

THE HOME ARTISAN BAR

Chapter 3: Garnishes

A garnish is a decorative item used in food or drink that can be either a visual cue or a flavor enhancer. These are generally smaller elements of the overall dish or drink, but their presence as a contrasting or complementing color or flavor can bring it all together. Some examples include: olives in a martini, chives on top of a baked potato, a tropical umbrella on a Mai Tai, a cherry on a sundae or in a Shirley Temple, parsley on an egg dish, or the endless items you can fit into a Bloody Mary. If you think about these garnishes, some bring an element of flavor that would be completely absent if it were omitted, like the olives in a martini. In the martini's case, the olive garnish is what makes the drink. The tropical umbrella in the Mai Tai, obviously not meant for consumption, serves a completely different purpose: it sets the mood for the cocktail before you even sample it.

The olive and umbrella are examples of edible and non-edible garnishes that can be used together or separately in your drinks. In this chapter, we will examine edible garnishes and how those can be manipulated and custom made to your liking. On their own, garnishes also make terrific gifts.

In this chapter you'll learn:

- What a garnish is
- Dehydration
- Why citrus peels matter
- How to use salt and sugar creatively in a garnish
- Basic pickling technique
- Basic sweet preserving techniques
- Tips
- Recipes



CITRUS PEEL

It may seem like a citrus peel on the top of a cocktail is just a nice decoration symbolizing the juice that is in the beverage. However, peels have a very subtle but important part in cocktails and you can utilize them like the professionals once you understand the role of peels and their uses.

With the exception of the kumquat (or other small citrus fruits), you rarely eat the peel — it's far too oily and bitter to eat alone. The bitter nature of the peel makes its application slightly different. The outermost part of the peel (the part that has the color) is filled with essential oils that are like an up-close snapshot of the fruit. The peel is very aromatic and using these oils in drinks heightens the aroma of a beverage. To see how the peel works in a drink, taste the drink without the use of a peel then add the peel using the steps below and take a sip.

Tips for Using Peels:

- Before you peel the citrus, make sure that you gently wash the fruit. Don't scrub it hard or you will lose all of the important oils. Gently dry.
- Using a vegetable peeler, slowly peel the upper skin of the fruit. Try not to have any of the pith (white part) in your peel as that will add bitter notes. I like to use a horizontal peeler, which is included in the class kit. However, any peeler that gets the job done is fine.
- Twist the peel over the drink. If you look closely you will see the oils dash from the peel. Make sure that you do this over the drink and then place the peel in the drink. The oils of the peel will flavor the drink further.
- Another option is to bend the peel length-wise, wipe the rim of the drink with the peel, then rest it on the glass. As you approach the glass to drink, your nose will come closer to the peel and the oils.
- To use the peel in this manner, it must be fresh and moist. Unfortunately, you cannot prep this too much or the peels will become dry and they won't be flexible. This doesn't mean that you have to throw them away though, because there are other ways to use them as you are about to learn.



DEHYDRATION

Dehydration is the oldest form of food preservation. Drying herbs, fish, meats and fruits was an essential skill for survival for many cultures and was an important part of people being able to settle in one place. So what does dried stuff have to do with wet drinks? Dried flowers, herbs and peels can be used as flavor enhancers to salt and sugar, which can be used to flavor drinks or typically the rim of a drink. They also make great culinary additions that can lend to playful pairings of drinks and food with the flavored salt or sugar as the common thread.

NOTE: This section is just for drying citrus and herbs — very simple items. Do not use this section as a primer for all dehydration. Consult the Center for Home Food Preservation if you wish to learn more about drying other things like meats etc.

Methods: There are 3 basic ways to dehydrate food.

Electric dehydrator: These are great machines if you are really into dehydrating, but not suggested if this workshop is the only time you will use one. They can be expensive and they take up quite a bit of energy but you can do some next-level projects like fruit leathers easily with one. Brands include Presto or Excalibur among others.

Sun drying: It never went out of fashion. You can dry herbs by placing them upside-down in a paper bag (with holes in the bag — remember air circulation) and hanging it in a sunny space. I have even placed a baking tray with a drying rack (see below image from my oven) in the dashboard of my car on a summer day. Talk about easy!

Oven drying: This is my main method to dehydrate. I have a 1950s-era gas stove and the pilots for the oven are always on, creating a very warm and constant internal temperature that is perfect for drying foods. You don't need an old oven, though. Set your oven to its lowest temperature (120-150 degrees) and leave the door slightly ajar for air circulation. I have a baking sheet with a cooking rack on top and place the items on top.

