The perfect crisp pickle is possible

Crispness is a hallmark of a good pickled vegetable. That crispness comes from the vegetable’s natural pectin--the same pectin that is extracted from apples and citrus to make jams and jellies.

For a crisp pickle, freshness is important. Use only just-picked vegetables for pickling. Try to prepare pickles within two hours of picking for best quality. Excess heat or improper handling can soften vegetables. As each day passes, vegetables lose crispness. Once a vegetable is soft it cannot be made firm again.

Use only top quality vegetables for pickling. For cucumber pickles, use varieties recommended for pickling that are no more than 2- inches in diameter. Remove the blossom end. The blossom harbors enzymes that can cause softening. Start with crisp raw vegetable varieties to get crisp pickled vegetables.

Use only safe, research-based recipes to pickle foods. Proper acidity is needed to produce safe pickles. Use only research-based recipes such as those found in the USDA Complete Guide to Canning, the National Center for Home Food Preservation website, a Ball Blue Book, dated 1989 or more recent, or at University of Missouri Extension.

Use low-temperature pasteurization. Cucumber pickles may be processed for 30 minutes at 180-185°F. Check with a thermometer to be certain that the water temperature remains above 180° during the entire 30 minutes. Keep the temperature below 185° to avoid breaking down the pectin, which will cause softening of the pickle.

Use of alum. If good-quality ingredients are used and up-to-date methods are followed, firming agents are not needed for crisp pickles.

If firmsing agents are desired, alum (aluminum potassium sulfate) may be used to firm fermented pickles, but has little crispness effect on quick-process pickles. Alum will increase firmness when used at levels up to 1/4 teaspoon per pint. Addition of greater then 1/4 teaspoon alum per pint will decrease firmness.

Use calcium to firm pickles. Lime (calcium hydroxide) can improve pickle firmness. Food-grade lime may be used as a lime-water solution for soaking fresh cucumbers 12 to 24 hours before pickling them. Excess lime absorbed by the cucumbers must be removed to make safe pickles. To remove excess lime, drain the lime-water solution, rinse, and then re-soak the cucumbers in fresh water for 1 hour. Drain, rinse again.

Ball Calcium Chloride Pickle Crisp. This product is a food-grade calcium chloride salt. It provides the calcium to help firm pectin, but does not have the hydroxide component that can lower the acidity of pickled foods. Follow the manufacturer’s directions.

Use of ice to firm pickles. Soak cucumbers or other vegetables in ice water for 4 to 5 hours before pickling.

Use of grape leaves to firm pickles. Historically, grape leaves are sometimes added to pickle products to prevent softening. However, the enzyme that causes softening is located at the blossom end of the cucumber; if it is removed, this process is not necessary.


Brand names are mentioned for educational purposes only and do not imply endorsement.
Avoid major canning mistakes

It is rewarding to admire the rows of gleaming jars at the end of the summer, but a quick review of unsafe practices can eliminate potentially deadly mistakes lurking on those shelves.

Don’t make up your own canning recipe. Scientific testing is necessary to know how long the product needs to be processed in order to be safe.

Don’t add EXTRA starch, flour or other thickener to recipe. This will slow the rate of heat penetration into the product and can result in under-cooking.

Don’t add EXTRA onions, chilies, bell peppers, or other vegetables to salsas. The extra vegetables dilute the acidity and can result in botulism poisoning.

Don’t use an oven instead of water bath for processing. The product will be under-processed since air is not as good a conductor of heat as water or steam. The jars also may break or explode.

Always vent pressure canner. Lack of venting can result in air pockets (cold spots) which will not reach as high a temperature as is needed.

Always have dial-type pressure canner gauges tested annually. If the gauge is inaccurate, the food may be under-processed and therefore unsafe.

Always acidify canned tomatoes with citric acid or lemon juice. Not all tomatoes have an adequate acid level (pH), especially if the vine is dead when tomatoes are harvested. This can result in botulism poisoning.

Never cool a pressure canner under running water. Calculations as to processing time include the residual heat during the normal cool-down period as part of the canning process. Hurrying this process will result in under-processed food, siphoning of liquid from the jars, and jar breakage.

Never let food prepared for “hot pack” processing cool in the jars before placing them in the canner for processing. The heat curves are based on the food being hot at the beginning of the processing. The product could be under-processed.

NOTE: Canned meat, vegetables, or salsa, which is under-processed can cause botulism.

Source: Kathleen Riggs, Family and Consumer Sciences Agent, Utah State University

Wash reusable cloth grocery bags often

Cloth grocery bags are environmentally friendly, using them may help solve some home-clutter issues, and decrease plastic bag use by 80 percent. However, reusable cloth grocery bags present the risk of cross-contamination and must be laundered often.

A Canadian study looked at the presence of bacteria, yeasts and molds in reusable grocery sacks; and found that nearly two-thirds of the bags were contaminated with some type of germ. About 30 percent of the bags had unsafe levels of bacteria, which could promote food-borne illness. About 40 percent harbored molds and yeasts that could trigger allergic reactions and infections.

