



Grandma Helen's Kosher Dills
By Nan Sterman

My grandmother, Helen Miller, was born in Russia and immigrated to Chicago with her family when she was about 12 years old. She was a feisty woman who stood nearly 5' tall and spoke with a Russian accent. Had she been born 50 years later, she would have been a feminist. Instead, she lived in the flapper era and must have enjoyed some of that society since her engagement photo with my grandfather showed her in a stylish flapper dress, sporting a "spit curl" in the center of her forehead (surely my curly hair comes from her). Grandma Helen was famous for her cooking, which included a weekly batch of pickles when cucumbers were in season. When my siblings and I were small children, we frequently visited our grandparents at their apartment in Los Angeles. We'd run in, give them each a quick kiss, and then ask if there were any pickles!

INGREDIENTS:

1-2 large sprigs of fresh dill weed (avoid using dried dill)
5-6 cloves garlic, peeled and sliced in half lengthwise
Several tablespoons of pickling spices
2-3 whole, dried red peppers (skinny ones)
1 ½ cup kosher salt (*not* table salt)
5 pounds pickling cucumbers, washed well
2 cups white vinegar

Start with a 1-gallon GLASS jar (an old pickle jar is fine, or a canning jar with a rubber gasket in the lid). Wash the jar in hot, soapy water before you begin.

Place half of the garlic clove halves in the bottom of the jar, along with the pickling spices and dried peppers.

Holding the jar at a 45-degree angle, stack the cucumbers into jar, placed so they stand up when the bottle is upright, i.e. parallel with the sides of the jar. Most jars fit two layers of pickles this way. Place the lower layer into the jar first, and then add the salt. Use the vinegar to wash the salt down between the cucumbers. Add the next layer of cucumbers. You'll have to force the final ones into the jar, but that's okay.

Put the rest of garlic and the dill on top of the upper layer of cucumbers; that usually puts them at about rim level.



Set the jar under the tap and fill it with water. Just as it starts to overflow, quickly place the lid on the jar (see note about lining metal lids below). The goal is to submerge the cucumbers and spices, leaving as little airspace as possible.

Place the sealed jar on a counter, out of direct light, and let it sit several for days. Open daily to relieve the pressure and skim off any foam that develops. Invert the bottle every day or two to mix the liquid and ensure that the pickles cure evenly.

You'll see the cucumbers turn from bright green to olive green as they "turn" into pickles. Once the pickles are pickled enough for you, they are ready to eat. Store them in the refrigerator. They will keep for months and months.

NOTES:

If you use an old pickle jar with a metal lid, line the underside of the lid with plastic wrap to improve the seal and help keep the metal from corroding (which will happen eventually, regardless).

Select firm, small cucumbers with few blemishes.

Pickles turn olive green when they are done but since everyone has a different definition of "done," you'll have to taste them to decide when they are pickled enough for you.

Pickles turn faster in warm weather than in cool weather. Pickling may take three days in summer, and more than a week in winter.

After a few batches, start experimenting with the ratio of spices. Be careful not to overdo the garlic. On the other hand, don't skimp on the salt, since it helps keep the pickles crisp.

Dill freezes really well, so you can purchase it (or grow it in your garden) and store it for future use. To freeze dill, rinse it, blot to dry with paper towels or a tea towel, then freeze it in a zip-top bag. Don't thaw before using it. Just add the frozen dill to whatever you are cooking, as if it were fresh. (Parsley freezes well, too, but not cilantro).