The important things to remember when drying food are:

1. There needs to be air circulation. You may need to rotate and flip items around to increase airflow and to facilitate even drying.
2. It needs to be warm — not hot — to dry food. Work with temperatures from 100-150 degrees. Turning up the temperature will not dehydrate food faster; you'll just burn things.
3. Properly dried foods have between 75 percent and 90 percent of the water removed. Items should be light and brittle, but not brown. When in doubt, keep dehydrating. See some of the comparison images to get an idea of what to look for.
4. Drying times really depend on how moist and how thick the item is and what method you are using. Little rosemary leaves will take a lot less time than a thick slice of fruit. Start your projects using thinly sliced items, record your times and methods, and proceed from there.

*The recipe download at the end of this chapter has a recipe for dried citrus peels.



SALT & SUGAR

I will talk about salt and sugar together since they have similar textures, applications and methods of infusing. The typical or maybe traditional use is the salted rim on the margarita, but now that you know how to dehydrate, things can get pretty interesting! Before we discuss adding flavor, I want to spend a moment discussing what I prefer to use.

Sea salt: For all of my cooking, preserving and food projects, the base salt that I use is unrefined sea salt without iodine. Iodine may alter preservation projects and is not necessary. I also use either small or medium grain flakes. You can always crush the grains in a food processor or spice grinder if you want them finer. It's versatile and the perfect all-around salt, in my opinion.

Celtic/grey sea salt: I use this salt, which is naturally harvested in areas near the Celtic Sea, as more of a finishing salt for cooking, but I like to mix smaller portions of it when doing salt mixes from time to time. It has a wetter feel and many have praised it for the high amount of trace elements. It is more expensive, but I have seen a number of fermenting fans use it as their primary salt for projects.

Himalayan pink salt: This is another wonderful salt that is mined from ancient salt beds (free from pollutants or impurities). It is also expensive, but I love to mix this salt in smaller quantities to add subtle depths of flavor. The pink hue is also attractive.

Black Hawaiian salt: This salt is beautiful and has activated charcoal in it. It is expensive as well, but is dramatic in both presentation and flavor. I use this on rare occasions.

Please don't think that you need to go out and buy all of these different salts for a project. This is what I have on hand and it's important to understand that the typical "salt on the rim" can actually be interesting even if you're just using salt alone. Just mixing the above can yield a beautiful garnish, but remember to use the more expensive ones in lesser quantities.

As for sugar, I primarily use organic, unrefined cane sugar. It has a very subtle richness and is a little different than traditional white sugar.

There are two ways that I prefer to infuse flavor into salt or sugar. Both are easy and use dehydration techniques.

1. Dehydrate the item you want to flavor the salt/sugar. Grind into a fine powder using a spice grinder. Mix into salt or sugar.
2. Add the fresh item into a food processor and pulse for a minute, add salt/sugar and pulse again until item is fully mixed with the flavoring item. Place on a baking sheet that is lined with parchment paper and place in an oven set on low to dry for six hours.

*The recipe download at the end of this chapter has recipes for Wine Salt, Celery Salt and Hot Citrus Sugar or Salt.



PICKLES

Preserving with vinegar is a great way to add unique garnishes to drinks. Vinegar creates an acidic environment, where harmful bacteria cannot grow, imparts that tart flavor you have in pickles, and is a vessel to infuse herbs and spices. We will be dealing with “quick pickles” or “refrigerated pickles” — as opposed to canning techniques, which are a class on their own. Quick pickles impart the same flavor as canned pickles except they taste fresher and are ready in less time. But they must be stored in the refrigerator, not the pantry.

The basic pickle recipe consists of five components:

Vinegar:

For most projects, I prefer organic cider vinegar with live cultures from Braggs. Even though boiling the vinegar will destroy any live cultures in the vinegar, you can make “raw” pickles without heating the vinegar so you can enjoy the health benefits of live culture vinegar (see recipe download at the end of the chapter). It is advised that you work with vinegars with a 4-6% acidity for quick pickles and to never dilute the vinegar solution more than 50%. The vinegar is there as a preservative. Weakening the solution will make it susceptible to contamination. Since these pickles are “quick,” I highly suggest minimal dilution of the vinegar. These recipes are for small batches and the “curing” of the vegetable will take longer if the vinegar is diluted. You can experiment with recipes by simply changing up the vinegar. Red wine, champagne, malt, rice wine and balsamic are all types of vinegars you can play with. However, avoid homemade vinegar unless you can test the acidity.

