

A basic guide to jam and jelly making

Contributed by gil

Gbst shares the secrets of making jams and jellies from scratch. In this first part we learn about some of the terminology and techniques.

Jam making equipment

- weighing scales
- a big stainless steel pan (so you can use it to make chutney too - copper pans though good for jam don't like the vinegar that goes in chutney). rather than a dedicated jam pan with a handle, I use a very large two-handled stockpot / casserole.
- a roasting tin in which to warm the sugar before adding it to the fruit (supposed to speed up the dissolving of the sugar)
- a long-handled wooden spoon (which I don't use for anything other than preserves or beer/wine) whilst cooking up the jam, I use:

- a slotted spoon to skim off any scum (some preserves worse than others for this, and scum varies in quality from thick and gungy to light and almost rubbery) onto
 - a tea plate
 - and I use another plate and a teaspoon (put in the freezer to chill) with which to do the 'plate test' for setting
- Diversion : the Plate Test = place a teaspoon of jam (remove from heat to take sample) on the chilled plate. Cool for a couple of minutes. If the surface wrinkles when you push it with your finger, then the jam has reached setting point.

The least messy way I've found to fill jars involves:

- a soup ladle to get jam out of pan into
- a gravy boat (or anything with a good spout on it)
- a tea towel so as to not burn hands when holding jars full of hot jam

And thus into

- lots of clean, warmed jars with screw lids with
- self-adhesive labels

Jam ingredients

Fruit : Use ripe or slightly underripe fruit, picked when dry if you're doing this part yourself. Do not use over-ripe or wet fruit for making jam or jelly. Cut out any manky bits. Otherwise you run the risk of mould. And over-ripe fruit sets less easily.

The ideal behind jam and jelly-making is to preserve as far as possible the taste of the fresh fruit. The longer you cook and boil it for, the more it will taste cooked / stewed, or even syrupy or treacly. So cooking and boiling times should be as short as possible, within reason. But it doesn't always work to plan ! The crucial thing is to get your mixture to 'setting point' (see below). This is affected by the pectin content of the fruit, and the fruit's acidity, which helps release the pectin.

Pectin content of fruit All fruit contains (some) pectin, which helps the jam or jelly to set firm. Some fruits have more than others, which means that their jam or jelly is easier to set.

Good setters (fruits high in pectin)

Damsons
Blackcurrants
Redcurrants
Blackberries (early season)
Gooseberries
Quince

Medium setters

Raspberries (can be low)
Plums and greengages
Apricots

Poor setters (fruits low in pectin)

Strawberries
Rhubarb
Pineapple
Pears
Cherries
Blackberries (late season)

Combatting poor setting:

However, poor setting / low acidity can be helped along by other means :

- add some lemon juice (1 tablespoon per pound of fruit)
- use 'jam sugar', which has added pectin
- add a peeled and chopped cooking apple or two to the fruit for extra pectin
- combine good and poor setters (my father used to make strawberry and gooseberry jam; you could also try raspberry and redcurrant as a mix, or apple with late season blackberries)
- use less sugar per pound of fruit (see recipes)
- if desperate, add liquid pectin extract (anyone ever tried this?)

Testing for setting point

There are basically three ways to do this :

1. The cold plate test

- Take the jam pan off the hob and off the boil
 - Put a teaspoonful of jam without solid bits or jelly onto a cold plate and let it cool
 - Push it with your finger
 - If the surface wrinkles, setting point has been reached
- (too many solid bits in the test spoonful mean that your jam surface can wrinkle when it's not really yet set)

2. The wooden spoon test

- Dip the wooden spoon into the jam pan, and get a spoonful (not too much solid)
- Allow to cool
- Let the jam / jelly drip from it
- If the last drops don't fall but hang from the spoon, setting point has been reached.

3. Using a jam thermometer

The jam or jelly needs to boil at 222 degrees F (105 degrees C). I don't know whether this means for the whole time of boiling, or just that the jam / jelly needs to attain this temperature at some stage; never used this method myself. Anyone found this more useful / reliable than the other two methods?

Storing jam

Jams and jellies should be kept in a cool, dry, and preferably dark place. A pantry cupboard is ideal.

Some thoughts

All yields in the following recipes are approximate. All fruit cooking, and boiling to setting point times are approximate. Preserving is not an exact science. Use the evidence of your sense(s). Keep notes on what you've done (rather like a wine and beer cellarbook). Learn from your successes (though don't assume they can be exactly repeated), and from your mistakes - there's always next time. Jam and jelly is rarely totally inedible. If it won't set, it's not the end of the world. Jam that hasn't set properly is fine for putting in a trifle or in the bottom of a Bakewell pudding, or for spooning over ice cream (or mixing into home-made ice cream as a flavour). Jelly that won't set can be used as a sauce or syrup, or the basis for a summer cordial or winter hot drink (hot elderberry with lemon juice, cloves, and possibly whisky for colds, sore throats, chills and flu).

Happy preserving !

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