



The IncrEDIBLE Discourse Show Planning Guide

Hello chefs, today we talk pickling and why this technique has been a cornerstone in cooking for centuries. I am Mark Grigsby, your chef and guide through this experience, and this.. Is the IncrEDIBLE Discourse.

Alright guys! Episode 21! Only 3 more episodes after this one left in the season! I sincerely hope that you all have enjoyed the series so far and have learned a lot and applied these teachings to your cooking wherever you're whipping it up.

So we've completed our first 2 weeks in Houston. Big change, but good change. Well worth it.

Anyhow, We have updated the downloadable resources tab on the website. Now we're up to a dozen in depth resources that dive deeper into the subjects that we've discussed on the show. Check out the incrediblediscourse.com if you haven't been there yet to find these resources plus show blogs. Sign up for the newsletter while you're there.

And if you haven't yet, hit the like and subscribe button and give us a 5 star review wherever you're listening to this. Again, it helps us get the show out to others just like you trying to grow their culinary knowledge.

Alright, let's get down to business..

Pickling. That's what we're going to talk about today..

Pickling has been one of the cornerstones of cooking for centuries. Think about it — long before refrigeration, chefs and home cooks had to find a way to make ingredients last, and pickling was the answer. But here's the thing: it's not just about keeping food from going bad. It's about transformation. That hit of acidity, the crunch, the way a pickle can cut through something fatty or heavy — it takes a dish from good to unforgettable. Pickling is preservation, yeah, but it's also flavor amplification. It's depth, it's brightness, it's tradition meeting creativity. And that's why it's still as relevant in the kitchen today as it was a hundred years ago.

Now pickling's got history that runs deep. Every culture on the planet has their version of it, because before freezers and refrigerators, this was survival. From kimchi in Korea to sauerkraut in Germany, from Japanese tsukemono to classic kosher dills — pickling kept families fed through winters and tough seasons. But here's the cool part: what started as a necessity turned into gastronomy. Now you'll see pickles not just in grandma's pantry, but on the menus of Michelin-starred restaurants. It's a bridge from the old world to the modern plate, and it shows just how timeless the craft really is.

So with all that history behind it, today we're going to break pickling down into three parts. First, the foundations — what pickling actually is, the different methods, and why it works the way it does. Then we'll bring it into your home kitchen and talk about how you can use pickling to stretch ingredients, add brightness, and punch up everyday meals without a ton of effort. And finally, we'll take it into the professional kitchen — how chefs lean on pickling for balance, creativity, and even cost control. By the end, you'll see pickling not just as an old-school preservation method, but as one of the most versatile flavor tools you can have in your arsenal.

Alright, ready? — what exactly is pickling? At its core, pickling is about using acid, salt, and sometimes sugar to transform food and keep it from spoiling.

When we talk about pickling, the first thing you need to understand is that there are two big players in the game: vinegar pickling and fermentation. They both fall under the same umbrella, but they work in completely different ways and produce totally different results.

Vinegar pickling is the more straightforward of the two. You're basically taking a strong acid — vinegar — and using it to change the texture and flavor of your ingredient. It's quick, it's predictable, and it's the method most people are familiar with. You take cucumbers, slice up some onions, maybe toss in some garlic and dill, cover them in a hot vinegar brine with salt and sugar, and boom — in a day or two you've got pickles. Vinegar does all the heavy lifting, and you're in control of the flavor from the start.

Fermentation, on the other hand, is the slow burn. Instead of adding acid, you're letting nature create it for you. This is where lactic acid comes into play. When you salt vegetables — say cabbage for sauerkraut — you're creating an environment where beneficial bacteria thrive. Those bacteria feed on the natural sugars in the vegetable and produce lactic acid, which is what gives fermented pickles that deep, tangy, almost funky complexity you can't fake with vinegar. It takes more time, it's a little less predictable, but the payoff is huge. You're building flavor from the inside out, and every batch develops its own character.

