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## ARTISANS

BY RACHEL WHARTON

# WHAT'S IN THE JAR?

*Mastering the easy (and hard) art of the pickle.*



What is it like to run a pickle business? Ask Rick Field, the Prospect Heights pickler behind Rick's Picks. "Well, the emphasis is squarely on the second word," he answers.

Once a television producer with a cucumber-curing habit, the 42-year-old Brooklynite now handles the organizational details of getting Windy City Wasabeans or Phat Beets to more than 20 states and 200 stores. (Find Rick's Picks in Brooklyn at 212-358-0428 or [rickspicksnyc.com](http://rickspicksnyc.com).)

As the front man for the two-year-old artisanal pickle company, co-owned with partner Lauren McGrath, Field now spends his days overseeing a crew of professional Poughkeepsie pickle-makers, running the Lower East Side office or making late-night drives to visit a Vermont fancy-food distributor on far too little sleep.

That's why Wednesday nights like these are important. About twice a month—after a day selling pickles at the Union Square Greenmarket—Field heads home to his Grand Army Plaza high rise to pickle.

## Rick's Mom's Dill Pickles (Adapted from Rick's Mom)

For new picklers, Field suggests working from a standard recipe and making subtle adjustments like adding a favorite herb, spice or edible flower. And while he won't give out recipes for his own bread and butter, he'll gladly share the pickle that started it all.

Note for 21st-century cooks: This recipe includes instructions for "home canning"—sealing your pickles in jars that can then be safely stored at room temperature, technology that pre-dates refrigeration. If you don't mind keeping your jars in the fridge, you need only bother with steps 2 and 3.

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|---|--------------------------------------|
| 3 1-qt. canning jars with new 2-part lids, usually available at hardware stores | 3 c. water                           |
| 4 lbs. of small pickling (Kirby) cucumbers                                      | 9 dill heads (or 3 tbsp. dill seeds) |
| 3 c. white vinegar  | 6 cloves garlic, peeled and halved   |
| 6 tsp. kosher salt  | 3 tsp. pickling spice                |
|   | 18 whole black peppercorns           |

1. Fill a stock pot with water and bring it to boil. Sterilize jars and lids in the boiling water and keep them warm until ready to fill.
2. Meanwhile, in another pot, bring vinegar, kosher salt, and 3 cups water to a boil. (Have extra vinegar and salt on hand in case you need to make more brine.) Make sure to have this liquid at a rolling boil when you add it to the jars.
3. Put three dill heads, four pieces of garlic, one teaspoon of pickling spice and six peppercorns into each jar. Pack the cucumbers tightly into the jars and pour in the boiling brine, leaving  $\frac{1}{2}$ " of headroom. Screw on the lids, being careful not to overtighten.
4. Place the jars into the pot of boiling water and boil for about 20 minutes. (If you cut the cucumbers into pieces you should reduce the processing time. Slices take about seven minutes.)
5. Remove the jars from the hot water bath and let cool completely, about 24 hours. If the lids do not pop when pressed in the middle and feel taut, the pickles have been properly processed. (If the lids feel loose, you can store them in the refrigerator for use within a few days.)

"What you're experiencing right here," he says, pulling a Tecate from the fridge and putting zydeco on the stereo, "is the process at its most fun."

Barefoot and bedecked with a plaid hat, polka-dot patched cargo shorts and a tiny pickle pin—he described his style as "urban bumpkin"—Field uses these late night sessions to craft new recipes or tweak his brines and mixes.

He can also introduce prospective picklers like me—and his undergraduate intern, Mary Ellen Gallagher—to the accessible joys of preserving in Brooklyn.

"As you can see," says Field, referring to the Mason jars, spaghetti pots and mixing bowls that form his urban operation, "the gear required to do this is not that elaborate or expensive."

Weaving around his color- and kitsch-filled apartment kitchen, Field makes it look easy even when he's exhausted. As agreeable fumes from a



**Above:** Rick Field in his home kitchen. **Opposite:** Spears of influence.

boiling tub of cider vinegar and citrus brine prick our noses, he and Gallagher knock out a dozen or so containers in about two hours.

As he talks, into the jars go asparagus spears sliced evenly in half, a few spicy-sweet nasturtium blossoms, some lightly crushed pink peppercorns and a split stalk of lemongrass, hidden like a secret between the spears. Over goes the lemon-orange brine, on go smart black lids and into a pot of boiling water for a bath go the jars.

"There's a sense of triumph when you're doing it right," says Field, proudly wiping down tonight's pretty pink-tinged batch, "and it's inspiring in a way."

