Pickling and curing. Originating as a means to prevent food from spoiling in prerefrigeration days, curing and pickling techniques create distinctive characteristics in all manner of produce and meats. Consider classic bread-and-butter pickles , which gain a sweet-savory-tangy taste from soaking in a vinegar brine, or Swedish gravlax , a dish where a salt-sugar cure creates buttery, melt-

in-your-mouth paper-thin slices of fish. While traditional canning for pickled foods requires sterilized jars and steam pots, here we offer a simpler refrigerator method that doesn't use any special equipment. Nor do our cured fish and poultry recipes, which involve only salt and time. With our streamlined techniques, you can preserve brilliant summer produce and create classic cured

meats.

A few words about salt

Salt is essential to cured and pickled foods—to wilt the vegetables, inhibit bacterial growth, or to create the characteristic texture—so these items are naturally high in sodium. The sodium content of our pickles and cured foods is comparable to or lower than their commercial counterparts.

Balance these higher-sodium foods with minimally seasoned ones.

Curing, defined

Curing is a method of preserving food (usually meat or fish) to prevent spoilage. Food can be cured by brining (soaking food in a saltwater solution), smoking, or salting (packing food in salt)—we focus on salting here, which is easy to do at home. Curing has long been a way to make perishable, protein-

rich foods last from barn to market, as in the case of bacon and prosciutto, or from shore to home, as in the case of salt cod or kippered herring.

What salt-curing does

The salt works on at least three fronts. First, it inhibits bacterial growth, thereby preserving foods like duck breasts or salmon for moderate lengths of time. That said, the

salt doesn't inhibit all bacterial growth. Instead it allows for a moderate amount of fermentation—and thus the meat ends up with a mild, somewhat sweet twang, usually no more than a hint in the overall taste. Second, salt breaks down protein in muscle fibers so the meat or fish is more tender—as is evidenced in gravlax, corned beef brisket, or kosher chickens. Finally, salt can be

used as a dehydrating agent, which creates dense and chewy but nonetheless tender meat or fish—the signature texture of ham, lox, or bacon.

Best bets for curing

In general, meat and fish are the best options, particularly those cuts and varieties that are relatively high in fat: brisket, duck, ham, and salmon, to name a few. Already-tender cuts or fillets like tenderloin or shrimp

would gain little from the salt cure, no more than a strange aftertaste. Plus these would quickly turn too soft from the salt's action.

Most vegetables benefit little from a salt cure—except for those with very high water concentrations

like cabbage, cucumber, and eggplant. Once these foods are salted, they release much of their liquid and are then suitable for sauces, relishes, and the like. If not presalted, they would release liquid into the dish and water down the taste.

Curing time

Fish like salmon or halibut is cured for 24 to 48 hours, depending on how firm the flesh is. Meats like brisket or duck breasts are

cured for longer periods; their muscular structures are more resilient to the salt's action. With meat, the larger the cut, the longer the cure. But timing is crucial. Too little time in the salt, and the fish or meat will not be adequately tenderized; too long, and the whole thing will turn unappealingly soft and mushy. So it's important to use the times specified in the recipes.

Shelf life

Because our home-cured meat and fish recipes use lower salt concentrations for a shorter time, and because they don't use nitrates (preservative chemical compounds used in many commercial products), they have a shorter shelf life than commercially cured foods. Nitrate-free cured meat or fish will last three to five days tightly

covered in the refrigerator.

Pickling, defined

To pickle food is to preserve it by immersing it in a seasoned vinegar-based solution (often referred to as a brine). Flavors can be salty, sweet, or hot.

Pour some soap in your toilet

This is why you should regularly pour some dish soap in your toilet

Tips and Tricks

Open

What pickling does
This technique encourages certain naturally occurring and harmless microbes to feed on the sugars produced as the food's proteins break down in the presence of salt. These microbes

produce lactic acid, carbon dioxide, and even alcohol—compounds which in turn help preserve the food. Also, these helpful microbes leave most of the beneficial vitamins and minerals intact and further enhance the taste of the food preserved. In other words, the food is still nutritious and tasty weeks later. That's why it's a great way to preserve summer produce.

Sugar Does Miracles In Garden
2-Minute Read
Tips and Tricks

Open

Best bets for pickling
Sturdy vegetables work best—cabbage, cucumbers, olives, radishes, carrots, green beans, onions,

and asparagus. Most fruits and many leafy greens simply wilt and break down too far.

Pickling time

Depending on the ingredients in the pickling liquid, food can be pickled in as little as a few hours or can take as long as a week or more.

Shelf life

Keep pickled vegetables in the refrigerator for a couple of weeks (or possibly longer).

Store in a nonreactive container—glass or plastic works well—to prevent discoloration and "off" flavor. To ensure freshness, make sure all the vegetables are fully submerged in the liquid and that the head space in the storage container does not allow for much air. As you consume pickles from the jar, change to progressively smaller containers, always tightly sealed for cold storage. If

some of the pickling solution has been lost over time, add a little water so everything is well covered.

Refrigerator pickling
Before the days of refrigeration, pickling was hot work—a huge pot of boiling water billowing clouds of steam through the kitchen. Refrigerator pickling takes away the need for kettle steamers, special jars, and vacuum-tight lids.

The chilly environment of the refrigerator impedes bacterial growth without your having to boil out excess air in vacuum-sealed jars. In other words, simply follow the recipe and let the cool refrigerator stand in for the boiling vat.