So vinegar pickling? Fast, bright, clean. Fermentation? Slow, layered, complex. One isn't better than the other — they're just different tools, and knowing when to use each is what makes you a more versatile cook. That's the foundation of understanding pickling, and it's the jumping-off point for everything else we're going to get into.

Now once you understand the two main methods — vinegar pickling and fermentation — the next layer to think about is *how* you're actually brining your food. This is where wet brine versus dry brine comes into play.

A wet brine is exactly what it sounds like: you're submerging your ingredient in a seasoned liquid. Vinegar pickles almost always fall into this category — you've got your vinegar, maybe some water to dilute it, salt, sugar, and spices. You pour that over cucumbers, onions, jalapeños, whatever you're working with, and the liquid itself is doing the work. The brine penetrates over time, seasoning and acidifying the food while it sits. Wet brines are great for consistency — you know everything is surrounded by the same environment, and you can dial in the flavors with precision.

Dry brine is a little different, and honestly, it's fascinating. Instead of pouring liquid over your vegetables, you're coating them directly with salt — sometimes with sugar and spices mixed in. The salt draws out the natural moisture of the vegetable, and that liquid becomes the brine. This is the foundation of things like sauerkraut and kimchi. You start with dry salt, but as the process goes on, the cabbage or radish or whatever you're working with creates its own brine. That's when fermentation takes over and the lactic acid builds, giving you that complexity and funk.

So think of it like this: wet brine is you bringing the brine to the party. Dry brine is letting the ingredient create its own. Both methods transform food, both give you different textures and flavors, and both are tools every cook should have in their back pocket.

Alright, so once you've wrapped your head around wet brine and dry brine, the next question becomes: what's the end goal here? Are you trying to make something shelf-stable, or are you going for refrigerator pickles?

Shelf-stable is what most people picture when they think of old-school pickling — the canning jars lined up in the pantry, sealed tight, good for months or even years. This method takes a little more work and a lot more care. You're not just making a brine and pouring it over vegetables, you're also processing those jars in boiling water to create a vacuum seal and kill off any harmful bacteria. That's why grandma's pickles or preserved green beans could sit in the basement until winter — they were built to last. It's preservation in the truest sense, and it requires you to be precise with your acidity and sanitation. Done right, you get jars of flavor that carry you through seasons.

Refrigerator pickles, on the other hand, are the quick-and-easy cousin. You're skipping the canning step entirely. You make your brine, pour it over your veggies, stick it in the fridge, and you're good to go in a matter of hours or days. They're bright, fresh, and crunchy — perfect for when you don't need a six-month supply, you just want something punchy to throw on tacos this week. The trade-off is that they won't last forever. You're looking at maybe a few weeks of good quality, but honestly, they rarely last that long because they get eaten fast.

So here's the way I frame it: shelf-stable is about long-term security — stocking up, saving harvests, planning ahead. Refrigerator pickles are about immediacy — capturing flavor now, eating it while it's fresh, and keeping your cooking flexible.

Both have their place, and both keep pickling relevant no matter what kind of kitchen you're cooking in.

Pickling isn't just a technique — it's history in a jar. Every culture on the planet has leaned on pickling at some point, because before refrigeration, this was survival. If you pulled a harvest of cabbage or cucumbers or radishes, you couldn't just toss it in the fridge and forget about it. You had to find a way to make it last, and pickling was the answer.

That's why you see versions of it everywhere. In Korea, you've got kimchi — layers of cabbage, chili, garlic, and salt that ferment into something powerful and complex. In Germany and Eastern Europe, you see sauerkraut and pickled beets, staples that carried families through long, cold winters. Japan has tsukemono — quick-pickled vegetables that cut through the richness of rice and grilled meats. And here in the States, it's hard to imagine a deli sandwich without a crunchy dill spear on the side.

What started out of necessity became identity. Pickling didn't just preserve food, it preserved culture. Those flavors, those techniques, they became traditions passed down through generations. And even though we don't rely on pickling for survival the way our ancestors did, we still crave it — because that acidity, that crunch, that depth of flavor connects us to something older than ourselves. It's not just about keeping vegetables around longer. It's about keeping a piece of history alive on the plate.

