

SUGAR-FREE

jam making

After learning that a **diet low in sugar** is apparently an **expressway to more youthful looks**, **Seren Evans-Charrington** sets out to test a few inspired **sugar-free jam recipes**

Like it or lump it, the Western diet is now very high in refined sugar, and whilst I am not against a sweet treat, too much sugar does carry health risks. Overloading our systems with refined sugar has a harmful effect on metabolism, and can contribute to all sorts of diseases.

Having looked into the health benefits of following a reduced sugar diet, I was tempted to make some sugar reductions in my own diet. However, when I realised that a direct link has been established between the amount of sugar circulating in the blood and how old a person looks, I packed away the beauty cream and stepped away from the biscuit tin, whilst pledging to reduce my sugar intake. After all, scientists from Leiden University Medical Center in the Netherlands, and at Unilever in the UK, have discovered that for every 1ml/litre increase in blood sugar, the perceived age of that person rose by five months. Well, the incentive of looking twenty years younger was certainly a big lure in reducing my sugar intake, but my real reason for looking to reduce sugar was that refined sugar robs you of energy, and with two little ones in tow, and a growing menagerie, I need all the energy I can muster.

My philosophy is that a bit of what you fancy does you good, so my only plan has been to reduce my refined sugar intake rather than cut it out altogether. As I spend a lot of time and effort preserving, and love nothing more than a slathering of jam on my toast for breakfast, making refined sugar-free jam seemed like an ideal starting point.

However, when it comes to jam I am a bit of a purist and have always been a great advocate of traditional methods and recipes that all include sugar, so making a refined sugar-free jam was a truly monumental step for me.

When developing recipes for jam that did not include cane sugar, a few issues popped up, and it took a little bit of experimentation and thought to get some good results. The food safety of a refined sugar-free jam was never an issue because it's not the sugar in jam that makes a recipe safe: it's the acid level. Here, the acid level is high enough to keep the sealed contents of the jar safe and unspoiled, but the jam is not going to win any beauty contests because it has a duller appearance and is lacking the glossy lustre of traditional jams. I've also found that sugar-free jams can discolour and become brownish in their jars over time, and there is also the matter of keeping; unlike traditional

jams, the sugar-free version only keeps for two months in the fridge (unopened), and once opened it will only keep for a week in the fridge before it starts to turn mouldy.

However, when it comes to taste I have been pleasantly surprised, and to be frank, rather delighted, but the thing to remember about a jam that excludes refined sugars is that what you put into it is exactly what you're going to get out of it. Whilst I always preach about using the very best fruit in jam making, when it comes to sugar-free jam you really do need to select the sweetest and most perfectly ripe fruit you can find – after all, there will be no added sugar to mask any tartness or pep up the end result; the taste of the ingredients you put into the jam pan will be precisely what you taste in the finished jars of jam.

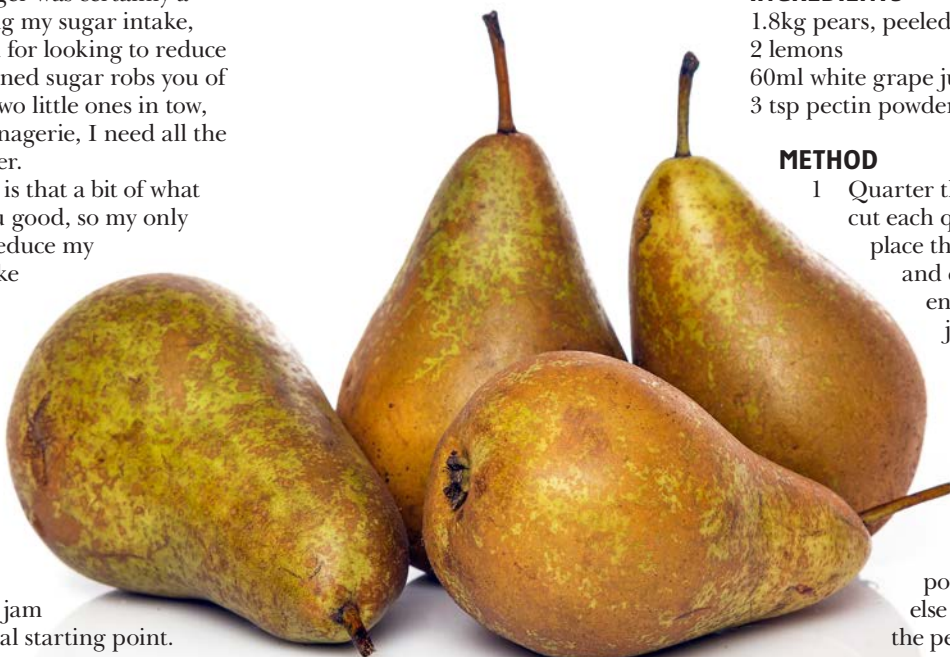
NO ADDED SUGAR PEAR AND LEMON JAM

INGREDIENTS

1.8kg pears, peeled and cored
2 lemons
60ml white grape juice
3 tsp pectin powder (for jam making)

METHOD

- 1 Quarter the prepared pears, cut each quarter in half, then place the pieces in a saucepan and cook (covered, with enough water to cover just the bottom of the pan) for 10–12 minutes, until soft.
- 2 Leave the softened pears to cool, then blend with a food processor, hand blender, or just a good old-fashioned potato masher if nothing else is to hand. Set aside the pear purée.





