

# Taste

food & drink

# Culture arts

## How to never buy yogurt again



JENNY McQUEEN

If you open up my fridge on any given day, you're sure to find a container of yogurt in there. We eat it for breakfast alongside berries, and it ends up in many of my baked goods, soups, sauces, smoothies and even homemade ice cream. But often, said container of yogurt is simply an unlabeled glass jar. That's because this probiotic-rich dairy workhorse can easily be made at home, and the result is more delicious and less expensive than store-bought brands.

Not to dump on store-bought yogurt. It actually serves a valuable role in my kitchen – as a starter for my homemade batches. Bacteria is really the only thing you need to transform plain milk into delicious yogurt, and the best place to find your starter bacteria is in a scoop of regular store-bought yogurt. Classic and Greek are both acceptable options, but steer clear of flavors and fruits, as the fermentation process can lead to bitterness and strange textures if there are sweeteners present.

Once you've made your first batch of yogurt, you can use a scoop of the homemade stuff to inoculate the next batch, and so on. This can go on for as long as you keep a spoonful from every batch, creating an heirloom bacteria strain guaranteed to be the envy of fellow home fermenters and chefs.

I go for whole milk when making yogurt, as the texture is infinitely better, but you can use 2% or skim if you wish.

I have even added a cup of heavy cream here and there for a more luscious flavor. This recipe will not work with nondairy products, as nut milks require a lot more meddling to achieve the consistency of yogurt. If you have access to sheep or goat's milk, I encourage you to give it a whirl; they will both offer more tang than traditional cow's milk.



**Food Savvy**  
with  
*Sarah Kurysz*

With your good bacteria and milk selected, patience and an instant read thermometer are really all you need. I use a slow

cooker for my yogurt as it is ridiculously easy; however, you can use the stovetop as well. You will just need to watch closely so as not to let it get too hot.

You want to heat your milk to near boiling (190-200 degrees), then allow it to cool to 115-120 degrees before adding the yogurt inoculant. If the milk is too hot at this point, you will kill the bacteria. (The initial high heat alters the structure of the milk proteins, making for a creamier final product.) Allow the doctored milk to sit at room temperature for 6-8 hours so it thickens and develops a tart flavor, and voila! Yogurt. If you're looking for something akin to a thick Greek-style yogurt, strain it through a cheesecloth to remove some of the moisture.

### HOMEMADE YOGURT

*Yield: 8 servings*

- ½ gallon whole milk
- ½ cup plain yogurt with active and live cultures

Pour your milk into your slow cooker and turn to high. Allow to cook for about 40 minutes until the temperature reaches 190 degrees on your thermometer.

Turn off the heat and allow to cool to 115 degrees (this should take about 30-45 minutes).

Mix in the half cup of yogurt with a wire whisk and cover the pot with a dish towel before putting the lid back on. The towel allows the gasses to escape easily.

Next, leave it to set for several hours. If your kitchen is relatively warm, you can do this with the slow cooker turned off. If you're blasting the air conditioner, you may need to intermittently turn the cooker to "warm" to keep the mixture at about 80-100 degrees. But be careful not to let it get too hot. The longer it sets, the thicker and more flavorful it becomes.

After 6-8 hours, scoop your yogurt into a tight-sealing glass or plastic container (through a cheesecloth if you desire a thicker product). Allow to chill in the fridge overnight. Keeps for up to two weeks.

Enjoy in a plethora of delicious ways, and experiment with different flavorings by mixing in fruit, jams or honey. ■



JENNY McQUEEN

# Gateway grilling

Even the faint of heart can embrace the oyster

**T**hough I now consider them a summertime staple, my first oyster experience didn't happen until I was a full-on adult living in Chicago, eating them raw in a very fancy restaurant on Michigan Avenue. I appreciated the glamour of the evening, but my favorite way to enjoy oysters is decidedly more laid-back: on the waterfront, alongside a campfire or portable grill with beer and friends. Since moving to Virginia a few years ago, local oyster festivals have given me a taste of oyster-loving culture, and now I'm hooked for life.



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Oysters, beyond being delicious, are also vital to ocean health, filtering millions of gallons of seawater daily, so it's imperative that we are consuming these creatures sustainably by planting oyster beds for later harvest instead of depleting wild populations. Fortunately, thanks to Virginia's fast-growing aquaculture industry, our options for local, sustainably farmed oysters are plentiful, making them one of the more environmentally friendly seafood options.

Virginia oysters are organized by eight growing regions with more than 40 distinct varieties between them: Seaside, Upper and Lower Bay of the Eastern Shore, Upper, Middle and Lower Bay of the Western Shore, Tidewater and Tangier.

The temperature, salinity and surrounding marine life can adjust the flavor from buttery and smooth to astringent and salty to bold and savory – and hardcore oyster lovers usually have a favorite. If you're new to oysters, I suggest sampling an assortment. I enjoy oysters with a strong saltiness and a smooth finish: Nassawadox Salts, Misty Points and Olde Salts to name a few.

Preparing oysters is no easy task, as they require thorough cleaning and shucking. To clean them, run the shells under cool water and use a brush to scrub the outside of the shell. Oysters are alive when harvested and remain that way until they are shucked. Once shucked, they need to be kept on ice and consumed within two hours.

If you have never shucked an oyster, I suggest asking your fishmonger for a tutorial, but I can give you the basics. The process requires an oyster knife, easily available online and at many seafood shops. Oyster knives have a long handle and a small teardrop-shaped blade that is sharp on both sides. The design is specifically for slicing through the shell's rubbery seal and then prying open the joint. You want to insert the knife at the base of the shell and slide it horizontally, separating the two halves. One half will be bare (discard that) and the other will hold the oyster. Keep your shucked oysters on ice, sitting in their shells with all of their juices until you are ready to cook or eat them.