What's wild is how pickling has gone from being purely about survival to being celebrated as a culinary art form. Back in the day, no one was thinking, *'I'm going to pickle these vegetables to elevate the flavor profile of my dish.'* No, they were thinking, *'If I don't preserve this food, we won't make it through the fucking winter.'* It was practical. It was survival.

But as times changed, the role of pickling shifted. Once refrigeration came along, people didn't *need* to pickle everything anymore, but the flavors were so good, so distinct, that cooks and chefs kept doing it. It moved from the cellar and the pantry to the table and the menu. Suddenly, pickling wasn't just about storage — it was about flavor design.

That's when you start seeing it in fine dining. Chefs realized that a quick-pickled onion could brighten a rich braised short rib, or that fermented vegetables could bring layers of funk and complexity that nothing else could replicate. What used to be a humble method of survival turned into a mark of creativity and skill. Today, house-pickled vegetables, fermented hot sauces, even pickled fruits show up on Michelin-starred tasting menus. And the best part? That same craft is still accessible to anyone with a mason jar, some salt, and a little patience.

So the evolution is clear: what started as necessity has now become an art — a way to not just preserve, but to amplify, balance, and elevate the entire eating experience.

When it comes down to it, pickling is all about balance. Acid, salt, sugar, and spice — those are the four pillars. Get them working together, and you can turn almost anything into something crave-worthy.

The acid is your backbone. That's what gives pickles their punch, that tang that wakes your palate up. Whether it's vinegar you're adding directly, or lactic acid that's being created during fermentation, that acidity is non-negotiable. Without it, you don't have a pickle, you just have vegetables sitting in liquid.

Then you've got salt. Salt isn't just seasoning here — it's functional. It pulls moisture out of the food, it helps control texture, and in fermentation it keeps the bad bacteria at bay while letting the good bacteria thrive. Salt is both flavor and protection.

Sugar comes in to balance that sharpness. You don't always need it, but when it's used right, sugar rounds out the edges, softens the bite of the vinegar, and gives your pickles a more complex profile. Think about bread-and-butter pickles — without sugar, they wouldn't have that signature sweet-and-sour thing going on.

And then there's spice. Not just heat — though chili flakes or jalapeños definitely bring something to the table — but aromatic spices. Garlic, dill seed, mustard seed, peppercorns, coriander, bay leaf. These are the flavor builders. They infuse the brine and the vegetable, taking it from simple sourness to something layered, aromatic, and unique.

So every jar is a balancing act. Too much acid and it's harsh. Too much sugar and it's cloying. Not enough salt and you lose both flavor and safety. But when you get the balance right? That's when a pickle goes from just preserved to perfectly craveable.

Once you've got the basics down, the real question becomes: how much time do you want to invest? That's where we start talking about quick pickles versus long ferments.

Quick pickles are all about convenience. You've got a jar, you've got a hot brine, and you've got dinner tonight. By dinner time, you're crunching into something bright, snappy, and refreshing. Quick pickles are your weeknight heroes — red onions for tacos, cucumbers for sandwiches, jalapeños for burgers. They don't stick around forever, but they don't need to. They're there to solve the problem right now: you want acidity, you want contrast, and you don't want to wait.

Long ferments are on the opposite end of that spectrum. They're not about speed, they're about depth. You let nature work slowly, and in return you get something layered and complex. Sauerkraut doesn't taste like cabbage with vinegar on it — it becomes its own thing entirely. Same with kimchi. That slow process creates flavors you simply can't rush, and the payoff is a pickle that has personality. It's funky, it's alive, it changes as it sits, and it connects you to traditions that go back hundreds of years.

So when you're deciding between the two, it's really about intent. Do you need something quick to punch up a plate tonight, or are you willing to put in the time and patience for something that develops over weeks? Both have a place in the kitchen, but they serve very different purposes.