- 3 Finely slice 1 of the lemons after removing the pithy core. To do this, cut it in half along the stem line and remove the pithy centre, then turn each lemon half over and slice finely. Place the slices into a small saucepan, cover with water and simmer for 10 minutes.
- 4 Put the water in which the lemons simmered and the pear purée into a large saucepan, add the squeezed juice of the remaining lemon to the mixture, then bring to the boil over a medium heat. Once boiling, reduce to a gentle simmer, stirring regularly to prevent sticking or burning.
- 5 Blitz the lemon slices in a food processor and add the lemon pulp to the simmering pears, then stir well.
- 6 When the pear mixture has a soft, smooth consistency, remove it from the heat and add the white grape juice, stirring well.
- 7 Bring the pear mixture back to the boil and quickly stir in the

pectin powder.
Cook the jam, stirring constantly for exactly

1 minute, bring it back to the boil, then remove from the heat.

- 8 Pour the jam into sterilised jars, wiping the rims clean before sealing the lids.

This jam will keep for 8–10 weeks in the fridge, and is delicious in its own right, but is best spread on thick toast.

REFINED SUGAR-FREE STRAWBERRY JAM

This recipe for strawberry jam does take some time to make due to the absence of sugar cane, but the end result is pure strawberry goodness. It is not sweet in a traditional jam way, but it is certainly sweet enough, and it has an amazing buttery smooth and creamy consistency. It's a natural taste of summer, and if you are not keen on very sugary jams, then you'll love this recipe.

INGREDIENTS

- 500g fresh strawberries, hulled and quartered
- 1 tbsp water
- 1 tbsp fresh lemon juice
- 2 tsp arrowroot powder





METHOD

- 1 Place the prepared strawberries in a jam pan over a low heat and simmer, mashing them gently with a potato masher. Continue this process until the strawberries are soft.
- 2 Meanwhile, whisk the water, lemon juice and arrowroot powder together in a medium saucepan, then add to the strawberry purée.
- 3 Slowly bring the mixture to the boil over a medium heat, stirring frequently.
- 4 Lower the heat and simmer gently until it thickens. (*Stir frequently as it begins to thicken to avoid burning.*) You will know it is done when you can draw a rubber spatula through the centre and it creates a gap that remains open for a few seconds before disappearing. Once this happens, remove from the heat and pot.

This jam will keep refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 2 months.

NOTE!

Arrowroot is the thickener in this jam, but it imparts a cloudiness to the finished product, so the resulting jam is actually a pinkish red rather than the glossy, deep red of traditional strawberry jam.

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BLUEBERRY HEAVEN

My children adore blueberries, and considering the quantities they eat I am surprised that they are not Smurf coloured! I had really good results making refined sugar-free blueberry jam because blueberries are naturally sweet, and when cooked down, the sugars seem to caramelise and intensify the flavours of the fruit.

INGREDIENTS

750g fresh blueberries
1 tbsp water
1 tbsp fresh lemon juice
1½ tsp arrowroot powder

METHOD

- 1 Place the blueberries in a jam pan over a low heat and gently crush them with a potato masher to create a rough purée.
- 2 Meanwhile, whisk the water, lemon juice and arrowroot powder together in a medium saucepan and add to the blueberry purée.
- 3 Bring the mixture to the boil over a medium heat, stirring frequently, then simmer until it thickens.
- 4 Once the mixture has a thick and spreadable jam-like consistency, remove it from the heat and decant into sterilised jars.

This jam will keep for 2 months in the fridge.



SEREN'S TIP!

When making jams that rely on arrowroot powder for thickening, you must allow for the fact that the jam will thicken further during the cooling process. If the finished jam is too thick or gloopy you can return it to the jam pan and add some water before reheating. This will often resolve the problem.

AND FINALLY...

I cannot promise that I will be exclusively making sugar-free

jam from now on, but I have certainly enjoyed being able to serve up a healthier option at breakfast, and the results have been far tastier than I ever expected. I must confess, too, that in light of a reduced sugar diet being anti-ageing, I am now wondering whether to spread him indoors liberally with my latest batch of no-sugar blueberry jam, as many years of eating all my sugar-laden preserves has obviously taken its toll... well, it's either that or he's just had a hard life!

Remember!

The food safety of a refined sugar-free jam isn't an issue, because it's not the sugar in jam that makes a recipe safe: it's the acid level.

