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All In A Jar

By Susie Iventosch



Penny Porter in her kitchen Photo Susie Iventosch

When I first learned of Penny Porter's teaching business, All In A Jar, my first thought went back to early childhood days of catching fireflies in jars with holes poked in the metal lids. This summed up my knowledge of canning and bottling things, because fireflies were just about the only thing I remember putting in a jar, other than maybe a centipede or two.

So, when Porter invited me over to see her bountiful collection of homemade preserves ... jams, chutneys, pasta toppings, pickled veggies, fruits, lime curd, tapenades, and even ready-to-go apple pie filling, I was not only amazed, but truly inspired. The art of preserving food is making a big comeback, along with the heightened interest in cultivating prolific vegetable gardens, and Porter is an enthusiastic professor of preserving.

"My passion is getting people in the kitchen doing this together," Porter proclaims. "Preserving is a really fun activity for family members and friends, alike. To me, food is love and family ... that's how I show them I love them ... and they tend to like it too!"

Whenever friends have an abundance of produce from their gardens, Porter hops in the car, gathers the goods, and races back to her kitchen where her creativity goes into overdrive. As you can see from the picture, Porter laid out a beautiful spread of goodies for me to taste, as well as a perfect autumn apple pie made with her homemade pie filling.

"My favorite birthday dessert has always been strawberry rhubarb pie, but the problem is that my birthday is in November," Porter said. "So, my mom used to go out and buy frozen fruit for the pie. But, by preserving the fruit myself, I can have my favorite pie any time of the year!"

Porter got her start in canning at age six, when she went to Brentwood u-pick farms with her mom. They picked apricots and from the mushy fruit, they made jam while they put the pretty fruit straight into jars. She lost touch with the art of preserving during her 20s, but one day, in her 30s, she called her sister and sister-in-law to plan a "jam" fest. They all ventured to Brentwood and came back to jam--the boys on their musical instruments and the girls over the stove, actually making jam.

"We finally encouraged the boys to 'jam' with us in the kitchen and they love it," she said. "I think they are always hungry and love to get creative in the kitchen so they'll

always have something good on hand to eat. They seem to especially enjoy making hot sauce and pickled veggies."

Porter likes to think outside the box, er, jar, and makes pickled tomatoes, jams with hot peppers or real vanilla bean, and also uses these products creatively in other recipes.

"Recently, I've been putting the cherry-jalapeno jam in brownies!"

Hands down, my favorite item from the gorgeous spread she prepared for me was her Eggplant-Bell Pepper Spread, which she uses as a filling for manicotti and lasagna, bread spread, or to top scrambled eggs.

"This item can be used for breakfast, lunch or dinner," she notes.

Her stepson, Jason Porter, is the executive chef at Seven Glaciers ski resort in Alaska and she is always open and interested in his critiques of her products. He has used some of her recipes at the restaurants, though he doesn't preserve them, but rather uses them right away.

Even though many people are frightened away from preserving food because they don't know how, or they fear contamination, Porter says that preserving food is really not difficult, but you must start with a very clean kitchen.

"I clean the kitchen thoroughly, including the vent above the stove, and you must scrub the produce, even if you plan to peel it," she said. "I also sterilize the jars and lids, and always label each jar with the product, date and

batch number."

She also recommends following the recipes exactly, and never doubling them. You may get more or less yield due to the size and water content of the produce, but she says to stick to the recipe. That is not to say you cannot substitute ingredients, which is exactly what I did when I realized we only had limes on hand, yet her apple chutney called for an orange. But, I did stick to the measurements and still discovered that the yield was slightly different than expected.

Porter recommends purchasing the Ball Blue Book of Canning and Preserving Recipes, or taking a class to get started. She offers classes at Back To The Table cooking school in Lafayette, as well as home parties and demonstrations at select Navlet's Garden Center locations. She also says it is a great idea to purchase a jar lifter, a canning funnel and a good ladle before you try this at home.

I think this is a great idea, too, since I did not have a jar lifter when I made her delicious apple chutney, and found that my tongs did a poor job of removing the jar from the boiling water bath. Once I removed the jars, I eagerly anticipated the "ping" of the lid sealing. When mine did not ping, I consulted the Internet, which told me to be patient. Within two more minutes, "ping" went the jars!

Oh the joy of that unmistakable ping!

For more information on All In A Jar preserving classes, please visit: <http://www.allinajar.com/>, or email allinajar2012@gmail.com, or call (925) 299-0251. For more information on Back To The Table cooking school, please visit: <http://backtothetablecookingschool.com/>.

Spice Pear or Apple Chutney



(Yields approximately 5 pints)

This chutney can be used in many ways. I used it for chicken curry, but Penny Porter uses it in oatmeal, over yogurt or in muffins. She uses pippin or Fuji apples, or Bosc pears if using pears. I used a combination of Fuji and Honeycrisp.

INGREDIENTS

10 large pears or apples*
 1 1/2 star anise
 One 3-inch cinnamon stick
 2 whole cloves
 1 whole Thai chili
 1/2 teaspoon ground ginger
 1 teaspoon cinnamon
 1/4 teaspoon cardamom
 1/2 teaspoon yellow curry powder
 1/2 teaspoon cumin seed
 1/4 teaspoon turmeric powder
 1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper
 1 teaspoon fresh grated ginger
 1 orange, zest and juice (this is where I used lime

zest and juice ... delicious and a bit more tart)

1/2 cup apple cider vinegar

1 cup honey

1 cup golden raisins

1 cup walnuts, coarsely chopped (add just five minutes before placing jars in the water bath)

* To prevent browning of fruit, make a solution of 2 tablespoons kosher salt, 2 tablespoons white vinegar and one gallon cold water. Immerse cut fruit in this solution until ready to use.

DIRECTIONS

1) Use a spice bag or make a bag with cheese cloth to put star anise, cinnamon stick, Thai chili and whole cloves.

2) Wash pears or apples, peel, core and cut into 1 1/2 -inch pieces.

3) Wash orange, then zest and juice

4) Combine all ingredients in a large, nonreactive sauce pot. Simmer over medium-low heat for about 20 minutes, or until thick, stirring frequently to prevent sticking.

5) Remove spice bag and add nuts. (I did not use the nuts, but will try next time)

6) Ladle hot chutney into hot sterilized jars, leaving 1/2 inch head space. (Fill one jar at a time, leaving the remaining jars in the hot water to keep them sterile and also this helps pull the vacuum for a good seal.)

7) Remove air bubbles by tapping bottom of filled jar on a cutting board covered with a folded towel to prevent cracking.

8) Wipe rims of jars with clean, damp towel and seal with new lids and rings. Twist rings until secure, but not too terribly tight.

9) Process for 20 minutes in a boiling water canner, or large pot. Be sure water is about 2 inches above the top of the lids.

10) Remove jars to a cooling rack, check seal, label and store in pantry.

11) Refrigerate after opening.

** Note: Porter suggests removing the metal rings before storing, leaving just the sealed lid on top. The rings can get rusty after being in the water bath, and it is easier to tell if you have any problems with your preserved food if you do not have the ring on it. She says this way the jars can better "talk to you" to tell you if there are any spoilage problems.

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