And the cook who knows when to go quick and when to go slow has another gear most people never even think about.

Now before we move on, we've gotta talk about safety — because with pickling, flavor isn't the only thing on the line. The whole reason pickling became such a reliable preservation method in the first place is because it created an environment where bad bacteria couldn't survive. And if you're going to do it right, especially if you're aiming for shelf-stable jars, you need to respect that balance.

Here's what's important: acid and salt aren't just about taste, they're about protection. A proper pickle brine is acidic enough — usually a pH of 4.6 or lower — to keep dangerous bacteria like botulism from growing. Vinegar takes care of that immediately because you're pouring in the acid up front. Fermentation takes a little longer to get there, but the salt and lactic acid bacteria create that same safe environment as the process goes on. That's why you don't skimp on salt, and why you let the fermentation run its course.

And cleanliness matters too. If you're doing shelf-stable pickling, your jars, lids, and utensils all need to be sanitized and handled carefully. That boiling water bath isn't just some old-fashioned ritual — it's the step that seals out oxygen, locks the vacuum in, and ensures your pickles stay safe on the shelf. Skip it, and you're rolling the dice.

Refrigerator pickles are a little more forgiving, but even then, you can't just let them sit indefinitely. They don't have the same processing behind them, so they're meant to be enjoyed fresh within a few weeks. If it looks off, smells off, or has mold, it's done — toss it.

So here's the bottom line: pickling is simple, but it's also science. When you respect the ratios, keep things clean, and pay attention to pH and salt levels, you're not just making something delicious — you're making something safe. And that's the difference between a jar of pickles you can enjoy with dinner and a jar you're afraid to open.

So when you really step back, pickling is this perfect mix of science, tradition, and creativity. On one side you've got the methods — vinegar pickling and fermentation, wet brines and dry brines, shelf-stable jars versus quick refrigerator pickles. On the other side you've got the history — every culture finding its own way to preserve harvests and, in the process, creating flavors that defined cuisines. And then there's the balance: acid, salt, sugar, spice — the building blocks that make it all work, both for taste and for safety.

It's simple enough that anyone can start a jar at home, but it's powerful enough that chefs still lean on it to this day. That's why pickling hasn't faded away with time — it's evolved, it's adapted, and it's become part of how we build flavor, not just how we preserve food.

Now that we've got the foundations down, let's bring it into your kitchen.

And you know what that means..

It's time for.. Food for thought. Or what I like to call.. Pro tips from a chef's lips.

So, when it comes to pickling at home, the beauty is in how simple and approachable it really is. You don't need a basement full of jars, you don't need fancy equipment, and you definitely don't need to be a professional chef. All it takes is a little salt, a little vinegar, a clean jar, and some patience. Pickling at home gives you instant range as a cook — suddenly you've got acidity on hand to brighten up heavy dishes, crunch to add texture, and flavor bombs that can transform the most basic meal into something exciting. It's preservation, sure, but more than that, it's an easy way to put your own spin on everyday cooking.

One of the biggest reasons pickling matters at home is shelf life. Let's be real — how many times have you bought a bunch of cucumbers or a bag of radishes, stuck them in the fridge, and then forgot about them until they were limp and sad? We've all been there. Pickling gives those vegetables a second life. Instead of tossing them in the trash a week later, you can drop them into a jar with some brine and suddenly they'll last weeks, even months depending on how you do it.

That's not just saving money, it's reducing waste — and in today's kitchen, both of those things count. You put in the time, effort, and cash to bring those groceries home, so why not stretch them further? Pickling makes that possible. A handful of carrots that might've gone rubbery by the end of the week become a crunchy snack or a bright garnish for a salad. That extra half of a red onion you didn't need? Slice it thin, throw it in vinegar and salt, and now you've got a topping that'll make tacos, burgers, or sandwiches pop.

At home, shelf life isn't just about preservation — it's about extending opportunity. The more ingredients you keep alive and flavorful, the more flexibility you have when it's time to cook.

If that doesn't make sense, I don't know what does.

