

Get Ready To Pickle!

What most Americans call pickles are pickled cucumbers or dill pickles. They can be sour, sweet, or spicy and come in various colors, flavors, and sizes. In canning terms, pickles include any fruit, vegetable, or protein food prepared by a pickling process and various relishes.

Types of Pickled Products

Various pickled products can be made depending on the ingredients and preparation methods. There are several general types of pickles.

Brined Pickles or Fermented Pickles are fermented and cured for about three weeks.

Fresh Pack or Quick Process Pickles are brine-processed in a salt and vinegar solution for a short time, drained and combined with hot vinegar, spices, and seasonings in a sealed jar, then pasteurized.

Refrigerator Pickles are fresh-packed into sterile jars but are not cooked. Instead, they are stored in a refrigerator and used within two weeks.

Fruit Pickles are prepared from whole or sliced fruits and simmered in a spicy syrup acidified with vinegar or lemon juice.

Relishes are chopped fruits and/or vegetables cooked in seasoned vinegar.

A pickled product's acidity level is as crucial to safety as it is to taste and texture. Never alter a recipe's proportions of vinegar, food, or water. Use vinegar with a known acidity. Use safe, research-based recipes to pickle foods because having the proper acidity level is vital to produce safe pickles. The goal is to prevent the growth of *Clostridium botulinum*, the bacteria that produces a highly toxic poison in low-acid foods.

Many older pickle recipes exist, from family heirlooms, the internet, or canning books. Unfortunately, the amount of vinegar may be incorrect in pickle recipes because vinegar's level of acidity in older recipes may not match the current vinegar acidity. Also, older recipes may not have the correct processing method.

A crucial factor in getting crisp pickled produce is to start with fresh, just-picked fruits and vegetables. Vegetables become soft as their pectin structure changes due to microbial activity, excess heat, or improper handling. The longer you let your vegetables sit out before pickling, the softer they will get.

Use unwaxed pickling cucumbers that are no more than 2 inches in diameter for cucumber pickles. It is important to remove the blossom end as it can cause softening.

Use a canning or pickling salt without iodine or anti-caking agents. Do not reduce the salt in fermented pickles because proper fermentation depends on the correct proportions. Some fresh-pack pickle recipes have been formulated with reduced or no salt. Both the flavor and texture of these pickles will be different.

White distilled or cider vinegar of 5 percent acidity is recommended for pickling. Do not dilute the vinegar unless specified in the recipe.

Soft, distilled, or filtered water is recommended for pickling.

For the best flavor, use fresh, whole spices. Powdered spices will still work, but the product's color may darken or become cloudy.

Firming agents are unnecessary if you use up-to-date, tested recipes and fresh quality produce.

To improve pickle firmness, consider using a low-temperature pasteurization recipe.

Cautions about Refrigerator Pickles

Instead of heat-treating pickled foods, some recipes call for keeping them at refrigeration temperatures. For years, refrigerator pickles have been regarded as safe. However, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that studies have concluded that *Listeria monocytogenes* bacteria survive and multiply in low-acid, refrigerator pickles. If you are in a high-risk group for foodborne illness, treat refrigerator pickles as fresh food and consume them within three days.

Pickled products can be satisfactory, tasty, and safely prepared if top-quality ingredients are used, a tested recipe is followed, and the proportions or measurements of the ingredients are strictly followed.

(Sources: www.ballmasonjars.com; nchfp.uga.edu; National Center for Home Food Preservation: nchfp.uga.edu; USDA Complete Guide to Home Canning, 2015; www.uga.edu)