

The Oregonian

Summer in a jar

by Lynne Sampson Curry, special to The Oregonian

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Fresh cherries preserved in simple flavored syrup mean you'll enjoy the real thing for months to come



Ross William Hamilton/The Oregonian

Cherry-flavored cough syrup, jelly beans and Jolly Ranchers are sorry attempts to capture the tastes of our favorite fleeting fruit. When sweet cherries surge into the market in early summer, we gorge on them, because once these luscious stone fruits are gone they're gone.

Even without a late-spring frost like the one that decimated the harvest in 2008, the cherry crop is touch and go. A hard rain can bruise cherries' taut yet tender skins, ravaging an already limited supply. So this year, I found myself wishing for a long string of sunny days and racking my brain for ideas to extend the cherry eating season.

I remembered a homemade dinner in France where the hosts offered cherries in brandy for dessert -- in October. Pleasingly boozy, the plump, sweet red cherries still snapped to the bite. We sipped the cherry-infused liqueur and nibbled the cherries, spitting out the pits, just like they were fresh.

The trouble with preserving sweet cherries is that standard heat-based methods undermine their best just-picked qualities. (Sour cherries are much better suited to cooking and preserving for pies and the like.) Poaching the cherries in a liquid -- anything from vanilla syrup to balsamic vinegar -- keeps them firm and releases just a little of their juice, and many sweet cherry recipes call for this slow, simmering technique.

In order to keep them as fresh-tasting as possible, I took it a step further: I opted to steep the cherries by pouring hot liquid over the stemmed fruits and letting them cool to mingle the flavors. By storing these fresh preserves in the fridge, I figured I'd have the foundation for breezy desserts all the way into fall.



Ross William Hamilton/The Oregonian Fresh

Cherries stand ready to receive delicate syrups made with rose, amaretto or kirsch, which will allow you to stash them in the fridge for easy and elegant desserts for months to come.

Oregon ranks second only to Washington (and in some years California) in sweet cherry production. So we have first dibs on the many varieties of reds other than Bings. Lambert, Van, Chelan and Sweetheart are some of the

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other burgundy-fleshed cherries to be found at farmers markets, along with the ever-popular white cherry, Rainier.

As with any preserving, choose unblemished fruit. Also, a green stem is the best indicator of freshness. To pit or not is your own preference. I invested in a low-cost, hand-operated pitter from the hardware store. It punches out the pits (most of them anyway, so always warn guests) and does the job in a jiffy.

Unlike the hours needed for canning, this steeping process takes only as long as the liquid needs to come to a boil and simmer briefly. The question of which liquids to use came easy once I determined that I wanted to use my preserves principally for oven-free desserts for entertaining, like cherries over store-bought vanilla ice cream and poundcake.

Once I had quart canning jars packed with cherries submerged in libations including amaretto, dark chocolate and rose wine, my imagination ran wild. I envisioned a summer of serving steeped cherries over everything from French toast to cheesecake.

It's best to hold off serving your sweet cherry stash for two days. Then, store it in the refrigerator for up to three months. You may want to strategically locate them behind the olives and mayonnaise. Otherwise, you'll be as tempted as I am to sneak a few cherries into your mouth anytime you like.

Until they run out, you won't have to be satisfied with imitation cherry-flavored anything at all.

Lynne Sampson Curry is a writer and culinary professional living in Joseph who blogs at www.ruraleating.blogspot.com.