

Shirley Corriher's Cooking Secrets

Ripeness of Fruit

Have you ever had perfectly beautiful bananas in a bowl along with other delicious fruit like grapes, apples, or pears and the next day, the bananas begin to brown and soon become over ripe? What caused this to happen?

It was the apples; they give off ethylene gas. Ethylene is an agent that causes certain fruits to ripen fast. Many farmers benefit from the use of this gas by picking certain produce when they are hard and green for safe shipping. Produce shippers then use ethylene to ripen fruits like bananas and tomatoes quickly when they reach their destination. As bananas ripen, they also emit ethylene gas. So if you really want to keep your bananas longer, try hanging the bunch on a fruit hook to let the air flow through them or keep them separated. When you need to ripen fruit quickly, you can use the same technique that the produce shippers use; but on a smaller scale. For example, to ripen a hard rock avocado, place it in a brown paper bag with a couple of apples. Close the bag loosely to concentrate the ethylene. The avocados will be nearly ripe the next day.

Maintaining Color in Cooked Red Vegetables (Red Cabbage)

Have you ever been cooking a beautiful red cabbage and after a few seconds of cooking, it starts turning a disgusting blue???! What happened?! The anthocyanins were compromised. Anthocyanin is the compound that gives red fruits and vegetables its color. The color will remain intact as long as the acidity or alkalinity doesn't change. Sometimes when cooking red cabbage it will change to an unappetizing blue because some of the acids have evaporated. To bring the red color back, add a little vinegar or lemon juice (1 tsp.) or cook the red cabbage in something acidic like apples.

Baking Muffins with a Proper Peak

Have you ever wondered why your muffin tops turned out flat instead of having a pretty peak?

It wasn't your fault. It was the recipe. In order to get a peak on a muffin, the oven has to be hot enough to "set" the outside of the muffin but allow the inside to rise and remaining moist. In baking, if the goods get hot on top first, it seals and stops rising. Many recipes do not allocate a high enough temperature to create an ideal muffin peak. The oven temperature must be at least 400 – 450 degrees. You want the muffin to heat from the bottom up. Consider pre-heating the oven to 500 degrees and place a pizza stone or heavy baking sheet in the lower third of the oven, about 8 inches from the oven floor. When you're ready to place muffins in the oven, place the muffins on the heated pizza stone or baking sheet and turn the oven temperature down to 400 degrees.

Boiling Custard

When preparing pastry crême or custard always follow the directions to cook the custard thoroughly to avoid salmonella or other compromises. Directions in good cook books tell you to put custard back on the stove after adding egg yolks and bring to a boil to thicken. Many cooks are apprehensive about doing this because they think the eggs will coagulate. Do not worry; the cornstarch will prevent this from happening. Remember to heat the custard mixture thoroughly and stir well. Egg yolks contain little enzymes called alpha amylase and if the custard mixture is not brought to a boil to kill the enzyme; overnight that little rascal will gobble up the starch in your custard mixture and you're left with a soupy mess.

Checking Freshness of Eggs

How do you distinguish a fresh egg from an old egg?

An easy way to tell if an egg is fresh is to place the egg (in its shell) in a bowl of tap water. If the egg lies flat on the bottom, it has a small air cell and is quite fresh. If the egg stands up and bobs on the bottom, it has a larger cell and is not as fresh. If the egg floats to the top, look out! It may be rotten. Crack an egg onto a plate. If the white is thick and does not spread widely, the egg is fresh. The white of a fresh egg is nearly all thick. As the egg ages, this thick part of the white deteriorates into a runny consistency. Membranes in the egg also change with age. The yolk membrane becomes weaker and eventually breaks. If the yolk stands up, the membrane is strong and very fresh. If the yolk is flat and spreads out the egg is older.

Preserving Firmness in Cooked Vegetables (beans)

When fruits and vegetables are dropped in boiling water, its cell walls shrink and the glue-like substance that holds the cells together dissolves. The fruit or vegetable now has the potential to become mush. This can be prevented if you use sugar or calcium in the water. The sugar or calcium forms a firm compound that allows the vegetable or fruit to remain nice and firm. For example, adding molasses to baked beans helps the beans retain their shape for long periods of cooking. This principle can also be used when making apple sauce. Do not use sugar when boiling the apples, you want the cells to break down so that the apples can be mashed easily. If you want to sauté fired apples sprinkle sugar on them to keep the wedges firm.

Preserving Color in Green Vegetables (asparagus)

Have you ever wondered why some green vegetables like asparagus or green beans are a beautiful bright green after cooking and others are not?

All green vegetables are green because they contain chlorophyll. The vibrant green created by the chlorophyll will change if magnesium from the chlorophyll compound is lost. Unfortunately, the chlorophyll in the vegetable cells loses its magnesium easily when heated or when it comes in contact with acid that's produced due to cell breakdown of the vegetable. Therefore cook green vegetables for less than 7 minutes in order to retain their bright color.

Making Caramel in Microwave

You can make great desserts with caramel for flan, crème brulee, burnt sugar icing, etc. in a snap by placing ½ cup of sugar in a heat proof 2-cup glass measuring cup, add ¼ cup corn syrup, 4 to 5 drops of lemon juice and a 1 tablespoon of water, if necessary. Mix thoroughly. Place dampened mixture in microwave for about 2 minutes. Watch carefully! If you want the caramel darker, place in the microwave for one or two 15 second intervals, depending on your desired color. Mixture will continue to darken after removing it from the microwave.

Working with Chocolate

The number one problem when working with chocolate is seizing. One moment you have creamy melted chocolate, and next you have a solid grainy mass that will not melt. What happened? Imagine if you dip a damp spoon in a sugar bowl. The moisture from the spoon will cause the sugar crystals to glue together and create little hard grainy lumps. If you pour water in to that sugar bowl, the grainy lumps and the entire sugar bowl will dissolve. Chocolate seizing is similar to the damp spoon effect in the sugar bowl. In chocolate there are very fine, very dry particles in a rich fat, cocoa butter. The tiniest amount of moisture causes these dry particles to stick together. It does no good to heat this. If you add enough water to wet all of the particles they will no longer stick together. Rule of thumb: Use at least 1 tablespoon liquid to 2 ounces chocolate to prevent seizing.