
NOT YOUR GRANDMOTHER'S PRESERVES: FRESH IDEAS FOR PUTTING FOOD BY

BY CATHY HUYGHE

Dehydrating olives in the microwave is, perhaps, not the first thing that comes to mind when you think about preserving autumn food for the winter. But microwaves and juicers are just two of the modern pieces of equipment put to use by today's practitioners of the ancient tradition of putting food by.

Putting food by refers to the various methods of preserving fruits, vegetables, dairy, meat and fish for use at a later time. Canning and pickling are two familiar ways to preserve food but a few less common techniques are making their way back, thanks to updated equipment and the creative, resourceful cooks who use them.

Everyone from your next-door neighbor to Chef Barbara Lynch are thinking of new ways to make autumn's flavors last. They're revisiting and rethinking techniques like dehydrating (or drying), juicing and freezing fruits and vegetables. The result offers a fresh perspective on eating locally throughout the winter months.

Winter is a time to experiment with foods from different seasonal hues, away from the crisp and vibrant lettuce greens of summer and fall and more toward the mellower pumpkin orange and auburn lentils that transition us to the colder months. With a little planning, and not as much time or effort as you would think, we can adapt our eating patterns for October, November and December. If we seize the opportunity of the fall harvest, our winter menus can be even more varied and interesting, not to mention local and nutritious.

DEHYDRATING

Dehydrating, or drying, food is less labor-intensive and exacting than canning. It takes more time, but less work. Equipment doesn't have to be fancy or expensive, especially with a basic dehydrating machine now available at kitchen supply stores like Eastern Bakers Supply on North Washington Street in Boston.

Drying fruits and vegetables works as a means of preserving by removing nearly all of the water from the food. The water in food is what bacteria, molds and yeast live on. Vegetables that take particularly well to drying include the stars of the autumn harvest like onions, sweet potatoes, pumpkins and squash.

The method is simple. Clean or peel the produce, then slice the fruits and vegetables as thinly as possible. The finer the produce is cut, the less time it will need to dry. Arrange the slices on the dehydrating machine's trays, and let it do its thing. ("Its thing" is to circulate heated air around the trays so that the food dries but doesn't cook.)

Staff at Barbara Lynch's Plum Produce regularly dehydrate vegetables such as leeks and onions, using a basic food dehydrator. Once the vegetables are dried the staff pulverizes them in a food processor to the consistency of a fine powder. The powder is then funneled into 5-inch-tall cylinders that are maybe an inch in diameter. The tubes look like they come from an apothecary shop, and the contents are in fact potent stuff. Lynch suggests adding the powder to soups and dips for a concentrated punch of flavor.



A microwave oven can be used to dehydrate vegetable pulp or purée. Certain vegetables, like beets, carrots and tomatoes, work especially well using this method. Remove excess moisture from the purée, then spread it in a thin layer on a microwavable tray or plate. Microwave on low for 30 minutes or longer, depending on the power of your machine. At this point the vegetable can be ground into a powder using a spice or coffee grinder. Vegetable powders are a versatile ingredient in the kitchen. They can be used to enhance sauces and dips and to thicken soups.

Food can also be dehydrated in other ways, even without the use of a special machine like a microwave or dehydrator. Take apples, for example. Peel, core and slice them thinly into rings,

or into wedges first then slices. Dip the slices into a mixture of lemon juice (1/4 cup) and water (1 quart) to prevent discoloration, and arrange them on trays. Then put them in the oven at 115 degrees for six to eight hours. That's it. Really!

Take a few minutes of that time to think about your place in history's continuum. Your great-grandmother may have threaded her apple slices and hung them to dry in the attic. Before that, fruits and vegetables used to be dried in the town bread oven after baking, when the oven is still warm but not too hot. Eating dried apples, though, is the same as it always was: Eat them as a snack, or store them and refresh as needed to use in cakes, applesauce and pies. Dried fruits, like apples, should be refreshed by soaking in hot water and then cooked, if appropriate, in the soaking liquid. The dried fruit should be refreshed only when ready for use.

FREEZING

It helps to be in a preserving mind-set year-round—make extra of everything no matter the season, so local produce is maximized and nothing goes to waste—but autumn is an especially auspicious time to practice freezing as method of preserving food because harvest vegetables are in such abundance.

Take zucchini. It proliferates in even the most humble garden, so home cooks have become very creative about cooking this omnipresent vegetable. Fortunately many zucchini recipes take well to freezing, so the products can be defrosted and enjoyed throughout the winter. Make zucchini jam, and let it cool completely. Then let it stand in the refrigerator for a day or two, then store it in the freezer until needed. Soup also freezes easily. Make extra zucchini soup, let it cool, then store it in the freezer until needed.

Is it possible to eat locally throughout the winter in Massachusetts? The answer is yes, even during the holiday season. Turkey and cranberry sauce are a natural, and local, part of the menu. Acorn and butternut squash can be planted late in the season and harvested in the colder months. If held properly, turnips can keep well into December.

But imagine the possibilities for holiday menus now that you've added dried or frozen foods to your repertoire. Green beans that were blanched then frozen could be offered as crudités alongside a dip that's been seasoned with a dehydrated powder of leeks and onions. Sweet potato fries can be dressed with a plum sauce made with juice from your freezer. For a side dish, try a succotash of leeks and corn kernels.

And for dessert, go back to those dried apples and your place

in the historical continuum. Dried apple pie has a flavor all its own—unique, distinct, personal, local. What better way to make it through the winter?

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RECOMMENDED READING

CURRENT AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES

- Canning, Preserving and Pickling* by Marion Harris Neil (1914)
- Dehydrating Foods: Fruits, Vegetables, Fish and Meats* by A. Louise Andrea (1920)
- Home Canning for Victory, also Preserving, Pickling and Dehydrating* by Anne Pierce (1942)
- The New Preserves: Pickles, Jams and Jellies* by Anne V. Nelson (2005)
- The Pantry Gourmet* by Jane Doerfer (1984)
- Pickled, Potted and Canned: How the Art and Science of Food Preserving Changed the World* by Sue Shepard (2000)
- Putting Food By* by Ruth Hertzberg (1973)
- Stocking Up: The Third Edition of the Classic Preserving Guide* by Carol Huppig (1986)

TIPS FOR DEHYDRATING FOOD

- ◆ Blanch vegetables before dehydrating them. This will shorten the dehydrating time from five days to overnight.
- ◆ Use salted water for more flavor. It takes the “sting” out of the vegetables.
- ◆ Dried fruits are especially good in pies: The flavor is concentrated; the juice stays inside the pie and doesn't overflow.

TIPS FOR FREEZING AUTUMN FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

- ◆ Blanch corn when it is still on the cob. Then use your knife to remove the kernels, and freeze.
- ◆ Snap green beans in half, blanch them, and freeze.
- ◆ Pit fresh cherries or plums, then juice the fruit. The juice keeps in the freezer for up to six months.