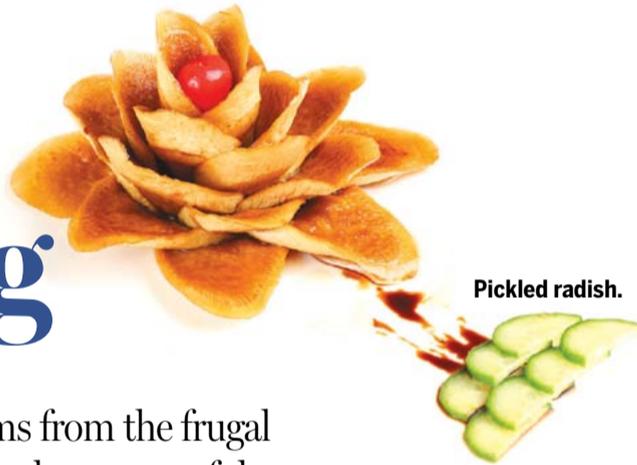




Jars of pickles by Liubiju, a Beijing pickle maker that is more than 400 years old. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

# Age-old art that needs preserving



Pickled radish.

Crisp, crunchy winter pickles are a Beijing tradition that stems from the frugal past when food was scarce and housewives had to scramble to be resourceful

By PAULINE D LOH  
paulined@chinadaily.com.cn

**O**ur garden has gone gray and silent. The first frosts have arrived, and our trees have been stripped bare by the gusty north winds. Only the wintergreen hedge is still dark green, although even the foliage has been dulled by the cold.

In a hidden corner, the last radishes are braving the weather, but they, too, will be harvested almost immediately.

My husband has gone to the neighborhood market and come back with a good haul of vegetables for pickles. Every year, we make huge vats of pickles — crisp, crunchy varieties that will see us through the entire season.

They are perfect as side dishes for mutton hotpots or table barbecues, and are good palate cleansers after too much meat.

Earlier, our Ayi (helper) had already put aside a big urn of salted brown mustard greens, a slightly tart pickle called *xuelihong*. This is delicious cooked with lean meat and noodles, and great for when Ayi makes her hand-cut noodles.

We buy about 10 kilograms of the fresh vegetables because they shrink

during pickling and in the dehydration process.

Ayi hangs them out to dry on the clothesline for a day or two before sprinkling salt on them and stuffing them into the jar.

*Xuelihong* keeps its bright green color even after pickling and is a wonderful addition to our winter diet when glasshouse greens are so expensive.

My husband likes preserving radishes as well, and he also makes Sichuan-style pickles.

The radishes are large, fat and very sweet right about now. Apart from the common white radish or *daiikon*, there are also green fruit radishes and rotund watermelon radishes.

Beijingers love raw radishes, lightly skinned and cut into chunks. These are dipped into the sweet bean sauce normally associated with Peking duck and eaten like fruit.

Radish pickles are simply radishes salted to get rid of excess water, then macerated in vinegar and sugar and flavored with cloves of garlic and a few red peppers.

My favorite is the delightfully named watermelon radish, a large, green-skinned root the size of a small football with a lovely magenta center. It is named *xinlimei* in Chinese — “beautiful heart”.

Pickled in apple cider vinegar with raw sugar and crushed garlic, it can be really addictive.

My spouse likes the green outer skin, which is very crisp when pickled. The secret is to cut the radish so that every slice includes a little strip of rind.

The other pickle we like making in winter is the Sichuan *paocai*, seasoned with red peppers and prickly ash berries. There is no vinegar in this pickle, which depends purely on natural fermentation.

We use an assortment of hand-torn Beijing cabbage, sliced carrots, beans, celery stems and radishes. These are placed in a glass jar, and cooled boiled water is poured in to completely cover the vegetables.

Ginger slices, garlic, red peppers and Sichuan peppercorns also go in, and the jar is covered and placed next to the radiator to hasten the process. A few days later, when tiny bubbles appear inside the jar, we know the pickling process has started. It takes about a week more for the flavors to fully develop.

After that, the pickle jar goes outdoors so the cold will keep it fresh.

Sichuan pickles are tart and spicy, but it is the texture that makes them so good. The cabbage chunks squeak when you bite into them, and the

carrots and celery stalks stay crisp while retaining their natural flavors.

Korean-style *kimchi* is also popular in our house. This makes use of the giant Napa cabbages that are dirt-cheap in winter, as well as garlic chives, radishes and carrots. I like *kimchi* because it can be eaten at all stages.

Fresh, it has a crisp crunch that allows you to enjoy the sweetness of the vegetables. Matured, the fullness of flavor from the fermenting vegetables combines with the spicy chili flakes to make it an appetizing treat.

Old *kimchi*, too tart to eat on its own, is beautiful cooked in soups and stews.

Just one whole cabbage can last us all winter.

Winter pickles are a Beijing tradition that stems from the frugality of the past, when food was scarce and housewives scrambled to make the best of what they had.

Often, the best they had was what they planted in pots in the *hutong* (alley), or cheap vegetables when enjoying a glut. It is a disappearing tradition, as living standards escalate and modern logistics and horticultural practices improve.

But pickles are both delicious and healthy, and the art of making them should definitely be preserved.

## Pickled delights

### Watermelon radish pickles

- 1 large watermelon radish (or substitute 1 white radish)
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1/2 liter white vinegar
- 300g rock sugar, crushed
- 1-2 chili peppers, optional
- 6 cloves garlic, lightly crushed

Lightly peel the watermelon radish. Keep as much of the green skin on as you can. Cut into half, then into quarters. Cut each quarter into two wedges, then use a rolling cut to slice off pieces so each has a thin green rind attached.

Salt the cut watermelon radish and leave to drain. Rinse off with cold boiled water after 15 minutes.

While the salted radish is draining, combine the vinegar and rock sugar and warm till sugar melts. Cool.

Place watermelon radishes, chili and garlic into a large glass jar and pour the cooled pickling liquid over it. Cap and keep in the refrigerator. It will be ready to eat after 24 hours.

### Northern Chinese *kimchi*

- 1 Napa cabbage, cut into four, hard core removed
- Pickling mix:
  - 1 small radish, two carrots, shredded
  - 1 apple, grated
  - 1 Chinese pear, grated
  - 1 bunch chives, cut into 2-cm lengths
  - 1 cup chili flakes
  - 1 tablespoon minced garlic
  - 1 tablespoon minced ginger
  - 2 tablespoons fish sauce

Soak the Napa cabbage quarters in salted water. The water should taste like seawater. Weigh down the cabbages so they stay submerged for a day.

In a large mixing bowl, combine all the ingredients for the pickling mix.

Drain the cabbage wedges thoroughly. Use a salad spinner to help get rid of excess water. Otherwise, lay them on a sieve to drain thoroughly.

Cover the cabbage leaves with pickling mix, making sure to get in between every leaf. When you finish with one quarter, roll it up tightly into a ball, using the large outer leaves to secure it. Tuck it into a glass jar or a deep plastic tub.

Repeat until you finish all the wedges. If there is extra pickling mix, pour it into the tub or jar.

Allow to mature three days in a warm environment or one week in the refrigerator.

Fresh *kimchi* can be eaten the same day, but it will taste more like a spicy salad. As for *kimchi* that has been forgotten too long, try adding it to soups, stews or even a bowl of noodles.