



In a Pickle

PRESERVING VEGETABLES FOR A HUNGRY MOTHER-INSPIRED MEAL

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAN WATKINS

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THE BLUE FLAMES OF BURNING WHISKEY AND THE FRENCH CARTOUCHE, I STARTED TO PANIC.

Although it was only 10 minutes into my pickling tutorial with chef Barry Maiden of Hungry Mother in Cambridge, I already felt dread and despair. And we hadn't come to the part where I might poison people by improperly washing my vegetables and sanitizing my jars. I was in

the celebrated restaurant's tiny kitchen to learn how to pickle, but I discovered that I'd also need to acquire flambéing and origami skills in order to make a Hungry Mother menu for my pickle-centric party—scheduled for three days later. Until that moment, it had seemed like a good idea, the perfect confluence of culinary desires—Maiden would teach me how to prepare a meal that would impress my cooking-club friends, none of whom had jumped on the briny bandwagon.



Pickling is a way to suspend time in a jar, but the from-scratch movement is also a natural extension of the zeitgeist responsible for farmers' markets, locally grown produce and environmentally conscious eating. It makes sense that given a seasonal surplus of, say, okra (a vegetable that's now occupying half of my fridge) you'd want to save some for the rest of the year, when Boston's nine-month winter transforms even the hardiest athletes into pale shut-ins.

That thriftiness has a strong financial component. Despite nascent signs of an economic rebound, unemployment hovers around 10 percent, not counting those who've given up on the job search altogether. "The last few years have been rough for people," says chef Michael Scelfo, 35, of Temple Bar. "Scratch-cooking is cost-effective. You pay a higher price for pre-fabricated [food]." Jarden, the company that makes Ball canning supplies, reports a 30 percent increase in sales of home-canning equipment over last year. Almost every hardware store where I looked—even the dinky one on my block—had Mason jars. Although it's 2009, it's hard not to see things through the blighted spectacles of 1929.

But the current scratch-cooking movement, and the subspecialty of pickling, also diverges from the techniques of leaner times in one fundamental way—it looks down on both the shortcuts and flavors of yore. There's a faction of homesteaders who frown on using packaged pectin, a naturally occurring thickener. Some make their own by boiling down the juice of unripe fruit. Recipes in Eugenia Bone's *Well-Preserved*, a popular cookbook for the new generation of gourmet home-canners, call for fresh herbs rather than commercial pickling spices, and for vegetables that are a far cry from the ubiquitous dill cucumber—baby artichokes, cauliflower and asparagus. (For more traditional canning recipes, consult the unfortunately named *Ball Blue Book of Preserving*, which has been around for more than 100 years in some



BREAD AND BUTTER PICKLES

8 cups sliced Kirby cucumbers, washed well

FOR THE PICKLING LIQUID:

5 cups cider vinegar
5 cups sugar
1 1/4 cups sliced onion
2 Tbs mustard seed
2 Tbs celery seed
1 Tbs tumeric
1 Tbs coarse black pepper

FOR THE BRINE:

1 cup salt
6 quarts water

Make the brine by bringing salted water to a boil. Cool, then pour over the cucumbers and refrigerate covered overnight.

Drain the cucumbers, squeezing brine from them. Meanwhile, bring the rest of the ingredients to a boil in a large, covered pot. Turn off the heat and let the pickling liquid steep for 10 minutes.

Arrange the cucumbers in sanitized mason jars and cover with the pickling liquid. Let cool to room temperature. If you have extra pickling liquid, you can use it on other vegetables, like green tomatoes, which don't need to presoak in brine.

NOTE: At this point, you can either refrigerate the jars and eat the pickles after a few days, up until 3 months, or to preserve them longer, follow the USDA's Complete Guide to Home Canning (uga.edu/nchf/how/can_06/prep_foods.html) and process them in a canner—essentially a large pot with fitted jar racks—and keep them in a cool, dry place for up to a year.

form.) These might be scary times, but some people still draw a line between cooking from scratch and cooking from scraps.

