

Preserved Lemons

Everyone needs a few culinary tricks up their sleeve—or, better yet, in their refrigerator. If you live in a metropolitan area with lots of ethnic shops, you'll be able to find these lemons already cured. Living far from those stores, we make our own—big jars of them that last us throughout the year. And it is so well worth it. These golden treasures are money in the bank as their deep salty-sour flavor can brighten up practically any dish. Actually, we have to restrain ourselves from using them in just about everything.

We like to use Meyer lemons, a sweet, thin-skinned variety (most likely a cross between a mandarin orange and a true lemon). You'll find them in the market from fall through spring. But any variety of lemon will do. In fact, a thicker-skinned lemon is the traditional choice in Morocco, where this pickling method originated.

Preserved lemons are typically rinsed before they are added to stews, tagines, soups, and couscous dishes. Only the rind is used and the pulpy flesh gets discarded. When our own preserved lemons are still new (aged between one month and about six months), we use both rind and flesh, not even bothering to rinse the lemons. The salty brine softens the rind until it is almost translucent and makes the flesh plump and supple. The longer the lemons cure, the saltier they get, so taste them first to decide how you will cook with them. Preserved lemons will last up to 1 year in the fridge.

Lemons, washed

Kosher salt

Sterilized wide-mouth container with a tight-fitting lid

Cut the lemons (almost all the way through) into quarters, keeping them attached at the stem end. Working over a bowl, tamp the inside of each lemon with salt. Tightly pack the salt-filled lemons into the sterilized container. Pour more salt over the lemons as you fill the container. Cover the salt-packed lemons with freshly squeezed lemon juice.

Store in the refrigerator. Turn the container occasionally for the first few weeks to moisten all the lemons with the ever-accumulating salty brine. The lemons should eventually become submerged in this brine. If the brine doesn't completely cover them after a month, use a metal kitchen spoon to gently press the lemons under the surface.

Recipe adapted from Canal House Cooking, Volume N° 1

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