



DILL OR NO DILL Chef Sean Brock's pickled summer fruits and vegetables

Preservation Society

ALL-STAR CHEFS AND HOME COOKS ARE PERPETUATING THE TRADITION-STEPPED ART OF PICKLING—AND TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL. BY ADAM BAER

MY LATE GRANDFATHER Morris, a Holocaust survivor from Poland, had a saying: “Slow, slow, slow.” He seemed to utter it each time he saw anyone move faster than a snail’s pace (which, as a boisterous child, I often did). His brother, my great uncle Harry, was cut from the same cloth. Indeed, Harry was known around his Queens, New York, neighborhood for his skill at two activities that require great patience: playing chess and making pickles. His specialties were small, pimpled,

garlicky and tart kirby cucumbers, which he pickled with expert care and shared with friends and family.

He learned his technique from my great-grandmother back in Poland, who had kept pickles fermenting in barrels stored in the cellar of her rural home, and to him—as to many picklers—it was more than a cooking technique. Pickling is a philosophy, a means of preserving the gifts of the present, knowing they will change (and quite likely improve) over time. Pickling is about the future.

I had forgotten about Uncle Harry’s pickles in recent years, but they were brought to mind after a recent dinner at Los Angeles’ new Four Seasons restaurant, Culina. I’d noticed the chef, Victor Casanova, serving some pretty bright and tasty pickled seasonal food. Italians, like so many European and Asian cultures, boast a longstanding pickling tradition, but Casanova wasn’t just pickling onions and peppers. In addition to ramps, fennel and rhubarb, there was pickled mackerel *scarpace*,

brined in red wine vinegar with clove, cardamom, star anise, garlic, sugar and peperoncini; and even green apples pickled in grappa, the distilled grape liquor, served with *crudo*, Italian sashimi.

He isn't the only top chef to rediscover pickling. There's David Chang in New York, who has served pickled pineapple on top of fluke at Momofuku Má Pêche; Steve Corry of Portland, Maine's Five Fifty-Five, with his mussels and pickled cherry tomato; and James Beard-winning Sean Brock of McCrady's in Charleston, South Carolina, who loves his pickled ramps and okra. Apparently, pickling went gourmet when I wasn't looking.

Still, pickling, at root, is about home sweet home. So while I was thrilled by the gourmet pickling renaissance, I was eager to learn the technique myself. I remembered something

BEET IT Mark Dommen uses pickling to create his beet carpaccio with rock shrimp at One Market in San Francisco.



Harry once told me: "You always liked pickles," he'd said after one long Passover seder. "You understand; you are the right one to make them." I laughed off the comment at the time. I was too young, too intent on living in the moment to think ahead. I'd grown up a bit since then. Now I was ready.

Inspired, I called Harry, now 94, at his Arizona nursing home to catch up and learn his recipe. I'd made a few lackluster pickling attempts, and there was something I needed to know: *What gave his pickles their unusual tartness?*

"Rye bread," came the surprising reply.

I was too young for pickling, too intent on living in the moment to think ahead. Now I'm ready.

Every pickling recipe that I had read called for placing vegetables in a jar with a brine containing salt, sugar, and vinegar and flavored with a varying mixture of "pickling spices" that might include clove, cardamom, cinnamon, star anise, bay leaf, mustard seed and/or coriander. But *bread?*

"Make sure it has the caraway seeds, too," he added. "And use the heel if you can."

Harry recommended taking sour homemade rye bread, laying it on top of a jar filled with cucumbers, water, lots of salt, garlic, savory pickling spices (without the cinnamon and other fancy stuff) and sometimes dill. No vinegar. He let it sit on the kitchen counter, making sure to turn it upside down every now and then. The yeasty bread amped up the fermentation (and preservation) process, which made for sour pickles in half the time—and half-sours even faster (48 hours, by my count), crisp and carrying an iconic Harry zing.

