

Pickle Perfect

TAKE TIME TO PRESERVE THE SEASON

Liz Tarditi

IT'S OCTOBER, SO FOR SPOOKY SEASON, I'M GOING to scare you — just a little.

In John Steinbeck's "East of Eden," the plot to murder Faye begins on a mid-October afternoon. The truly terrifying Cathy Ames disguises her cold-blooded poisoning by blaming a single bad jar of home-canned string beans. The doctor falls for the ruse, chalking the violent illness up to botulism, and Cathy ultimately gets away with murder.

Still with me? Cool. Now let's make pickles!

Fortunately, our story has a much nicer protagonist. Rich O'Donnell of **OD's Goodies** started where many great food businesses do: making something people love. What began during retirement as a way to turn surplus backyard garden produce into thoughtful homemade gifts quickly took on a life of its own. "I love gardening," O'Donnell said. "And a friend encouraged me saying, 'Christmas is coming, and let's just see what happens.' If I'd known, I would have left banking 30 years ago."

The response was overwhelming. Today, O'Donnell still hand-makes every small batch from his home kitchen, using charming jar labels designed by a high school friend of his wife.



OD's Goodies

Scaling up meant learning how to turn that passion into a licensed business and produce food safely.

O'Donnell sought guidance from the PA Department of Agriculture and Penn State Extension and studied established recipes. His words of wisdom are straightforward: "I listen to what they tell me." Knowing when to experiment and when to consult an expert is one of the most useful skills any cook can develop.

That approach has deep Pennsylvania roots. Benjamin Franklin inspired the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, founded in 1785, to discover and share better scientific farming practices.

Meanwhile, something delicious has happened. Pickles went from invisible to artisanal. The humble spear beside a sandwich has become a culinary fascination. But the modern pickle revival isn't just chefs throwing exotic things into vinegar. It's renewed interest in the craft — acidity, fermentation, texture, flavor balance, seasonality and preservation. Plus interest in wasting less food and making food dollars stretch.

OD's Goodies operates primarily wholesale, but local shoppers can find O'Donnell at the Christmas Bazaar at Our Lady of the Assumption in Strafford on November 7 and the German Christmas Market in Phoenixville on November 21.

O'Donnell gets us started with recipes for Bread & Butter Pickles, Dill Pickles and Spicy Bread & Butter Pickles. Then we venture beyond cucumbers.

Think of these recipes as an invitation to start your own journey. Check your sources, understand the technique, then get creative. The pickle jar has plenty of room for both science and imagination — and that's where the magic begins.

Bread & Butter Pickles

Rich O'Donnell passed this recipe along the old-fashioned way — handwritten on an index card. You don't get more authentic than that! This recipe is the template for the skill of pickling and canning safely and makes a batch that's manageable for homemade gifts and pantry storage.



Yields 7 pint jars

- 4 lbs. 4"-6" cucumbers, trimmed and sliced
- 2 lbs. onions, thinly sliced
- 1/3 C. Ball Salt for Pickling
- Ice, as needed
- 2 C. sugar
- 2 T. mustard seed
- 1 tsp. peppercorns
- 3 C. white vinegar, 5% acidity
- 7/8 tsp. Ball Pickle Crisp, divided

Wash cucumbers and trim 1/16" from blossom ends. Slice cucumbers and thinly slice onions. Combine cucumbers and onions in a large bowl and sprinkle with pickling salt. Cover with ice and refrigerate 3 to 4 hours. Drain well.

Combine sugar, mustard seed, peppercorns and vinegar in a large saucepan. Bring to a boil, stirring until sugar dissolves. Add drained cucumbers and onions and return to a boil.

Pack hot pickles and liquid into prepared pint jars, leaving 1/2" headspace. Add 1/8 tsp. Pickle Crisp to each jar. Apply lids, *taking care not to overtighten*.

