Salsa – Preparing and Preserving at Home

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Salsa is considered a condiment to enhance the flavor of tortilla chips and Mexican dishes. Derived from the Spanish word for “sauce”, salsa is traditionally made from tomatoes or tomatillos, onions, and chili peppers seasoned with cilantro, lime juice, and salt. “Salsa” is now made from any combination of vegetables and fruits.

Fresh salsa is meant to eaten immediately. Fresh salsa can be purchased at markets and is found in the refrigerated section. Salsa is also available commercially cooked and canned, resulting in a much longer shelf life.

If you have an abundance of produce and want to preserve salsa for later consumption, there are a couple of key points to consider. You may have created a delicious recipe for salsa or gotten a recipe from a friend, but that doesn’t mean that product can be safely preserved at home! Salsa is a mixture of acid and non-acid ingredients and cannot be safely canned in a boiling water bath unless you are using a tested recipe that maintains a safe acid level that does not allow the growth of potentially hazardous organisms that can cause food borne illness. The National Center for Home Food Preservation has numerous tested recipes for salsa available at http://www.uga.edu/nchfp/how/can_salsa.html.

Home food preservation can be done safely as long as one uses approved methods and equipment. An approved recipe has been tested for safety by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to ensure adequate acidity levels and heat penetration throughout the canning process and during the product’s shelf life. These food product testing procedures are not available to the home food preserver. Therefore, it is important to use an approved recipe for safety.

Traditional salsa has a mix of acid ingredients like tomatoes, tomatillos, or fruit and non-acid ingredients like onions, peppers (sweet/hot), spices, and herbs. To preserve salsa, follow an approved recipe and do not add more non-acid ingredients than the recipe calls for because it will change the pH level of the product and may make it unsafe to can using the boiling water bath canning process. Salsa can also be safely frozen. Here are a few hints when making salsa:

- Use the amount of acid – commercially bottled lemon or lime juice or vinegar called for in the recipe. Bottled lemon juice can be substituted for vinegar in a recipe. DO NOT substitute vinegar for lemon juice as this will result in a less acid product which could result in a potentially unsafe canned product.
- Onions and other vegetables (other than tomatoes) are low in acid. Therefore, do NOT add more onions or other vegetables (other than tomatoes) to the salsa than the recipe calls for as this will make the product less acidic. If
the product is lower in acid, it will need to be canned in a pressure canner to reach a high enough temperature to destroy any potentially harmful pathogens, unless the addition of sufficient acid is made.

- Paste tomatoes have a firmer flesh and less seeds and will yield a thicker salsa.
- If recipe calls for peeled tomatoes, dip tomatoes in boiling water for 30-60 seconds or until the skins split. Dip tomatoes in cold water and remove skins.
- Do not squeeze or drain tomatoes unless recipe specifically says to do so. The liquid actually contains acid that is needed in the recipe.
- Tested recipes for salsa tend to be watery. Do not drain before processing. When ready to serve the salsa can be drained if desired.
- Do not thicken salsa with cornstarch, flour, or other starches before canning. The salsa can be thickened after opening if desired.
- One type of pepper can be substituted for another. If you do not want to use hot peppers, you can substitute sweet peppers or vice versa. The key is not to increase the total amount (pounds or cups) of peppers called for in the recipe as this can change the acid level of the final product. Do not substitute the same number of whole peppers of a large size for the same number of peppers of a smaller size. For example 3 large bell peppers in place of 3 jalapenos or serranos is not an equal substitution in cups chopped or weight or volume.
- If you use hot peppers, be sure to wear plastic or rubber gloves and do not touch your face or eyes while handling or cutting hot peppers. If you do not wear gloves, wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water before touching you face or eyes.
- Salsa can be frozen. Pack fresh salsa in a freezer container. Leave head space so the product can expend as it freezes. Freezing can affect the texture and flavor of the product. Some people prefer to add fresh herbs or spices to frozen salsa at serving time.

The most time consuming part of making salsa is the preparation and chopping of the tomatoes and vegetables. You can use a food processor or blender, but be careful about over processing as you will end up with puree instead of chunks. Also, tested recipes usually specify the size of the chopped ingredient. Chopping into smaller pieces than specified can result in a greater volume which can change the acidity level of the recipe.

Other useful resources:

- Canning salsa and tested recipes: http://www.uga.edu/nchfp/how/can_salsa.html

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Fact sheet prepared by: Dianne Lamb, MEED, UVM Extension Nutrition and Food Specialist, UVM Extension Associate Professor Emerita

Fact sheet reviewed by: Dr. Londa Nwadike, UVM Extension Food Safety Specialist Londa.nwadike@uvm.edu; tel:802-223-2389; 617 Comstock Road, Berlin, VT 05602


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