



Leave the Creativity Behind When Home Canning

I remember spending hours in the kitchen when I was little watching my mother cook. If I were to be there today with a notebook to record the secret ingredients for our family-favorite spaghetti sauce, chances are that I would find it very difficult. The secret of mother's cooking was often to add 'a pinch of this' or 'a pinch of that' - nothing exact, but wonderful results all the same. Cooking can be a wonderfully creative outlet, but Barbara Ingham, University of Wisconsin Extension food scientist, says, "When it comes to home canning, leave the creativity behind."

Recipes that are not precise, mentioning a pinch of this ingredient or a pinch of that ingredient, recipes that are not tested in a laboratory, or recipes that contain inaccurate canning information, can result in products that may be unsafe to consume. Ms. Ingham offers these general guidelines for safe canning:

- Do not add more low-acid ingredients (onions, celery, peppers, garlic) than specified in the recipe. An unsafe product may result.
- Add spices or herbs only when specified in the recipe, and in no more than the amount given. Don't add extra seasonings or spices, these items are often high in bacteria and excess spices can make a product unsafe.
- Do not add butter or fat to home-canned products unless stated in a tested recipe. Adding butter or fat may slow the rate of heat transfer, and result in an unsafe product.
- Do not thicken with flour, or add rice, barley or pasta to canned products – this applies to both savory products (soups and stews) and pickled items. Items that thicken products will absorb liquid during processing and slow the way in which the food heats. Under-processing and unsafe food could result.
- Add acid (lemon juice or citric acid) to tomato products when directed in the recipe. In 1994 scientists acknowledged the risk of botulism poisoning from canned tomato products, and acid is now added to canned tomatoes, even those canned commercially. Lemon juice is widely available, but will add a sharp note to canned tomatoes; citric acid will change the flavor less noticeably. You can balance the acid taste with added sugar.
- Do not use jars larger than specified in the recipe, an unsafe product may result.
- Heat process all canned items that will be stored on the shelf. Some recipes, especially those for jams and jellies, instruct you to simply seal hot-filled jars, or to invert the jars as the final step. Extension does not recommend either open-kettle canning or inverting jars as the final step, unsafe products may result.

And finally, don't rely on experience alone to guide your canning steps. Instead, consult an acceptable source for home canning recipes such as: The USDA Complete Guide to Home Canning (1994 edition): http://www.uga.edu/nchfp/publications/publications_usda.html, the Ball Blue Book (1997 edition or later) and, in Wisconsin, the publications in the Wisconsin Safe Food Preservation Series, available from county extension offices or on-line: <http://cecommerce.uwex.edu/>.

Food safety is, and should be, a primary concern when home canning any type of food, from pickles to meat. The Extension service sets itself apart in providing research-based information, said Ms. Ingham. While it's easy to find delicious sounding recipes for home-canned products in cookbooks, magazines or newspapers, check the source of each recipe and, if it isn't from the an acceptable source, don't get out the canning supplies.