

BREAD AND BUTTER PICKLES: A GREEN SOUTHERN TREAT

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For an assignment in East Tennessee State University's "Foodways of Appalachia" course, I researched a green American treat, bread and butter pickles. While similar recipes have likely been around for centuries, the bread and butter pickles that we know today date back to the early 1920s when Omar and Cora Fanning trademarked a generations-old family recipe for "sweet and sour" pickles. From Streator, Illinois, the Fannings made a living raising cucumbers. One season, the family fell on hard times, and Mr. Fanning made the resourceful decision to use the small cucumbers, which had been considered waste up until that point, to create an innovative side business. The resulting pickles were such a hit that Mrs. Fanning was able to barter with her local grocer, exchanging the pickles for household staples like bread and butter. The name stuck, and bread and butter pickles were an overnight success. They were simultaneously marketed as "old-fashioned" and the "latest thing," and their popularity quickly spread from the Midwest to the South, where bread and butter pickles remain a staple.

When I asked my father, Joe Baker of Greeneville, Tennessee, for his thoughts on bread and butter pickles, he stressed that "anything preserved that was sweet was a special treat." Growing up in Tennessee, he worked on a sharecropper's farm. "Poor people," he said, "generally ate the cheaper cuts of pork and beef, and as a condiment, bread and butter pickles were a great advantage. They made the meat tastier. In the 1950s and 1960s, pickling and preservation were still the main way of carrying summer produce into the winter."

Today, cucumbers, tomatoes, eggplants, and peppers come to us fresh from Mexico and South America. "But in the '50s and the '60s," my dad went on to say, "that industry didn't exist. There was no international transport of produce like there is now."

For as long as I can remember, my aunt Lora Johnson of Gray, Tennessee, has been making bread and butter pickles. So it only made sense to consult her in my search for the perfect recipe. The very first cookbook she pulled from the shelf where she keeps old recipes and canning supplies just happened to be one my uncle's

Bread & Butter Pickles prepared by Lora Johnson. Photo courtesy Charlie Warden.

mother used when she was in high school, most likely in her home economics class. When my aunt flipped to the index to search for pickle recipes, she found a torn-out magazine page with a recipe for bread and butter pickles written on it. My uncle, Terry Johnson, estimates, from looking at the magazine page, that the recipe dates back to the 1950s.

Many people eat bread and butter pickles alongside pinto beans or deviled eggs. However,

when asked to describe his favorite bread-and-butter pickle pairing, my father suggested eating them with fried pork chops, black-eyed peas, and cornbread. "Or perhaps they go best with pickled pig knuckles, often called trotters, and soda crackers," he added. He even hinted at eating them as a dessert in sweet pickle ice cream. "For sandwiches," he says, "dill pickles are fine, but for consumption by the slice, bread and butter pickles are divine." ❖

Bread and Butter Pickles

12 small cucumbers, no more than 1 ½ inches wide
8 medium onions, peeled
4 green peppers
¾ cup salt
6 ½ quarts water, divided
7 cups sugar
6 cups vinegar
3 tablespoons celery seed
¼ - ½ cup white mustard seed
1 teaspoon turmeric

Wash the cucumbers, onions, and peppers. Slice thin. Soak several hours or overnight in brine made by dissolving salt in six quarts of water. Drain. Combine sugar, vinegar, remaining water, and spices in large kettle. Bring to boil. Boil 3 minutes. Add vegetables. Boil 20 minutes or until vegetables are clear. Seal in hot sterilized containers.

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