Perhaps the most common and prized way to eat fresh oysters is raw with lemon, horseradish and Tabasco. While I encourage everyone to try them this way, don't fret if you don't like it – raw oysters have a distinct flavor and texture that can take some getting used to. In the summertime,

grilled oysters offer a great alternative, bringing out the depth of their ocean flavor alongside garlic, butter and a hint of white wine. They are also as much fun to prepare as they are to eat. Grilling oysters requires slowing the pace a bit, enjoying time outside with friends and family, sharing a good wine or favorite brew, while eating a few oysters at a time as they come hot off the grill. It's a recipe for a great evening for sure.

## GRILLED OYSTERS

- 2 dozen** oysters, cleaned and shucked
- 3 sticks** salted butter, softened
- 2 cloves** garlic, smashed
- 1 shallot**, peeled
- 3 Tablespoons** fresh tarragon, or **1 Tablespoon** dried
- 2 Tablespoons** fresh parsley
- 1 Tablespoon** lemon juice
- ¼ cup** white wine
- 1 teaspoon** paprika
- 1 teaspoon** honey
- 1 Tablespoon** Worcestershire sauce
- 2-3 shakes** of Tabasco or other hot sauce
- ⅓ cup** freshly grated Parmesan cheese
- ½ teaspoon** salt
- ½ teaspoon** white pepper

Heat grill to 450 degrees.

Place everything except the oysters in a food processor and blend until thoroughly combined.

Use a small spoon to place a dollop on each oyster.

Place oysters in their half shells on the hot grill and cook for 6-8 minutes, until the edges brown and curl.

Enjoy immediately with a glass of white wine or a favorite beer. ■

# Taste

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## The pickled peel

JENNY McQUEEN

*When life gives you lemons, preserve them*

**T**oday I want to share with you one of the easiest recipes imaginable. All it takes is two ingredients that you probably already have lying around, and time to let them sit and do their thing. But the results are something so special and versatile, you'll be left wondering why you don't encounter them in more dishes.



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I'm talking about preserved lemons. Their unique pickled taste and silken texture is a staple in Moroccan and North African cuisine, but once you have them in your pantry, you can use them to elevate everything from a raw summer salad to grilled lamb. All it takes is an effortless salt brine to turn this oh-so-common citrus fruit into a powerhouse ingredient that will change your summer menu planning for the better.

Preserved lemons are easy, cheap and long lasting – every chef's dream. Though the only necessary ingredients are lemons and salt, you have the option of adding in dried herbs to give nuance to their already enchanting flavor.

The flavor of preserved lemons is hard to describe if you've never tasted it. There are elements of salt, acid, citrus, fermentation and a certain *je ne sais quoi* – most likely a combination of all of the aforementioned characteristics, colliding to form a commodity greater than the sum of its parts.

You'll notice there's no added liquid in this recipe. Instead, the lemons' own juices combine with the salt to form the brine. To achieve this, you'll need to smush the packed fruit down firmly in their jars in order to squeeze out enough juice to cover them. Do not be tempted to add water. Water will dilute the salt and citric acid, resulting in a weak mixture that won't preserve effectively. If your lemons seem to have a low juice content, you can fill the remainder of the jars with lemon juice. Just be sure to get 100% lemon juice and not a blend or one that contains additives or flavorings.

Another important note is that you can add more salt if desired, but not less. Kosher salt is best, both for its large crystal size and lack of additives.

The seasoning possibilities are limitless (and completely optional). I have used everything from cinnamon sticks to thyme to chile peppers. The key is to make sure your aromatics are dried. Do not use fresh herbs. I would also caution against using ground spices, as they will make the mixture "muddy," for lack of a

better word. For the lemons in the photos, I used coriander and bay leaves. You need only sprinkle in about a teaspoon throughout the lemon layers, as the flavors will intensify over time and you want the lemon to remain the focus.

### PRESERVED LEMONS

*Yield: About 1 cup lemon peel when brining is complete*

- 6 lemons, organic if possible, rinsed
- ½ cup kosher salt
- 1 quart-sized or 2 pint-sized jars

#### *A few optional add-ins:*

- Dried chiles
- Coriander
- Bay leaves
- Peppercorns
- Dried thyme

Sterilize your quart jar, either by boiling or running through the dishwasher on the hottest setting. Set aside.

To prepare the lemons, start by cutting off the top and bottom, making sure to expose the flesh beneath the white pith. Standing the lemon on end, cut lengthwise into quarters, leaving the bottom attached, so it spreads open to resemble a tulip.

One by one, fill each of your lemon-tulips with a couple teaspoons of salt. Some salt will fall onto your workspace,

and that's OK.

Add the salted lemons to the jar one by one and, using a pestle or a wooden spoon, smush each one down to extract as much juice as possible before adding the next. Add a tablespoon or so of salt in between each lemon.

Continue filling and smushing (layering in any optional seasonings you want), until all of your lemons are packed in there. Make sure the juice fully covers the lemons, but leave about ½ inch of air at the top of the jar.

Put the lid on firmly. Allow the lemons to ripen for at least 30 days, shaking the jar periodically to distribute the juices and salt. No need to refrigerate, just allow the jar to sit on the counter out of direct sunlight.

When you're ready to use the lemons, remove them as needed from the brine and rinse with water. Remove any flesh and pith – it's the peel you're after.

One of my favorite ways to use preserved lemons is to mince them and toss with roasted green beans or broccoli. You can also add it to a salad; the bits of lemon bring bunches of flavor, so no need for a lot of dressing. Preserved lemons will almost melt when used in soups and stews, providing a velvety citrus essence to every bite. As of yet, I have not found a flavor that clashes with preserved lemons, so the world is your oyster with this recipe. Also, they are great with oysters. ■