

Fruit Spreads: From Jellies to Preserves

There's nothing like a row of colorful summer jams to brighten cold winter days. Now is the time to think ahead and get jamming. Canning your own homemade fruit spread is a great do-it-yourself project.

Jams, jellies, preserves, conserves, and marmalades are all gelled fruit products. These products differ in gel consistency, ingredients, and the preparation method used for the fruit. What is the primary difference between all of them? How much fruit is used in the final product? Let's break down the differences.

Jams are thick, sweet spreads made by cooking crushed or chopped fruits with sugar. Jams tend to hold their shape but are generally less firm than jelly.

Jellies are usually made by cooking fruit juice with sugar. The juice is usually extracted from cooked, crushed fruit. The extraction process involves straining the fruit mixture through a fine-mesh fabric to remove all solids. Jelly is clear and firm enough to hold its shape when removed from the container, yet it quivers when moved.

Preserves are spreads containing small, whole fruit or uniform-size pieces in a clear, slightly gelled syrup. The fruit should be tender and plump.

Conserves are jam-like products that may be made from a mixture of fruits. They may also contain citrus fruit, nuts, raisins, or coconut.

Marmalades are soft fruit jellies containing small pieces of fruit or peel. They often contain citrus fruit.

For a successful fruit spread, four crucial ingredients are needed in proper proportions to form a gel: fruit, pectin, acid, and sugar.

Fruit gives the product its special flavor and texture. It also contains part of the pectin and acid needed to form a gel.

Pectin is a natural substance found in fruit. It forms a gel when present in adequate amounts with the correct proportions of acid and sugar. All fruits contain some pectin. When fruits with low pectin are preserved, they should be combined with fruits high in pectin or with commercial pectin.

Commercial pectin is available in both powdered and liquid forms; however, recipes cannot be used interchangeably between the two types. Special pectin is available for making low and no-sugar spreads.

Acid is necessary in fruit spreads for flavor and to facilitate gel formation. Fruits contain natural acid, though the acid content varies in different fruits. When fruits are low in acid, lemon juice is added to the recipe.

Sugar aids in gel formation, acts as a preservative, and contributes to flavor. The correct proportion of sugar must be present with the acid and pectin to form the gel. Do not reduce the amount of sugar in a recipe.

Low- and no-sugar fruit spreads are becoming increasingly popular. Unless specific recipes and low- or no-sugar pectin products are used, reducing or eliminating sugar when making fruit spreads can result in failure.

Use up-to-date recipes after 2014. Not all recipes found on the web or in other publications are scientifically tested. Reliable research-based recipe sources include USDA, the National Center for Home Food Preservation, Ball, Mrs. Wages, commercial pectin, and Extension sources.

Follow this kitchen tip: do not double fruit spread recipes - unless you like syrup, because it may not gel!

To preserve fruit spreads, use an approved method such as a boiling water canner or atmospheric steam canner for long-term storage.

Few things can preserve the vibrancy of peak-season fruit like turning it into spreads.