

SOUR SECRET WEAPONS

Preserved lemons are cost effective, zesty and useful

How many times have you used some zest from a fresh lemon only to have the remainder of the fruit shrivel up on the counter or in the fridge? Is it possible to keep the fresh flavor of this bright yellow globe on hand for the times you might want to add some rays of sunshine to whatever you're cooking?

The answer: Yes, with preserved lemons. Every foodie needs to have these lemons in his repertoire of spices and flavoring additions.

Citrus fruits in winter are less expensive; however, buying and wasting them at any time of year adds up. Who wants to run to the store every time you need a lemon? I don't — I just head to my fridge, year round!

Here is how you too can preserve them for yourself at home. You will need only two ingredients: salt and lemons. And oh, yes, you'll also want a wide-mouth pint jar — is the jar considered an ingredient? Nah, I don't think so.

The preserved lemons will keep indefinitely, as long as you keep them refrigerated and keep the brine free of cross contamination. I use a clean fork to pull a lemon out each time I remove one from the brine. Right now, I'm down to the last two of a batch of lemons I preserved in a half-gallon jar more than a year ago. It's time to whip up a new, smaller batch to make more room in the fridge because it takes a few weeks for them to cure.

When I'm putting together a dish or a recipe that could use lemon, I just pull off a section of the lemon, discard the fleshy part and use the zest by first rinsing off the

section or soaking it in water for about 30 minutes to remove excess salt. And voila, lemon!

Use preserved lemon by adding it to tuna salad with capers and a little mayo. It's simple and, most importantly, delicious! For you bread bakers out there? Try pressing it into your ciabatta and rustic breads along with other goodies like olives or caramelized onions before baking them off. I make sun-dried tomato and preserved lemon tapenade that is very yummy. It's a perfect top-note for a finishing touch to brighten a cooked-down tomato sauce.

Preserved lemon has been a staple in my kitchen for a

number of years now, and it has proven to be my favorite secret weapon.

Let your own imagination and taste buds run wild with this one!

Here it is, nice and simple:

Secret Weapon (preserved lemon)

4-5 large lemons, preferably organic

Canning/pickling salt

Scrub the lemons in warm water to remove soil and wax, and then dry them off. Cut a thin slice from the bottoms and the tops of three lemons. Make about four slices into the lemon, starting from the top and ending about a half inch from the bottom, essentially quartering them without cutting them fully apart, and fill the slits with about two to three tablespoons of salt. Place the lemon into the jar and repeat until full.

Cover the lemons with juice from the remaining lemons — the juice should cover the lemons. If more juice is needed to cover the jarred lemons, simply juice more. Wipe the jar rim with a damp towel and screw on the lid. Leave the jar on the counter for four to five days, then place in the refrigerator. The lemons will become quite soft within seven to 10 days and are ready to use after about three weeks of brining. ■

Robert Cecil, a Renaissance man, is fascinated with the many processes of growing, preparing and presenting of what he calls Real Food. He grows, raises and preserves his own produce, eggs and honey at his downtown Eugene urban farm. It is his passion for Real Food that is the focus of his musings here as a contributor to EW. He also shares this knowledge and experience while volunteering as an OSU Extension Master Food Preserver and Master Gardener in Lane County.



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