

Preserved Lemons

When a friend brought over a jar of preserved lemons my world of salt and tart got a new player. We can applaud Paula Wolfert, cookbook author, world traveller, exacting recipe developer and passionate lover of authentic, simple food for this recipe. She brought it to Americans through her first book in 1973, *Couscous*, based on her time in Morocco. Her recipe optionally includes cinnamon stick, cloves and coriander but here I am carrying forward her simplest version.

Preserved lemons exemplifies one of the six key lessons from Paula's cooking life - "time is a flavoring". Consider that pot of soup or stew that marries its flavor over a few days or roasted vegetables left to mellow during its last half hour of baking in the oven's receding heat. These principles support another of her lessons - "the best host is a relaxed host". By cooking a day ahead the flavors deepen and the host is composed.

Ingredients

9 or 10 organic lemons
about 1/3 cup kosher salt
1 heaping teaspoon black peppercorns
2 bay leaves

Method

1. Scrub 5 of the lemons well, then soften them by rolling them back and forth on a firm work surface. Slice each softened lemon from the blossom end to within 1/4 inch of the stem end. Spread the salt in a wide, shallow bowl. Sprinkle 1 to 2 teaspoons of the salt on the exposed flesh of the lemons, then reshape the fruits. Halve and squeeze the remaining 4 to 5 lemons to total 1/2 cup juice.
2. Place 1 Tablespoon of the salt at the bottom of a large wide-mouth glass jar with a tight-fitting lid. (Jars with a hinged and rubber gasket work very well but if you are using a lid with metal screw-in lid, cut a piece of parchment paper to fit between the salty brine and the lid to prevent corrosion.) Pack the 5 prepared lemons into the jar, adding more salt between the lemons. Firmly push down on the lemons so they release their juices. (A cocktail muddler is an ideal tool for this.) Top with the 1/2 cup fresh lemon juice. The lemons should be completely submerged, with about 1/2 inch headspace between the liquid and the inside of the lid. Add more lemon juice if needed to cover. Screw on the lid.

3. Let the lemons ripen in a warm (mid 60's to 80 degree F) place for 30 days, turning the jar upside down every few days to distribute the salt and juice. If necessary, add more lemon juice to keep the lemons covered.

4. To use the lemons, remove them from their brine as needed, using a wooden spoon or tongs to extract them. Rinse them under running cool water to remove the excess salt. Usually only the rind is used, though Paula sometimes also uses the pulp. Cut as directed in individual recipes.

Preserved lemons will keep up to a year. They are naturally pickled/fermented so no need to refrigerate but you can if you are more comfortable with that.

Notes



Paula recommends a kosher salt brand with no additives, such as Diamond Crystal.

Source: [Unforgettable: The Bold Flavors of Paula Wolfert's Renegade Life,](#) by Emily Kaiser Thelin (M&P, 2017) or <https://cooking.nytimes.com/recipes/1016212-preserved-lemons> (Yield: 5 lemons)
