



CANDIED CHILLIES

Candying is one of the most ancient forms of preserving the harvest. When chillies are placed into a syrup and the sugar content is gradually increased, the pods cell liquid gets replaced by sugar. This migration through semipermeable cell walls is also called osmosis. Typically, 70 to 75 percent of the extracted cell liquid, mostly water, will be replaced by sugar, while shape, colour, and a good portion of the flavour will be preserved. That way candied chillies will keep almost indefinitely. The ways you can use these sweet peppers are almost limitless, and the same is true for a by-product of the process spicy syrup.

The process

Warning: candying chillies is not for the impatient

The process spreads over 6 days, taking about 30 minutes every day, not counting the time taken to clean up pots and utensils. So take your time and allow this to be a fun project.

What you will need

- Medium-sized saucepan
- Wooden spoon
- Mason jar (1 litre) or similar glass container with lid
- Small glass bowl that just fits into the opening of the jar, to hold down the chillies in the liquid
- One or two clean marmalade jars and lids
- Heat resistant strainer
- 500ml jars to keep excess syrup
- Cookie cooling rack
- Baking oven or electric dehydrator
- Old newspapers to put under pots and jars

Ingredients

- 350 grams of fresh chillies rinsed and cut in half or strips
- 1.2 kgs of regular white sugar
- 1 litre of water

The process

Day 1.

Start by preparing the peppers. As with all preserving techniques, use only the fresh spotless chillies. Rinse and pat dry. Cut the pods of thin-walled varieties such as habanero, cayenne, or Thai chillies in half to ease the syrup penetration, and deseed them. Fleshier chillies like Jalapenos are better cut into strips. Keep sections of chillies uniformed in size for each batch.

The syrup

In a large saucepan, combine the litre of water and 1kg of sugar. Using a wooden spoon, mix well, then bring to a rolling boil (lots of bubbling). Keep boiling and stirring until the mixture takes on a syrupy consistency but still stays clear and colourless. This takes about 30 minutes. If you are using a ceramic stove top watch out not to spill any of the syrup on it, as this stuff burns in fast. Put the cut chillies in the mason jar or other glass container and pour the boiling hot syrup over them. Leave enough room to put a small bowl as a weight on top to keep the chillies down under the syrup. Close the container and keep the remaining syrup in marmalade jar(s). Let the chillies sit in the closed container for 24 hours. To minimise spillage and mess place newspaper underneath your jars.

NOTE: It is easier to clean the pots and utensils before they cool down.

Day 2.

On the second day, drain the chillies in a strainer, letting the syrup flow into your saucepan. Put the chillies back into the glass container.

Bring the syrup to a boil and stir in an additional 50 grams of sugar. Add also the syrup you saved in the marmalade jars. Keep boiling at high heat and stirring with your wooden spoon for about 10 minutes. Pour the hot syrup over the chillies again and put the weight on them to keep them all covered in the liquid. Save the remaining syrup again. Let the chillies sit in their closed container for another 24 hours.

Day 3 to day 6.

Repeat the second day's procedure on days 3, 4, and 5, including the addition of 50 grams more sugar every day. Both the sugar addition and the reduction by cooking will cause the syrup to become thicker and thicker. As well it will be getting hotter as some of the capsaicin will dissolve into the syrup from the chillies. After day 5 let the chillies sit for 48 hours – day six you can have a rest.

Day 7.

Pour the syrup and chillies into a saucepan and bring to a brief boil for just 1 minute, then take off the heat. Drain the chillies through the strainer and catch the syrup in jars. There are great uses for the sticky spicy liquid as well.

Arrange the chillies on a cookie cooling rack, be sure to put newspaper underneath to catch drips of excess syrup. Let them sit for 2 hours.

Finish the sticky pieces off in the oven or a dehydrator (4 hours in the dehydrator). In the oven drying should take about 15 minutes at 120 degrees Celsius with the door slightly open. Check after 10 minutes, and the drying should be finished no later than another 10 to 15 minutes. (To keep the peppers as they are, the airflow and lower temperature offered by a dehydrator works best.)

Let the chillies cool to room temperature, store them in an airtight container. Flat containers like Tupperware or glassware allow you to place the pieces side by side rather than stacking them and potentially having them sticking together. If the chillies are still a little sticky, you can coat them with powdered sugar (also called confectioner's sugar).

Ideas and inspiration on using your candied chillies

- Spice up fruitcake, muffins, and other cakes
- Add to a cheese cake
- Decorate cakes, ice cream
- Cover in chocolate and enjoy a spicy snack

Suggestions for the syrup

- Sweeten tea or hot chocolate
- Use in cocktails
- Pour over waffles or pancakes
- Add to caramels, or butterscotch