If bags become contaminated by meat juices, bacteria could contaminate fresh fruits, vegetables, or frozen foods.

To prevent cross contamination, separate purchases.

Use plastic bags for meat purchases, and keep those purchases away from produce. For instance, designate red cloth bags as “meat only bags.” Do not place other foods in the meat bags.

Use sets of bags in different colors for different foods. For example, use a green bag for fresh produce.

Do not place cloth grocery sacks on the parking lot while opening the car trunk, or on the garage floor while removing them from the car.

If bags are placed on the kitchen counter or table, wash these surfaces thoroughly before preparing or serving food.

To keep your food safe and be “green” at the same time, launder reusable cloth bags regularly.

Be sure to let reusable cloth bags dry thoroughly before storing.

Does the salsa stay on chips

When home-canned salsa turns out too thin, never attempt to thicken the product before canning by adding flour or cornstarch.

Adding thickening agents could change the heating rate, and the acidity of the product, thus possibly creating an unsafe canned product.

To prepare a safe home-canned salsa, always follow an approved recipe exactly to make sure the processing time and acidity is safe.

For a safe way to thicker salsa, try one of these tips:

- Add some flour or cornstarch when the salsa is opened and ready to be consumed.
- Pour off some of the juice before consuming the salsa. Do not remove any tomato juice before canning, as this might reduce the acidity.
- Use Roma or other paste type tomatoes which have a firmer flesh than slicing tomatoes.
- Use a recipe that adds commercially canned tomato paste as a thickener.

Tomato/Tomato Paste Salsa

- 3 quarts peeled, cored, chopped slicing tomatoes
- 3 cups chopped onions
- 6 jalapeño peppers, seeded, finely chopped
- 4 long green chiles, seeded, chopped
- 4 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 2, 12-ounce cans tomato paste
- 2 cups bottled lemon or lime juice
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 tablespoon ground cumin (optional)
- 2 tablespoons oregano leaves (optional)
- 1 teaspoon black pepper

Yield: About 7 to 9 pints

Procedure:

Hot Pack: Combine all ingredients in a large saucepan and heat, stirring frequently, until mixture boils. Reduce heat and simmer for 30 minutes, stirring occasionally. Ladle hot salsa into clean, hot pint jars, leaving ½-inch headspace. Remove air bubbles and adjust headspace if needed. Wipe rims of jars with a dampened, clean paper towel; apply two-piece metal canning lids. Process in a boiling water canner for 15 minutes at 1,000 feet of altitude or less, or 20 minutes for altitudes of 1,001 to 6,000 feet.

IMPORTANT: The only change that can be made safely in this salsa recipe is to change the amount of spices and herbs. Do not alter the proportions of vegetables to acid and tomatoes because it might make the salsa unsafe. Do not substitute vinegar for the lemon juice.

Nutrition Information (Estimated values using Nutritionist Pro™ software)

Per 2 Tbsp: Calories 14, Total Fat 0 g, Sodium 120mg, Fiber 1g, Protein 1g.

Daily Values: Vitamin A 6%, Vitamin C 18%, Calcium 1%, Iron 2%.

Percent Daily Values based on Dietary Reference Intakes.

Source: University of Georgia, http://www.uga.edu/nchfp/how/can_salsa.html
Bruschetta in a jar

- 5 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 cup dry white wine
- 1 cup white wine vinegar
- 1/2 cup water
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 2 tablespoons dried basil
- 2 tablespoons dried oregano
- 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 9 cups chopped cored peeled plum tomatoes (about 4 lbs. or 12 medium)
- 8 oz. (half-pint) glass preserving jars w/ lids and bands

Directions:
2. Combine garlic, wine, wine vinegar, water, sugar, basil, oregano and balsamic vinegar. Bring to a full rolling boil over high heat, stirring occasionally. Reduce heat, cover and simmer 5 minutes, or until garlic is heated through. Remove from heat.
3. Pack tomatoes into hot jars leaving 1/2-inch headspace. Ladle hot vinegar mixture over tomatoes leaving 1/2-inch headspace. Remove air bubbles. Wipe rim. Center hot lid on jar. Apply band and adjust, until fit is fingertip tight.
4. Process filled jars in a boiling water canner for 20 minutes, adjusting for altitude. Remove jars and cool. Check lids for seal after 24 hours. Lid should not flex up and down when center is pressed.


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Mary Schroepfer
Nutrition & Health Specialist
116 W. Main
Union, MO 63084
Ph: (636) 583-5141
Fax: (636) 583-5145
Email: SchroepferM@missouri.edu

Judith Lueders
Nutrition & Health Specialist
321 N. Main, Suite 1
Perryville, MO 63775
Ph: (573) 547-4504
Fax: (573) 547-4535
Email: LuedersJ@missouri.edu