Salt and sugar:

Both are not necessary, but they can develop more complex flavors in pickles. Salt (no iodine!) in small quantities highlights tart flavors and the flavor of the vegetable. Sugar, on the other hand, will calm the vinegar flavor, so it is not as tart. Use both in small quantities.

Produce:

Yes, you can pickle fruit. The flavors of pickled fruit are a mix of sweet and tangy. Pretty much anything can be pickled.

Here are a few tips on produce:

1. Make sure that the produce is fresh and ripe but not soft or blemished — those areas are already turning bad, so you don't want to preserve them. My golden rule: “When in doubt, throw/cut it out!”
2. Wash produce, but don't soak things, as water absorbed by the produce will weaken any pickling flavors.
3. Keep in mind the overall softness of the produce. If you want a crispy cucumber, for example, slicing it thin and pouring hot brine over it would result in a flimsy and soft pickle. Pay attention to how dense the produce that you are working with is and act accordingly. See method below for details.
4. “Blossom end” of produce: I avoid the area of produce where the item was picked from. A perfect example is a zucchini. Cut off the very top end of the squash (the wrinkly tip) as this area is usually the first to go bad because it has been cut from the plant and has been exposed to the air.



Herbs and spices:

Herbs and spices lend subtle yet remarkable flavors to not only the pickle but to the brine itself, which can have multiple uses. Use fresh and whole spices. Yes, even dried spices can be old after a period of time. Avoid grinding spices, as that will make their flavor extra potent and may dominate the entire flavor profile.

Common herbs and spices in pickles include:

Whole spices: Coriander, peppercorn, mustard, cinnamon, bay leaf, allspice berries, dill seed, celery seed, clove, juniper berries.

Herbs fresh or dried: Rosemary, oregano, whole dried peppers, dill fronds, garlic, lavender, tarragon, thyme.

Equipment:

Vinegar is acidic, so it is important to use non-reactive cooking and storage items that will not react to the acid. Failure to do so will lead to discoloration and altered taste. To heat your vinegar solution, use stainless steel or enameled cast iron, and for storing your pickles, use glass or food-grade plastic.

Method:

There are two ways to produce a quick pickle — cold pack and hot pack. These terms are slightly different if you “can” a pickle, so just use this method for quick pickle preparation.

Hot pack: Put the produce into a warm clean jar, packing as much as possible with any fresh herbs and garlic if you choose to use them. Separately, take the vinegar, salt/sugar and spices in a non-reactive pot to boil. Pour over the produce and allow it to cool on the counter. Place a lid on the jar and move to the refrigerator to cure for a few days. This procedure is preferred for hardier veggies like carrots, beets, asparagus, cherries and green beans.

Cold pack: I rarely use this method, though I prefer it for quick pickling “softer” produce like cucumbers, soft ripe peppers that have been cut, and tomatoes. Pack the jar with produce along with fresh herbs/garlic, if you wish, and spices. Pour cold vinegar on top until full and secure with lid. Place in the fridge to cure for at least two days before tasting. Pickling will become stronger over time.

*The recipe download at the end of this chapter has recipes for Bloody Mary Green Beans or Asparagus, Pickled Peppers, Pickled Pepper Hot Sauce, Cocktail Onions, Herbs de Provence Raw Cucumber Pickles and Pickled Cherries.



PRESERVES

The preserve is a method of preservation that cures produce (fruit in particular) in a sweet syrup. This is NOT a jam/jelly/marmalade — the idea is to keep the fruit as whole as possible. A popular preserve is the Maraschino cherry, which traditionally uses Bing cherries preserved in sugar and maraschino liquor. I love to use preserves in cocktails. Not only is it fun to make your own cherries, but using preserved stone fruits adds the rich flavors of summer to drinks that is unlike anything you will try. Use preserves as a garnish, but also to flavor drinks by muddling fruit into the drink or by using the preserving liquid to sweeten cocktails.

Preserving tips:

1. It is always best to work with peak-of-season produce. I encourage visiting your local farmers' market regularly and trying different fruits and vegetables.
2. Always check your produce before any preservation project. Look for blemishes, soft or discolored areas, and remove those areas or discard the item if it's not salvageable.
3. Garnishes have a bigger role than just being on the side of a drink. Use flavored salts for cooking or flavored sugars for baking. Pickles make fantastic sides on cheese plates and preserves are delicious on ice cream or pastries.
4. Keep track of your projects in a notebook. Note curing times and taste differences, consistency and textures of products and any changes that you have made to a recipe with the final outcome.
5. As I've said many times, label and date all of your projects. You may remember the item and date while you are making them, but later you'll forget. Labeling the jar makes it easy to tell when things are ready to consume or past their prime.

