

## **“Preserving” Our Past**

It occurs to me that much of what is part of our unique individual histories are life experiences that relate to food from “the old days.” Don’t you remember a special pie, homemade ice cream, scratch chicken and dumplings or something your mother or grandmother would make for you when she wanted to show you how much she loved you? Sadly, much of that tradition is being lost with time as great amounts of food knowledge and history passes away with our elders. What a terrible shame.

Back thirty years ago in southwest Ohio I would wager that most of the households “put up” canned goods every year to enjoy during the winter and beyond. Now ask yourself how many people you still know who canned this year. It’s way easier to buy things at modern markets and much of the knowledge of how the whole process works has been forgotten or lost.

I want to relate a “canning” story this week and along with it I would offer you a challenge. Go to those people who still know how to prepare favorite old recipes the way you remember. Document how they are made and learn how to prepare those foods yourself. Don’t lose part of your heritage. You’ll be enriched by the learning experience and you may find that our oldest generation should be treasured for what they know and the immense pleasure we reap in the sharing.

My story takes us back to my wife’s old homestead, well, at least the one she stayed at as a girl when all of the cousins got together during the late summer to harvest and barn tobacco in Garner, North Carolina. There’s a tap on the door Sunday morning at just after 8 o’clock and there stands Tater Man’s dad who is even a bigger man than his mountain of a son with a bucket of the most beautiful figs ever picked out of God’s gracious bounty. I mean they’re devastating. They look great, they smell heavenly and they are just begging to be tasted.

Aunt Margie studies that bucket of figs like a big city doctor examines an x-ray. She informs us that the figs won’t hold an extra day and they’ll need to be made into preserves that afternoon. Now let me regress a bit to tell you that I’ve managed through my dear wife’s persuasive ability to experience those fig preserves. And what we are about to experience is something akin to watching the goose lay the golden egg. (Don’t take me literally, Aunt Margie!) This stuff is treasure and I quickly grab a notebook and my digital camera.

I know we’re not in North Carolina and the availability of tree-ripened figs is pretty thin. But let me give you the good news. If you want to make great preserves this year, the other type I’ve tried out of Aunt Margie’s collection are pear preserves, which are prepared in exactly the same way as fig preserves. We do grow excellent pears in Ohio and you’re just going to have to trust me until you actually taste them...they’re wonderful.

## Aunt Margie's Fig Preserves

(may substitute fresh peeled and sliced pears)



Using a heavy bottomed stockpot with lid, combine:

2 parts fresh fruit

1 part sugar

½ cup water

Place the uncovered stockpot on a burner set to low and allow to cook until the sugar has melted. You can gently stir your preserves during this stage but use only a wooden spoon being extra careful not to break up the fruit.

After your sugar has melted gradually bring your temperature up to just shy of medium, only hot enough to allow the preserves to come to a gentle simmer with the lid on. At this point you'll want to add 2 very thin (1/8<sup>th</sup> inch thick) half slices of fresh lemon for each pint of preserves you are preparing. Make sure to remove all seeds and gently stir the half slices into the simmering preserves. The lemon will slightly raise the acidity of your preserves, which helps to stabilize them as well as keep the sugar from crystallizing later in the jar. It also adds a wonderful character to the taste.



Depending on the size of your batch, cooking time from this point could be up to several hours so be patient and let the preserves thicken slowly. When you stir them gently from time to time you'll see them gradually thicken until the point that as you lift your spoon

from the pot about 8 or 9 inches, the syrup will make a continuous thread that distance. At this point, your preserves are ready for canning.

There are two types of canning available depending on the type of food you are putting up. Pressure canning requires the purchase of a pressure canner so that you are able to attain temperatures of 240°F to 250°F. This method is used for low acidity foods like vegetables, meat, poultry and fish. Since our preserves will read lower than the pH value of 4.6 ( high in acid), we will be using the boiling water canning technique.

### **Boiling Water Canning**

Your equipment needs are very basic. A boiling water canner consists of a large pot that comes with a rack for inside to secure jars and a lid. There are special tongs called “jar lifters” that you’ll also need.

Your jars can be purchased new or used, your choice. I do recommend that you use new lids and securing rings when you can to insure that you get a perfect seal every time. Regardless of whether they are new or used, your jars should be thoroughly washed in a good quality anti-bacteria dish soap, rinsed in hot water and allowed to dry top down on a clean dish towel. Bacteria are your enemy and cleanliness is extremely important through this process.

While filling your jars with preserves, heat water in your canning pot to just under boiling. The pot should be about two thirds full. Once the preserves are in the jars, remove any air pockets by running a small plastic spatula around the preserves between them and the glass sides of the jars. Clean off the top lip of the jar with a clean cloth before sealing.

In a separate pot gently boil the lids so that the rubber-attached gasket softens. Using tongs take a lid out of the water and place it on each jar making sure the gasket is down and in direct contact with the lip of the jar lid. Place a securing ring over the lid and screw it down until it is lightly snug...don’t over tighten. The object is to keep boiling water from going into the jar but to let air escape.

Place each jar into the wire rack, carefully lower the jars into the water and adjust the water level so that it is about one inch above the jar tops. Turn your heat up and begin timing your boil time from the point you reach a rolling boil. Lower your temperature so that you just maintain a gentle boil. Our fig preserves will require boiling times of 15 minutes for pints and 20 minutes for quarts, add 5 minutes to those times for pears.

When you reach your times, use your tongs to place each jar on a towel and allow them to slowly cool. You will know your jars are properly sealed as you hear each of them “ping” as the top is sucked down by the vacuum of the jar. Unsealed jars may be refrigerated for immediate use or reprocess with a new lid.

I know this is a fast lesson on canning but there are some terrific books out there that are great in your cookbook library. Also, always feel free to call if you have any questions at (888) 288-0668 or visit us online at [www.winedog.com](http://www.winedog.com).

This weekend we will be out at the wine festival in Morrow serving some of our food treats so be sure to drop by and say “Hi” if you’re at the event. We’d love to meet you!