

Relish, pickle and chutney making tips

from Jane Maggs of Wild and Fruitful

DEFINITIONS

Pickling is one of the oldest traditional ways to preserve food in our climate. **Pickles** are fruits and vegetables preserved in vinegar usually with added salt and/or sugar and spices. Think pickled onions, pickled cabbage and mixed vegetable pickles.

Chutneys and **relishes** came later into the preserving repertoire as British interpretations of Indian 'chatnis'. Piccalilli is probably the earliest example, being mentioned in eighteenth century recipe books as 'pickle lila'. Although the differences between a **chutney** and a **relish** are not definite some generalisations can be made.

A **chutney** tends to be made from fairly finely chopped or sliced fruits and vegetables cooked slowly for a long time in vinegar, sugar and varying amounts of spices to produce a mellow preserve with a fairly uniform texture where all the flavours are blended together. Examples would be damson, tomato, gooseberry and apple chutneys.

A **relish** is cooked fairly quickly and therefore the vegetables can be chunkier and with varying degrees of crunchiness. Generally the appearance is of discernible vegetables or fruit in a sweet or savoury sauce. Piccalilli is a particular kind of relish where the turmeric/mustard sauce is thickened with cornflour, but the vegetables remain crunchy. Onion marmalades and 'Branston'-type pickles are also examples of relishes.

TIPS AND PITFALLS

The judges will initially look at the appearance of the chutney. It is important that the jar has an airtight seal which is resistant to corrosion by vinegar and salt. If seals are incorrect or broken the preserve will not be judged. Use **new** plastic-lined twist-top lids (old ones if washed tend to go rusty under the rim). Wax discs and cellophane are fine as long as there are no air bubbles under the discs. However, chutneys, if stored for some time under discs and cellophane, can dry out and shrink. Do not fill jars to the brim as the vinegar-based preserves should not touch the lid.

In appearance the jar should be clean (wipe with a cloth dipped in methylated spirit) and if re-used be free from any branding. The label should include the type of preserve and the date made. Fancy labels or top covers are not necessary.

The preserve should be of good appearance and colour appropriate to the preserve. Obviously most chutneys are brownish or reddish, but relishes and pickles should have a bright appearance with appropriate colour eg pickled onions should not be discoloured, pickled cabbage should be deep red, not brown, piccalilli should be yellow with the coloured vegetables showing through.

Marks are also given for consistency and texture. With a chutney the ingredients should all meld together and free vinegar should not be visible. On the other hand the chutney should not be too stiff, either through evaporation over time or overcooking. Since adding sugar tends to stop the softening process, it can be better to add the sugar nearer the end of cooking. This can also result in a fresher flavour as the sugar can caramelise after long cooking. The best way to tell if a chutney is cooked is to draw a spoon through it. If the spoon leaves a clear trail which slowly closes over on the bottom of the pan then the

chutney is ready. Trying to cook a chutney too quickly and allowing it to burn will spoil the overall appearance, the colour, the aroma and flavour. Relishes should on the whole be crunchy and bright.

Most marks are given for flavour and aroma. Chutneys are best kept for a couple of months to mature. Some chutneys, such as damson, can taste quite acidic until they have had time to mature. Relishes and pickles can be used almost immediately.

Pickles can look attractive with whole spices left in the jars. However use only the spices which have been used during the pickling process as adding new pieces of say, cinnamon, will utterly change the balance of flavours.