The hardest part, he admits, is the two-week wait for them to cure.

"This isn't rocket science, what we're doing here," says Field after swirling a finger in the brine to check its composition. (A no-no for his commercial Poughkeepsie operation, it's a delicious yes-yes at home.)

"How difficult is this?" asks Field with a mock professorial tone. "Answer: Not very."

That's not to say Field doesn't have opinions on proper pickling: Pack your pickles tightly, bring your brine to a rolling boil and leave some headroom when you pour it in. And at first, keep your basic ratio of water to vinegar at about 50/50. (Although the chances of poisoning yourself pickling is pretty remote, assures Field: "To say that's highly



Above, from left to right: Jars await fulfillment; the challenger, Jon Orren of Wheelhouse Pickles in Park Slope; nasturtium blossoms add color and bite.

unlikely doesn't even begin to describe the story.")

A Slow Food-style gourmand, a 2001 best-in-show Rosendale International Pickle Festival award winner and a Yale graduate from a Boston family of academics, Field can also hold forth on his golden rules of preservation.

He's a citrus-brine fan and a salt- and sugar-buster, preferring ingredients like ginger and cherries (Bee n' Beez bread and butters) or soy-wasabi (those Wasabeans) to either kind of common white crystals.

And despite his penchant for fancy ingredients ("pickled asparagus is good," says Field, "but pickled asparagus with nasturtium blossoms — now you're talking"), he doesn't throw them around with abandon.

"What you want to avoid," says Field, looking and sounding like a Food Network chef as he measures out pink peppercorns, "is a situation where you have too many flavor notes competing with each other."

It's "the Italian panini aesthetic versus the American submarine sand-

wich aesthetic," he continues. A panini pickle, in other words, has "just three ingredients that play beautifully off each other."

Those ingredients are a sticking point for Field too. In an ode to the Greenmarket's mission to buy local, and the old-fashioned pickle mission to preserve seasonal bounty, he buys as much as he can from nearby farmers.

Plus, Greenmarket was the site of his epiphanic pickle-making "pivotal event," back in 1997, says Field, who used to pickle cucumbers and string beans with his mother during summers in Vermont.

He was in Grand Army Plaza, says Field of the Saturday Greenmarket just outside his door, when he was hit with the "potent family memories" of pickling during summer vacations.

"It's absolutely sublime in high season," says Field of being surrounded by Kirby cucumbers, sweet corn, purple okra and candy striped beets.

In fact, with farm stands like these, Brooklynites with a hankering for good pickles are sitting prettier than many of their suburban friends.

"I thought, 'I can do this here,'" says Field of his eureka moment in the market.

So should you, he says. □

## A TWO-PICKLE TOWN

If Brooklyn were an old Wild West settlement, we might be gearing up for a shoot-out. Two years after Rick Field launched Rick's Picks, the 29-year-old Jon Orren has started Wheelhouse Pickles in Park Slope, just a hop, skip and a Flatbush Ave. jump from Field's Prospect Heights home.

Like Field—who happily showed Orren the ins and outs of gourmet pickle-making—Wheelhouse plays with flavors and ingredients rather than sugar and salt, pairing beans with slivers of horseradish, pears with mirin or beets with the juices from watercress and oranges.

The similarities don't stop there. He's also from Boston, has given his pickles funny names (Big Bang Okra), won awards at the Rosendale International Pickle Festival and uses nearby farmers for vegetables, working directly with some land-owning friends, for example, to grow tiny two-inch turnips.

(He expects his pickles to be available in a few Park Slope specialty food stores this summer, says Orren. Until then, you can also buy an \$8.50 pint jar from him directly at [www.wheelhousepickles.com](http://www.wheelhousepickles.com).)

A slim, soft-spoken fellow who does freelance writing and "almost went to culinary school," Orren has worked in restaurants like Franny's in Prospect Heights and Park Slope's Rose Water, where he helped with pickling demos in the Grand Army Plaza Greenmarket.

While Field praised the creativity of Orren's combinations, he prefers not to comment on the new venture, which was just getting off the ground when we went to print.

Orren, meanwhile, hopes there's room for both of their briny handiwork, and compares their industry to that of the 1990s microbrewery boom.

"We'll benefit each other," says Orren, meaning together they can raise expectations for pickle quality and break down the resistance to paying \$8 and up for a pint jar.

We'll have to wait and see how the artisanal pickle playing field settles out, but better pickles and more sales for local farmers seem like good things.

Although it could've been one tasty showdown.