless bacteria, unless you are a winemaker and it gets into your vats — transformed alcohol into vinegar. As the acetobacter multiplied, many of them glommed together, forming that icky-looking mass, technically referred to as "mother of vinegar." The mother is edible, but I

usually compost it. You can also save it to give to friends as a "starter," but I've never needed a starter for making vinegar except when dealing with commercial wines, which contain chemicals to discourage acetobacter from multiplying.

The above procedure is pretty foolproof, but there are two ways to mess it up. The worse error is to buy cider with preservatives, since preservatives are designed to prevent cider from becoming vinegar. The other mistake is not to pour off any cider before you put the jug away. As the cider turns into alcohol, it forms bubbles. A full jug can bubble over and make a mess.

Failing to pour out cider also means you have less air in the jug, which slows down the acetobacter. Just last week I pulled out a year-old jug of cider that apparently hadn't gotten enough oxygen. When I poured it out to taste, there was none of the characteristic sour taste of vinegar. All I got was the smooth, dry flavor of hard cider. The concoction had never gotten past the alcohol stage. It was a crying shame. ♦

Kathryn Kingsbury is a certified Master Food Preserver.

## recipes

### Apple Fruit Leather

- ◆ Core and chop apples. Peeling is optional.
- ◆ Put the apples in a pan with a bit of water, to prevent burning, and heat until mushy. Let cool.
- ◆ Puree in a blender or food processor.
- ◆ Pour puree 1/4-inch thick onto a cookie sheet that is lightly oiled or covered with plastic wrap, freezer paper or parchment paper.
- ◆ Dry in 120-degree oven, door slightly ajar, for about 12 hours, or until fruit leather is no longer sticky and is dry enough to be pulled from the sheets.
- ◆ After peeling fruit leather off, check the bottom side for moisture. If not adequately dry, put leather on a rack — not back on the cookie sheet — and pop back into the oven until dry.
- ◆ Cool on racks and roll in wax paper, then place in an airtight container for storage.

### Gingered Carrots

1 quart finger-sized carrots, cleaned                      3 cups water  
1-2 inches peeled ginger root, sliced thinly            1 tablespoon salt

- ◆ Put the carrots and ginger root in a clean jar.
- ◆ Mix the water and salt, and pour the brine over the vegetables.
- ◆ Weigh the carrots down with a small saucer or glass until the brine completely covers the carrots, and cover with a napkin or cloth to keep the dust out.
- ◆ Set in a dark place with a relatively steady temperature, like a closet or a cellar that doesn't freeze, checking every few days to wipe off any yeast that forms on the surface.
- ◆ For a milder pickle, eat after one week. Wait longer if you want something tangier.

### Pickled Potlatch

*The vegetables listed below are suggestions for a colorful mix, but you can use any root vegetable, alone or in combination, other than potatoes or sweet potatoes. Red beets, not surprisingly, will stain the brine and any other vegetables pink.*

cauliflower, broken into florets	pickling salt (1-1/2 to 4 tablespoons salt to each quart water)
red radishes	dill seeds (1 tablespoon/quart water), carrot seeds (1 teaspoon/quart water) and/or
carrots	mustard seeds (1 tablespoon/quart water)
whole peeled garlic cloves	
water	

- ◆ Proceed as with Gingered Carrots, above.

