

taste buds
chef Larry
Janes

Preserving strawberries can be a snap

I just couldn't resist. I visited the farmers market last Saturday and walked away with not just one, but two flats of strawberries. I mean, at only \$6.50 per flat, how could I resist? On the way home, my mind was running as rampant as a Cul-sinart looking at a 5-pound hunk of cheese.

What would I do with all those berries?

I could begin a shortcake marathon and once again renew my membership to Weight Watchers.

I thought about making 15 gallons of my famous strawberry daquiris but then I remembered how I feel the next morning.

I finally decided to "put them up."

(Editor's note: This is a fair warning about what to expect for Christmas '88)

NOW I do know that fall is the ideal time for preserving. I also know that in the fall, I'm so bogged down with freezing zucchini, making tomato sauce, canning peaches, drying apples on top of raking leaves and batten-down the hatches for winter that I'm glad to get one thing done before the actual preserving season begins.

So what's needed to preserve these precious preserves?

The following will be a short primer on preserving.

First off, from Mama's no fault "watch me do it" school of preserving, I remember her telling me to always start with slightly underripe and firm berries for maximum flavor and to ensure a good age. Never, she did mean, NEVER make double batches because the sugar could burn or that balance of pectin-to-sugar could throw the whole pot off if allowed to boil longer than needed for larger quantities. Last but not least, follow the prescribed cooking times because even though the preserves look thin in the pan, they thicken up when allowed to cool.

With that knowledge and a case of screw-top jars and a six-pack under my belt, I began looking for equipment.

ALL THAT was needed was a heavy bottomed saucepan for oven cooking, a soup ladle, a large wide pot to boil the jars in (these big corn pots will do) and some jars with rubber-edged flat lids and rubberizing bands.

PLEASE NOTE: The rubber rings on the lids will not seal a second time around.

Next I remember Mama preparing the empty jars. These days, our idea of a dishwasher was whom ever's turn it was. These days, you can wash and sanitize the jars with one setting while the preserves are being made. If you prefer, you can bring the jars in a large pot to boil until you are ready to use them. Cover the rings and lids in a small saucepot with water, bring to a boil, then turn off. Invert the jars onto a cooling rack or clean towel just before filling. Fill one jar with the boiling preserves, wipe the rim and threads of the jar with a clean towel, set a lid in place and screw on the ring. Repeat with the remaining jars.

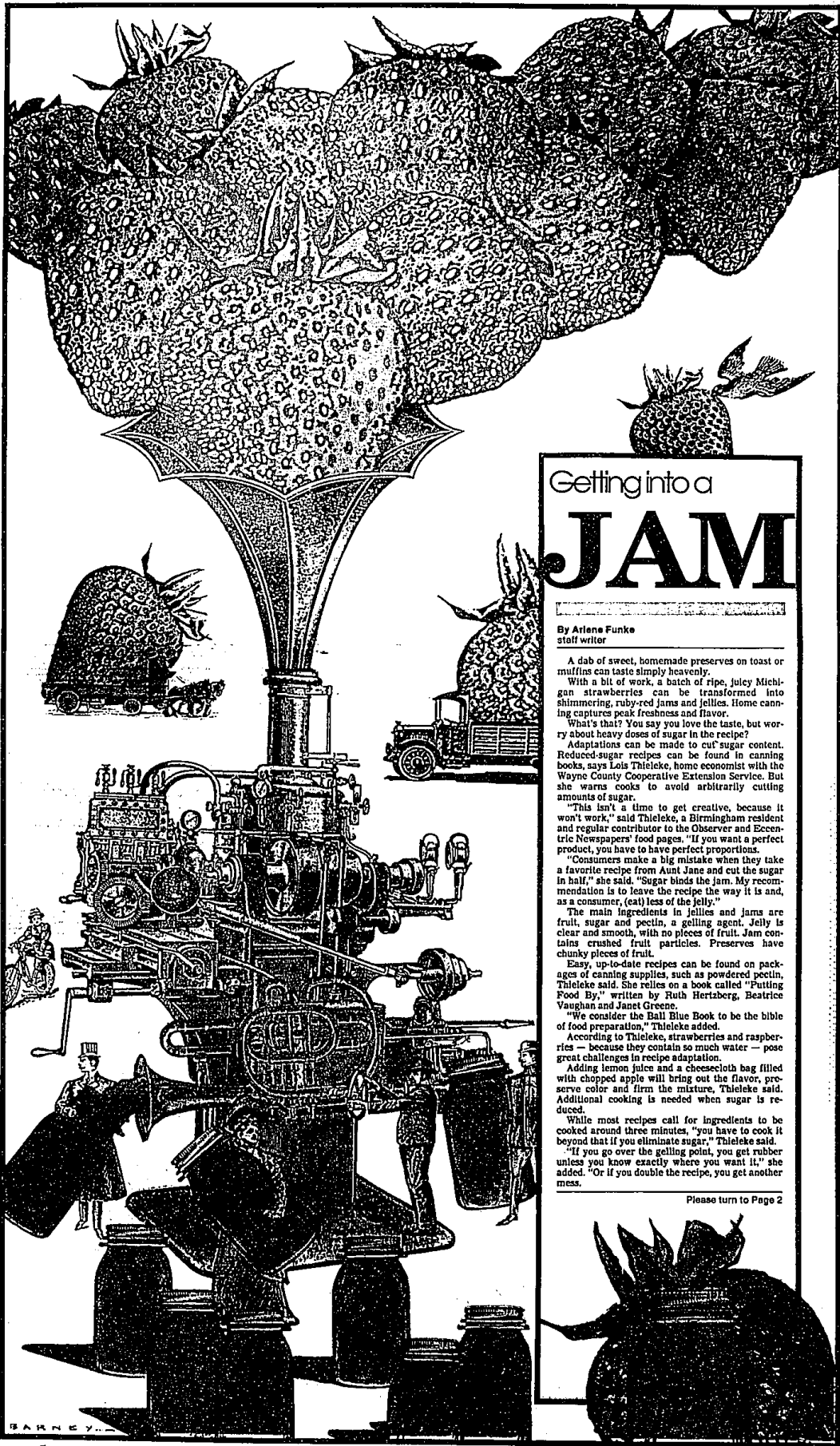
Now the jars are ready to be processed in a water bath. Place them in the large, deep corn pot (or whatever) and cover with water by at least one inch. Boil for the time noted in each recipe, when finished, cool to room temperature.

