OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY Extension Service

Food Safety & Preservation:

Low Sugar Jams & Jellies/Fruit Spreads

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Low or no sugar added fruit spreads

Low and no sugar jams and jellies are becoming very popular as people are changing their diets and reducing their intake of sugar. Traditional jam and jelly recipes call for a substantial amount of sugar so that the products jelled, or thickened. The sugar also acted as a preservative, so the products could be stored for long periods of time without spoiling. However, over the past few years, many commercial pectin products have been developed for successfully making low or no sugar fruit spreads at home. It's important to use one of the commercial pectin products meant for low or no sugar rather than reducing the amount of sugar called for in regular jam and jelly recipes for the product to thicken.

These newer, specially modified products are labeled as "light," "less sugar needed," or "no sugar needed." The pectin package will come with recipes that give options for using less sugar, no sugar, or alternative sweeteners, such as sucralose. Some of the products have instructions for using honey or agave as a sweetener. Be sure to check the package for the specific options offered by that pectin product and follow the manufacturer's directions that come with the product. Using these pectin-added methods allows you to process the jars of jams and jellies and store your reduced-sugar product at room temperature. Products made with Clear-Jel* or gelatin as a thickener would need to be refrigerated.

Low-Methoxyl Pectin

Low-methoxyl pectins are natural pectic substances derived from citrus fruits. While regular pectins depend on sugar and acid to form a gel, low-methoxyl pectin forms a bond with calcium ions in the absence of sugar and acid. The commercial pectin products on the market include a form of calcium in a separate packet in the package. If purchasing bulk low-methoxyl pectin marketed in health food stores, you need to be sure to purchase both the pectin and the calcium product needed to mix with it. When using these products, it is important to follow the manufacturer's directions that come with the product.

Natural sweeteners - To make an all fruit spread without added sugar, you can use concentrated, frozen, white grape or apple juice as the natural sweetener. For every 3 cups of crushed fruit or juice, add 1 cup of concentrated fruit juice. The amount of concentrate can be adjusted to suit your taste.

Note: You'll need to read the labels on the fruit juice concentrate. Some products have fructose or other sweeteners added, where others are all natural fruit juice. Different brands also have different degrees of sweetness.

Artificial sweeteners - People on therapeutic diets (such as diabetics) should check low-sugar jam instruction sheets or sugar substitute package labels for information on artificial sweetener use.

Preparing and Processing

Follow the preparation instructions in the pectin package. Process low and no sugar spreads in a boiling water canner for 10 minutes. After the product is opened, it should be stored in the refrigerator.

Caution: Low sugar spreads should only be made from fruits (which contain acid), since these products don't include enough sugar to act as a preservative.

Other Low Sugar Spread Alternatives

Fruit spreads using Clear-Jel* - When making fruit spreads thickened with Clear-Jel, make small batches and store in the refrigerator.

Basic Recipe
¼ cup plus 1 Tablespoon Clear-Jel
½-1 cup sugar (more or less depending on sweetness desired)
2 cups crushed fruit or juice
1 Tablespoon bottled lemon juice

Mix sugar and Clear-Jel. If sugar is omitted, mix Clear-Jel with a small amount of cold fruit juice in a blender. Combine the sugar mixture with the fruit or juice in a large saucepan. Cook on high heat until mixture comes to a boil, stirring constantly. Add lemon juice and boil for 1 minute. Pour into half-pint or pint jars. Let cool and store in the refrigerator.

Note: If the mixture is too thick, add a small amount of juice; if too thin, mix a little more Clear-Jel with a small amount of cold juice or water and add to the mixture. Bring to a boil. The spread will thicken as it cooks. You can gauge the thickness as the fruit spread is cooking.

For a no sugar spread, concentrated fruit juice can be used in place of some of the juice in the recipe.

*Clear-Jel is a waxy cornstarch that has been chemically modified to produce a good consistency even after heating. Ask your county Extension office about the availability of regular (not instant) Clear-Jel in your area.

Fruit spreads thickened with gelatin - Unflavored gelatin can be used to thicken fruit pulp or juice to make unsweetened jams and jellies. These products have a texture similar to gelatin desserts. They must be stored in the refrigerator and used within a month. Do not process jams and jellies made with gelatin.

Basic Recipe (makes 1 pint)
1½ teaspoon unflavored gelatin
1½ Tablespoon cold water
3 cups crushed prepared fruit
1 Tablespoon lemon juice
Sugar or honey can be added to taste.

Soften gelatin in cold water. Combine fruit and sweeteners in a sauce pan. Place over high heat and stir constantly until mixture comes to a boil. Remove from heat, add softened gelatin; return to heat and continue to cook for 1 minute. Remove from heat; blend in lemon juice. Ladle into clean jars. When cool, store in refrigerator and use within a month.

Source: OSU Master Food Preserver Program

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