The other big win with pickling at home is what it does for flavor and texture. A good pickle brings brightness, right? — that sharp pop of acidity that can cut right through something heavy or rich. Think about a pulled pork sandwich. It's fatty, it's smoky, it's savory. Throw some pickled onions or jalapeños on there and suddenly the whole thing lifts. The acid cuts through the fat, balances the bite, and makes you want that next mouthful. That's brightness in action.

And then there's the crunch factor. Texture matters just as much as taste, and a crisp pickle delivers it every time. That snap when you bite into a cucumber spear, the crunch of a pickled carrot, even the bite of a pickled green bean — it's satisfying. It's contrast. A dish that might otherwise be one-note becomes layered, because you've got soft paired with crisp, rich paired with sharp.

That's the real magic of adding pickles to meals at home. They don't just sit on the side of the plate like some afterthought — they actively change how the whole dish eats.

Pickling is also one of the easiest doorways into fermentation for beginners. A lot of people get nervous when they hear the word 'fermentation' — they think it's complicated, messy, or something you need special gear for. But pickling makes it approachable. You can start with

something as simple as salting down some cabbage in a clean jar. Within a couple of days, nature does the heavy lifting, and you've got the beginnings of sauerkraut. No lab coat required.

That first jar teaches you the basics: patience, balance, and trust. You start to see how salt pulls out moisture, how bubbles form as the good bacteria do their job, and how flavors shift and deepen with time. It's like a lightbulb moment — you realize fermentation isn't scary at all, it's just controlled transformation.

And the best part? Once you crack that code, it opens up a whole new world of flavor. Kimchi, hot sauces, miso-style pastes, even your own funky condiments — it all starts to feel within reach. Pickling is the training wheels, the simple step that builds confidence and gives you the tools to explore further. It's preservation yeah, but it's also empowerment.

Alright, let's get into some real techniques you can use at home, starting with the easiest: quick refrigerator pickles. These are the no-stress, no-canning, no-special-equipment kind of pickles. All you need is a clean jar, some vegetables, and a simple ratio of vinegar, sugar, and salt.

The standard starting point I like to use is one cup of vinegar, one cup of water, a tablespoon of salt, and about a tablespoon of sugar. That's your baseline. From there, you can adjust to your taste. Want it sharper and tangier? Bump up the vinegar. Like a little more sweetness? Add another spoon of sugar. The key is balance — too much vinegar and it'll feel harsh, too much sugar and you'll lose that bright, clean bite. Salt keeps it all together, both for flavor and for safety.

Once your brine is set, bring it to a simmer, pour it over your sliced vegetables — onions, cucumbers, jalapeños, even carrots — and let it cool before sealing and tossing it in the fridge. By the next day, you've got crunchy, flavorful pickles ready to go. And here's the best part: they're customizable. You can experiment without a big time commitment.

Quick refrigerator pickles are like instant gratification for the home cook. They're fast, they're flexible, and they teach you how those core elements — acid, salt, sugar — play off each other to create something so amazing you'll try to pair it with every meal.

And here's the best part — you don't have to go big to start pickling. In fact, I always recommend starting small. Grab a mason jar, toss in a handful of sliced vegetables, pour your brine over the top, and stick it in the fridge. That's it. No giant crock, no rows of jars taking over your pantry, just one little experiment sitting on the shelf.

Small batch pickling is freedom. You're not committing to gallons of something you may or may not love. You're free to try new spices, swap out vinegars, or play with different vegetables without wasting time or product. One jar of spicy carrots here, one jar of sweet-and-sour

cucumbers there, maybe some jalapeños with garlic and lime — each one is a quick test run. If it hits, you scale it up. If it doesn't, no harm done.

And the beauty of keeping it in the fridge is that you're never more than a day or two away from having something flavorful on hand. It's the simplest entry point into pickling, and it keeps the whole process approachable and fun. One jar, one brine, one fridge shelf — that's all you need to start building your own pickle game at home.