Place jars on a steel rack in a boiling-water canner, with water covering jars by at least 1 inch. Process 10 minutes.* Turn off heat and

let jars stand in canner for 5 minutes. Remove jars from canner and cool undisturbed for 12 hours.

**Chef's Note:* Processing time varies with elevation, and 10 minutes is correct for our Brandywine Valley region. At higher elevations, consult current National Center for Home Food Preservation guidelines.

Dill Pickles

This recipe from O'Donnell is a great counterpoint to the Bread and Butter Pickles because you arrange the spears in the jars and then pour in the hot brine, in a quick, neat, safe process that you can apply to other tested recipes for long produce such as asparagus, green beans, carrots or watermelon rinds. Imagine the "hot mess" if you tried it the other way!



Yields 7 pint jars or 3 quart jars

- 8 lbs. 4"-6" cucumbers, trimmed and cut into spears
- 3/4 C. sugar
- 1/2 C. Ball Salt for Pickling
- 1 qt. white vinegar, 5% acidity
- 1 C. water
- Dried dill, as needed
- Ball Pickle Crisp, as needed

Wash cucumbers and trim 1/16" from blossom ends. Cut cucumbers lengthwise into spears.

Combine sugar, pickling salt, vinegar and water in a large saucepan. Bring to a boil, stirring until sugar and salt dissolve. Reduce heat and simmer for 15 minutes.



Safety First

Good cooks improvise, but smart canners know when not to. For shelf-stable pickles, begin with a research-tested recipe from a trusted source such as Penn State Extension or the National Center for Home Food Preservation, then follow it carefully. The proportions of produce, liquid and acid, the size of the pieces and the processing time all matter.

Check the vinegar bottle, too. For home pickling, use vinegar labeled at least 5% acidity, and never reduce or dilute the vinegar unless your tested recipe specifically directs you to. Homemade vinegar has variable acidity and shouldn't be substituted in canning recipes.

Finally, respect processing times and adjust them for elevation when necessary. Safe preserving isn't about being afraid of the jar. It's about understanding the science well enough to cook confidently.

Follow those rules, and that takes the spooky-scary right out of the dilly bean jar.

Pack cucumber spears into prepared jars. Add dried dill to each jar. Pour hot pickling liquid over cucumbers, leaving ½" headspace. Add ⅛ tsp. Pickle Crisp to each pint jar. Apply lids, taking care not to overtighten.

Process jars in a boiling-water canner as directed for Rich O'Donnell's Bread & Butter Pickles.*

Spicy Bread & Butter Pickles

This isn't simply the original Bread & Butter recipe with some heat tossed in. Adding peppers changes the balance, so Rich O'Donnell adjusts the seasoning accordingly. There's plenty of room for creativity in pickling, but when preserving food for pantry storage, start with a tested recipe from a trusted source — then play safely within its guidelines.

Yields 7 pint jars

4 lbs. 4"-6" cucumbers, trimmed and sliced
2 lbs. onions, thinly sliced
½ C. Ball Salt for Pickling
Ice, as needed
2 C. sugar
2 T. mustard seed
1 C. hot or chili peppers, sliced
3 C. white vinegar, 5% acidity
⅞ tsp. Ball Pickle Crisp, divided

Wash cucumbers and trim ¼" from blossom ends. Slice cucumbers and thinly slice onions. Combine cucumbers and onions in a large bowl and sprinkle with pickling salt. Cover with ice and refrigerate 3 to 4 hours. Drain well.

Combine sugar, mustard seed, peppers and vinegar in a large saucepan. Bring to a boil, stirring until sugar dissolves. Add drained



cucumbers and onions and return to a boil.

Pack hot pickles, peppers and liquid into prepared pint jars, leaving ½" headspace. Add ⅛ tsp. Pickle Crisp to each jar. Apply lids, taking care not to overtighten.

