

Tips to help your preserves keep well.

It is hard work making preserves, and there is nothing more frustrating than finding they don't keep well. The following tips may help.

Make sure your jars are thoroughly clean and drained dry. It is best not to use a tea towel. Then sterilise them in the oven. A favourite method is to stand the dry jars right way up on a baking tray, and let them heat on a very low temperature for around 15 minutes to bring them to around 80c. They will be too hot to touch. Keep them in the oven until you are ready to pot,

The preserves are best potted hot. Take care to avoid splashes. A good jug, a ladle, a jam funnel (you might need a selection to fit different jars) and a spoon to help guide the preserve as you pour it can all help. Also a good plan to have kitchen towels handy to wipe any drips or splashes as you go.

Do you need wax discs?

Wax discs were an essential stage of trying to keep preserves air tight, if you were depending on traditional cellophane covers, but there are better options. If you have the correctly fitting screw top lids, with an integral plastic inner lining, or the traditional Kilner type jars with a rubber ring and wire clips, then the wax disc is not needed, and can actually create problems. It can trap condensation under the disk, and prevent the heat of the preserve from sterilising the air space.

Handling and sealing hot jars.

It is tricky handling hot jars with hot liquids. Make sure you have the right lids, which should be clean and dry and free of any damage before you begin potting. If you are not going to invert the jars or use a water bath then you will need to sterilise the lids as well as the jars. It can take practice to get the lid to screw on correctly. Getting the right degree of twist can be easier if you use a heat proof silicone trivet, (the soft waffle ones are ideal) to hold the jar whilst you screw on the lid.

What about the air space?

The most vulnerable part in a jar of jam is the air space between the top of the jam and the lid. It is a good plan to fill the jar as full as possible to keep the air space and the natural yeasts that will be present to the minimum.

You can take steps to sterilise the air space. If everything is at around 82c – the jar, the content and the lid, and if you seal the jar as soon as it is filled then the air space should be fairly sterile. There are two good ways of improving this. Some writers advise turning the jar upside down for around 10 minutes. The heat of the jar will help to sterilise the lid and the air space. If you do this remember to turn the jar the right way up before the preserve starts to set!

A lot of American cookery writers advise finishing the preserves in a water bath. If you have a large vat, with a lid, and a rack to keep the jars off the bottom then you can heat water, transfer the hot sealed jars on to the rack so that they are just covered, and bring them to 82c. Keep them at this temperature for 30 minutes. This is a very effective method, and providing your preserve has the correct balance of sugar and acidity, and that the lid is undamaged the preserve should keep very well.