TO TEST for a tight seal, press the center of the lid; if it stays down, the seal is made, but if it pops up, place the jar in the fridge and use within a reasonable amount of time. Finally, label the jars and store in a cool, dry place.

Trust me, it's worth it. Hey, look at it this way, part of your Christmas shopping will already be done!

Bon Appetit!

Questions about preserving or canning? Drop me a note with a self-addressed stamped envelope in care of this paper for an answer and solution to your problem!



Getting into a JAM

By Arlene Funke
staff writer

A dab of sweet, homemade preserves on toast or muffins can taste simply heavenly.

With a bit of work, a batch of ripe, juicy Michigan strawberries can be transformed into shimmering, ruby-red jams and jellies. Home canning captures peak freshness and flavor.

What's that? You say you love the taste, but worry about heavy doses of sugar in the recipe?

Adaptations can be made to cut sugar content. Reduced-sugar recipes can be found in canning books, says Lois Thieleke, home economist with the Wayne County Cooperative Extension Service. But she warns cooks to avoid arbitrarily cutting amounts of sugar.

"This isn't a time to get creative, because it won't work," said Thieleke, a Birmingham resident and regular contributor to the Observer and Eccentric Newspapers' food pages. "If you want a perfect product, you have to have perfect proportions."

"Consumers make a big mistake when they take a favorite recipe from Aunt Jane and cut the sugar in half," she said. "Sugar binds the jam. My recommendation is to leave the recipe the way it is and, as a consumer, eat less of the jelly."

The main ingredients in jellies and jams are fruit, sugar and pectin, a gelling agent. Jelly is clear and smooth, with no pieces of fruit. Jam contains crushed fruit particles. Preserves have chunky pieces of fruit.

Easy, up-to-date recipes can be found on packages of canning supplies, such as powdered pectin, Thieleke said. She relies on a book called "Putting Food By," written by Ruth Hertzberg, Beatrice Vaughan and Janet Greene.

"We consider the Ball Blue Book to be the bible of food preparation," Thieleke added.

According to Thieleke, strawberries and raspberries — because they contain so much water — pose great challenges in recipe adaptation.

Adding lemon juice and a cheesecloth bag filled with chopped apple will bring out the flavor, preserve color and firm the mixture, Thieleke said. Additional cooking is needed when sugar is reduced.

While most recipes call for ingredients to be cooked around three minutes, "you have to cook it beyond that if you eliminate sugar," Thieleke said.

"If you go over the gelling point, you get rubber unless you know exactly where you want it," she added. "Or if you double the recipe, you get another mess."

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