Process jars in a boiling-water canner as directed for Rich O'Donnell's Bread & Butter Pickles.*

Pickled Grapes

Here's proof that a pickle isn't a cucumber! These sweet-tart grapes require no canning at all. A quick refrigerator pickle transforms fresh grapes into bright little bursts of acidity, perfect for a cheese board, charcuterie platter or autumn salad.

Yields about 1 quart



1 lb. seedless red grapes
1 C. apple cider vinegar
½ C. water
½ C. sugar
1 tsp. mustard seed
1 tsp. black peppercorns
2 whole star anise

Wash grapes and remove from stems. Place grapes in a clean 1-quart jar or other covered, nonreactive container.

Combine vinegar, water, sugar, mustard seed, peppercorns and star anise in a small saucepan. Bring to a boil, stirring until sugar dissolves. Remove from heat and let cool slightly.

Pour warm brine over grapes, making sure grapes are submerged. Let cool to room temperature. Cover and refrigerate at least 24 hours before serving. Keep refrigerated and use within 3 months.

Chef's Note: These are refrigerator pickles, not canned preserves. Keep refrigerated throughout storage.

Spiced Pickled Pears

Checking your recipe is the pro move when it comes to preserving. For these autumn beauties, we turned to the experts: a tested recipe from University of Georgia, shared by Oregon State University Extension, and Penn State Extension's recommendation of petite Seckel pears for pickling. We've adapted the recipe form "So Easy to Preserve." Sweet, warmly spiced and decidedly October, they're delicious alongside cheese, ham or roast pork.



Yields about 4 pint jars
3½ lbs. firm Seckel pears (available October-February)
2½ C. sugar
1¼ C. white vinegar, 5% acidity
1 C. water
2 tsp. dried whole ginger
2 T. whole cloves
7, 3" cinnamon sticks

Wash and peel pears. Leave Seckel pears whole, with stems intact, if desired. To prevent browning, place peeled pears in acidulated water until ready to use. Drain well.

Pickling Isn't Canning

A pickle isn't a cucumber. It's a process. And pickling and canning aren't interchangeable terms.

Quick pickles use added acid, usually vinegar, to create their characteristic tang. Refrigerator pickles, like our Pickled Grapes recipe, stay refrigerated and never enter a canner. Shelf-stable pickles combine a tested acidic recipe with proper heat processing so sealed jars can be safely stored in the pantry.

Fermentation takes another route. In traditional sauerkraut and fermented pickles, beneficial bacteria convert naturally occurring sugars into lactic acid over time. Instead of pouring all the acid into the jar, you're creating conditions that allow it to develop. Salt, proportions, temperature and time still matter, so tested recipes are important here, too.

In other words, something can be pickled without being canned, canned without being pickled, or both pickled and canned.



Combine sugar, vinegar, water, dried ginger, cloves and cinnamon sticks in a large saucepan. Bring to a boil, stirring until sugar dissolves. Add pears and simmer gently until heated through and tender but still firm.

Pack hot pears into prepared pint jars. Cover with hot pickling syrup, leaving ½" headspace. Remove air bubbles and adjust headspace if necessary. Apply lids, taking care not to overtighten.

Place jars on a rack in a boiling-water canner, with water covering jars by at least 1 inch. Process 15 minutes.* Turn off heat and let jars stand in canner for 5 minutes. Remove jars from canner and cool undisturbed.

**Chef's Note:* Processing time varies with elevation, and 15 minutes reflects our Brandywine Valley region. At higher elevations, consult current National Center for Home Food Preservation or Extension guidelines. ♦

Liz Tarditi is a chef and wine specialist with more than 30 years of experience in food, wine and event planning. She holds degrees from Villanova University and from a Seattle culinary arts program founded by a Certified French Master Chef, where she trained in a classic brigade-style kitchen. Liz later ran her own catering company and has worked as a wine specialist in Pennsylvania. She brings her training and lifelong passion for seasonal, approachable cooking to Brandywine Table.