Now, that basic brine will get the job done, but here's where you can really start to have fun: the spices. This is where your personality shows up in the jar. Garlic cloves, fresh dill, mustard seeds, peppercorns, coriander, chili flakes — they all bring something unique to the party.

Think about it like layering a dish. The vinegar, salt, and sugar are your foundation, but the spices are what make each pickle stand out. A cucumber with garlic and dill tastes totally different than one packed with ginger and chili. Mustard seeds give you little bursts of flavor. Peppercorns add warmth. Coriander and bay leaf bring subtle aromatic notes. Even something as simple as red pepper flakes can turn a mild pickle into one with attitude.

And the beauty of spice blends in pickling is that they infuse over time. The longer the jar sits, the more those flavors marry with the vegetable. That means every bite carries not just the tang of the brine, but the depth of the spices you chose. It's your chance to take a humble carrot or onion and make it taste like something that could've come out of a chef's pantry.

So don't just stop at vinegar, salt, and sugar. Think about what story you want your pickle to tell — bright and fresh, bold and spicy, warm and aromatic — and let the spices do the talking.

Now once you've got the hang of small batches, this is where it gets fun — pairing your pickles with the right dishes. Because a good pickle isn't just something you snack on out of the jar, it's a tool to transform meals.

Spicy pickled carrots are one of my favorites. They soak up flavor beautifully, and they've got that natural sweetness that plays so well against vinegar and spice. Drop them into a banh mi and suddenly you've got crunch, tang, and a little sweetness and spice all working together to balance the fatty pork and rich pâté. It's a perfect bite every time.

Pickled green beans — those are underrated. Crisp, snappy, and just a little tangy, they make an incredible garnish for a Bloody Mary. They're also killer in a charcuterie spread, because they give you that refreshing acidity in between bites of rich cheese or cured meats.

And here's one people don't always think about: pickled grapes. Slice them in half, quick-pickle them with a little vinegar, sugar, and spice, and you've got these little bursts of sweet-tart flavor that are amazing with roasted chicken or even a cheese board. It's unexpected, but it works because it plays on that balance of sweet, sour, and savory.

That's the power of pairing: pickles don't just sit in the background, they amplify what's on the plate. They're the sharp edge that balances out the richness, the crunch that breaks up the soft, the pop of flavor that keeps you coming back.

Now, before you start filling jars left and right, let's talk about a few common mistakes that trip people up.

First one: throwing the balance out of whack. Too much vinegar or too much sugar and suddenly you've got something harsh, cloying, or just plain weird. Remember — acid, salt, sugar, spice. They've got to work together. If one's screaming louder than the others, the pickle isn't going to sing.

Second mistake: impatience. A lot of folks pull their pickles out too early. Sure, a quick pickle can give you flavor in a few hours, but most of the time they need at least a day to settle in. And with fermentation, rushing it means you miss out on all those deeper, funkier flavors that only develop with time. Good pickles reward patience.

And third, the produce itself. Pickling won't magically fix limp, soft, or overripe vegetables. If you start with weak product, you'll end up with a weak pickle. Always go for fresh, crisp vegetables — carrots that snap, cucumbers that feel firm, beans that bend and break clean. The better the starting point, the better the final result.

So here's the takeaway: pickling at home is simple, but as with all things in the culinary world, it still requires intention.

Balance your brine, give it time, and start with good ingredients. Do that, and you'll have jars full of bright, crunchy, crave-worthy flavor every single time.

That's what makes pickling such a powerful tool for the home cook. It saves food, it amplifies flavor, it gives you textures and contrasts that elevate everyday meals — and you can do it all with just a jar and a few pantry staples.

Now, we've talked about how you can make pickling work for you at home. Next, let's step into the professional kitchen and look at how chefs lean on pickling not just for flavor, but for balance, creativity, and even controlling costs on the line.