Pickling is not a technique to try on inferior foods. As I learned from Maiden, 33, whose eatery was recently named one of the nation's 10 best new restaurants by *Food & Wine*, you want to start with the freshest produce and to excise any blemishes on which bacteria might thrive. You know a chef is serious about pickles when he regularly feeds them to his seven-month-old. In theory, meticulously washing and inspecting each vegetable provides an opportunity to appreciate where your sustenance comes from; in practice, it's a soul-deadening endeavor, particularly when faced with five pounds of okra. Another perception versus reality lesson: Divide a restaurant's basic recipe by half, then divide it again. Most apartment kitchens can't handle large-batch pickling, and although I was able to trade a couple of jars of okra for a \$14 overdue fee at the local video store, it's probably not accepted currency anywhere but in certain parts of Cambridge.

Maiden was a generous and patient instructor, but he was essentially teaching particle physics to a remedial student—one who had to build a space ship three days later. "The power of the pickle," he explained to me as his sous chef laughed at his word choice, "[is that] the acid can balance out heavy, Southern cooking" like the bourbon-braised pork shoulder on my dinner menu. Although I had braised before, I'd never set mirepoix (a combination of onions, carrots and celery) on fire with Jack Daniels. Nor had I ever heated up enough hot oil to cause second-degree burns. But it was when he got to the pickling part that my panic level went to Defcon 1. Pickling is easy, Maiden assured me—so simple that he'd just talk me through it. "Ninety percent of the pickles, you heat up the brine, which is vinegar, water and salt," he explained. "I don't have raw vegetables to pickle. Most everything I have is pickled already."



I DISCOVERED I REALLY LIKE TO SET THINGS ON *fire.*

Luckily for me, I had YouTube as a resource, where I could repeatedly watch demonstrations on flambé-ing, cartouche-cutting and pickling, free from a sense of inadequacy. From those videos, I learned to keep a heavy lid around to smother flames in case of an emergency and not to pour the alcohol from the whiskey bottle over heat. With the false confidence bestowed by these

demos, I discovered I really like to set things on fire—going a little overboard with the bourbon just so I could relight it. I also consulted the USDA's National Center for Home Food Preservation Web site (uga.edu/nchfp) to learn about proper sanitation and storage. To my relief, I realized that since I'd be serving my pickles in three days, I wouldn't need to process them in a

hot water bath or pressure cooker. Just preserving them in brine and refrigerating them would be enough to prevent the social faux pas of giving everybody botulism.

Ideally, according to Maiden, pickles are best after a couple of weeks of steeping in brine, but thanks to his recipes, mine already tasted much better than store-bought ones after only three days. They were delicious, but not enough to compensate for the weekend I spent cleaning okra, beets, green tomatoes, cucumbers and peppers in an un-air-conditioned kitchen during a hot spell. I never made the chow-chow recipe or the vegetarian surprise I promised one pescatarian guest, who was a good sport and filled up on fried pickled okra, buttery collard greens and cake. I wish I could say my cooking club left impressed. Unfortunately, most of them had gone on a camping trip to Maine to take advantage of the good weather, so my elaborate, vainglorious, mistimed meal was enjoyed by some kind souls I rounded up from the office, including one pickle fanatic who made my day when he complimented the pork and bread-and-butter pickles. I liked them, too. After braising for five hours in a 300-degree oven with fresh thyme, the pork had the consistency of meltingly tender carnitas and the mirepoix turned into sweet morsels.

And although my cooking club was a no-show, the best thing about pickles is that there's no such thing as a missed moment. I

PICKLED PEPPERS

5 cups pickled peppers washed well and sliced
5 cups white vinegar
1 Tbs + 1 tsp salt
2 Tbs sugar
2 cloves garlic

In a large pot, bring all the ingredients except the peppers to a boil. Turn off the heat and let the pickling liquid steep for 10 minutes.

Arrange the peppers in sanitized mason jars and cover with the liquid. Let cool to room temperature. See **NOTE** in Bread-and-Butter Pickles.



PICKLED OKRA

5 pounds okra, washed well and trimmed of stems
12 cloves garlic
2 stalks fresh thyme
4 Tbsp crushed red pepper
2 Tbsp mustard seed
2 Tbsp black peppercorn
10 1/2 cups white vinegar
7 1/2 cups water
6 Tbsp salt

In a large pot, bring all the ingredients except the okra to a boil. Turn off the heat and let the pickling liquid steep for 10 minutes.

Arrange the okra in sanitized mason jars and cover with the liquid. Let cool to room temperature. See **NOTE** in Bread-and-Butter Pickles.

