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Brandied Apricots

Sometimes I wish I was a poet. Then I could truly express the exquisite taste of my favorite fruit, apricots.

It is hard for me to make anything other than plain, unadulterated apricot jam. It is so perfect in and of itself. However, I know you come here for more than the basics so I will to go beyond (er, around) perfect and give you something a little more creative. How about Brandied Apricot Preserves?

What is a preserve, anyway?

A preserve is a soft spread in which the fruit is preserved with sugar so it retains its shape and is transparent, shiny, tender and plump. The syrup varies from the thickness of honey to that of soft jelly. A true preserve does not hold its shape when spooned from the jar.

- 5 cups sliced pitted fresh apricots
- 2 cups chopped cored peeled tart apples
- 2 cups granulated sugar
- ½ cup liquid honey
- 2 Tbsp lemon juice
- 1 cup brandy

In a large stainless steel saucepan , combine apricots, apples, sugar, honey, and lemon juice. Stir to mix well. Cover and let stand at room temperature for 40 minutes.
Meanwhile, prepare canner, lids and jars.

Bring reserved apricot mixture to a boil over medium heat, stirring to dissolve sugar. Reduce heat and boil gently, stirring frequently, until mixture thickens, about 25 minutes. Remove from heat and test gel (read more below). If gel stage has been reached, skim off foam. Stir in brandy and return to medium heat. Boil gently, stirring constantly, for 5 minutes. Remove from heat and skim off foam.

Ladle hot preserves into hot jars leaving ¼ ‘ headspace. Remove air bubbles and adjust headspace, if necessary, by adding more hot preserves. Wipe rim. Center lid on jar. Screw band down until resistance is met, then increase to finger-tip tight.

Process in a boiling water or atmospheric steam canner for: 0-6000 ft. = 10 minutes, above 6000 ft. = 15 minutes.

For boiling water canning, turn off the heat, remove canner lid and wait 5 minutes. For atmospheric steam canning, turn off the heat, leave canner lid on and wait 2-3 minutes.

Check lids for seal after 24 hours. Lid should not flex up and down when center is pressed. Label and store in a cool, dry place.

Tip: Allowing fruit-sugar mixture to stand releases the fruit’s natural juices. It also firms the remaining fruit solids and helps them retain their shape in the thick gel, creating a preserve.

Source: Ball Complete Book of Home Preserving

"Gel Point" Explained

partly from the Ball website (freshpreserving.com) and partly from me (sb)

As the preserving season progresses it is important that you understand what gel point means and why you need to know about it.

Gel Point comes into play when you are making jams without pectin (cook-down method), soft spreads, preserves, syrups and candies.

There are three tests you can perform to ensure your soft spread made without the use of commercial pectin has reached the gel stage.

Temperature Test Cook the soft spread until it reaches a temperature of 220°F, or 8°F above the boiling point of water (this is important if you have to adjust for altitude). Measure the temperature of

soft spreads with a candy or jelly thermometer. Always insert the thermometer vertically into the soft spread and ensure that it does not contact the surface of the pot.

Let's go back to that gel point temperature for a minute. It is important that you know at what temperature water boils in your particular area. Before you start a project involving gel point, heat some water on the stove ***to a rolling boil***, insert a thermometer and note the temperature. Then, when you make your product add 8 degrees F. to the boiling temperature at your elevation.

For example: water boils at 204 degrees at my house. The gel point will then be 204 + 8 = 212 degrees F.

Got it? Ok!

So, that raises another question. If water boils at 204F at my house how the heck do I get it to boil at 212F? The answer is all about the sugar.

Now for the science. What you are doing is driving water out of the syrup (or jam) through evaporation, leaving behind molten sugar as an ever increasing percentage of the mixture as the water percentage diminishes. This makes the hotter than boiling water temperatures possible, and is also a gauge of both how cooked and how thick the syrup (or jam) is, as well as what the nature of the molten sugar will be when cooled.

Sheet Test Dip a cold metal spoon into the boiling soft spread. Lift the spoon and hold it horizontally with edge down so that the syrup runs off the edge. As the mixture cooks, the drops will become heavier and will drop off the spoon separately but two at a time. When the two drops join together and "sheet" off the spoon, the gel stage haven reached.

Refrigerator Test Chill two or three small saucers in the freezer. Place a teaspoonful of soft spread on the chilled saucer and place in the freezer for 1 minute. Remove the saucer from the freezer and push the edge of the spread with your finger. A mixture that has reached the gel stage will be set, and the surface will wrinkle when the edge is pushed. Note: To prevent over-cooking or scorching, remove the soft spread from the heat before performing this test.

If the test you performed shows that the gel stage has not been reached, return the mixture to the heat to cook for a few minutes longer, then retest the soft spread.