I began to practice, and to come up with my own variations, adding garlic cloves (five, smashed, was just right) and dill (more than two bunches, though, and you'd get a bitter

taste). I tried boiling the brine, which made for more consistent results, and refrigerating, which slowed the pickling process for more control.

As I became more obsessed, it became clear other home cooks were doing the same thing. Kevin West, a jet-setting magazine editor known for his profiles of socialites and fashionistas, recently reclaimed his down-home roots by rediscovering pickling. "No question there's a rampant, wildfire interest in canning and pickling in foodie culture right now," says West, now the proprietor of a well-regarded pickling blog,

savingtheseason.com. "Jam and pickles are the new bacon. Home canning and food preservation has become the new fetish kitchen skill."

Given the craze for seasonal, locally grown food, it's only natural that the culinary world is now turning

DAVID CHANG'S VINEGAR PICKLES Makes four servings



- Raw vegetables (carrots, cauliflower, fennel, celery or cabbage work well), trimmed and cut
- 1 cup water, piping hot from the tap
- ½ cup rice wine vinegar
- 6 tablespoons sugar
- 2¼ teaspoons kosher salt

Combine water, vinegar, sugar and salt in a mixing bowl and stir until sugar dissolves. Pack the vegetables into a quart container. Pour brine over vegetables, cover, and refrigerate. Let sit for three or four days at minimum, or a week for optimum flavor.

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ON THE BOARDWALK Uncle Harry with his wife and nieces in Coney Island, New York, in 1955

to homegrown means of preserving a season's bounty. "Plus, when you have a huge harvest, and you're able to preserve it, it only gets better as it ages," says Brock. "As a Southern chef, pickling is a big part of our tradition. I grew up in rural Virginia, and there was one grocery store, and no restaurants." That meant a huge garden where his family grew most of what it ate. "You're constantly 'putting stuff up' on shelves in Mason jars. I have fifty on my shelves at home."

Brock, who serves a variety of pickles on the McCrady's charcuterie plate, in the bar and alongside entrees, tells me that he recently pickled some 600 pounds of ramps, pungent, bright-green wild onions available in spring. He's made 100 jars of green tomatoes and lots of tart green pickled strawberries. "My favorites are dilly beans, and last year I did about 250 pounds of sunchoke pickles," he adds. He lets most set for three months before eating; his is a slower and sweeter, more heavily preservation-minded process than that of my great uncle Harry, whose pickles would go too sour after a week.

"Historically, the Southern pickle has a lot of sugar in it," Brock says. "We're careful about that now. But our formula is still in the Southern tradition, with equal parts regular vinegar and apple

cider vinegar, flavored with dill seed, celery seed, mustard seed and onion, among other things."

A number of chefs are also experimenting with new techniques and ingredients. "My favorite pickled food right now is watermelon rind," says Chang, the celebrated Korean-American

chef, who was weaned on kimchi. "With more imagination, I think top chefs can change how pickles are perceived."

Chang's technique is focused on maintaining the crispness of the foods while adding a little zing. "A lot of people will tell you to boil the heck out of the brining solution," Chang says. "You don't have to do that, especially if you know the food's going to be eaten in the next three months. Take pineapple. That can be pickled fresher and cooler so it keeps its texture. I like pickles with texture."

Casanova, who has been hosting tasting dinners for Hollywood A-listers at Culina in Beverly Hills, sees pickles as key to grabbing the attention of sophisticated diners.

"The best way to make memorable food is to be three-dimensional, and pickles are like secret weapons that add new, unexpected layers of flavor," he explains.

Casanova's recipe for pickled apples is decidedly high tech. He boils his pickling liquid, puts it into a vacuum-sealed bag with the fruit and lets it cool for 72 hours before cooking the contents sous-vide-style, in a circulating bath of warm water.

It may not be quite as homey as a piece of sour rye bread in a jar, but Uncle Harry would approve. As he puts it, "If you make pickles, you always do things your *own way*." ■

ADAM BAER can follow directions, but he made his latest batch of New York pickles with Mexican chilis.