In a professional kitchen, pickling is one of those secret weapons chefs lean on to amplify flavors. Think about a fatty piece of pork belly — rich, unctuous, melts in your mouth. On its own, it can feel heavy after a few bites. But throw some pickled mustard seeds on top, and everything changes. The acidity cuts right through that richness, balances the bite, and keeps you wanting more.

That's the beauty of pickling on the line — it's not just a garnish, it's a flavor tool. A spoonful of pickled onions can brighten up a braised short rib. Pickled chilies can bring both heat and tang to balance out something creamy. Even a sharp little pickle tucked onto the side of a plate can reset the palate so the next bite lands just as good as the first.

Chefs don't just use pickling for decoration — they use it to engineer balance on the plate. It's the contrast that makes a dish sing.

And it doesn't stop with a few pickled vegetables on the side — chefs take it even further by turning pickles into condiments that drive the whole dish. Pickled ramps blended into a vinaigrette, pickled shallots chopped fine and folded into sauces, or even kimchi pureed into a base for a marinade — these aren't just accents, they're foundational flavors.

When you pickle something and then transform it into a condiment, you're building layers of complexity that no single ingredient could give you on its own. A pickled ramp has bite, sweetness, and acidity all wrapped together. A spoonful of pickled shallot brings depth and tang in a way raw shallot never could. And kimchi — that's a powerhouse. Fermented, funky, spicy, and sour, it can lift a broth, a sauce, or even a simple bowl of rice into something memorable.

One of my favorite and most memorable things to eat is cold sushi rice and kimchi. My grandmother has a kimchi recipe that has been handed down to my mom and now to my sister and I. The summer right after high school I stayed with my grandmother. One day I was going to school and she gave me a tupperware box with cold sushi rice and her famous kimchi. I was running late for class so I decided to eat in the car.. I never had cold rice that tasted so damn incredible. That moment was 20 years ago.. And I can still taste it. It was that damn good.

And no, that's not a story in my professional career, it was long before I gave myself to this passion.. But it is a defining moment in my food life that led me to understanding deeper flavors later on. I could relate a lot to different foods because I ate a ton of shit growing up. When I became a professional, I used pickling to transform dishes. Whenever I wrote a recipe or a special in my restaurants, I used to always have a formula.. To build a dish I always liked having a protein, a vegetable, a starch, a sauce and then my garnishes. And my garnish game was intentful and well thought out. I would think about textures, colors and flavor profiles.. Gotta have some crunch, some salt, some sweet, some sour or bitter.. And that's when pickles would come into play. At one point we pickled onions, chilis, cucumbers in multiple ways, cauliflower, green beans, carrots.. We literally sought out the freshest produce just to pickle it.

That's why pickling is such a staple in professional kitchens. It's not just about putting a jar on the shelf — it's about creating building blocks that chefs can pull from every day to add brightness, depth, and signature flavor to their menus.

Over the last decade, you've probably noticed — fermentation has gone from being this quiet, old-school method to one of the hottest trends in professional kitchens. Chefs are chasing that depth of umami you can't fake — that funky, savory complexity that only time and bacteria can create.

It's not just sauerkraut and kimchi anymore. You're seeing fermented chili pastes, house-made misos, even pickled and fermented fruits showing up on menus. A simple strawberry might get fermented into a tangy puree that chefs use to glaze meats or fold into desserts. Fermented

black garlic has become a darling ingredient because it delivers sweetness, earthiness, and umami all in one bite.

And the thing is, fermentation isn't just about flavor — it's about identity. A house-fermented hot sauce or kimchi can become a chef's signature, the thing diners remember and come back for. It's no longer a survival technique — it's a creative tool, a way for chefs to carve out their own voice in a crowded food scene.

That's why you'll see it in tasting menus, in fine dining, in gastropubs — fermentation is the line between ordinary and unforgettable.

One of the smartest ways chefs use pickling is for waste control. In a professional kitchen, every penny counts, and every scrap of food has value if you know what to do with it. Pickling lets you stretch ingredients further and turn what most people would throw away into something that actually adds value to the menu.

Take broccoli stems, for example. Most folks cut them off and toss them, but they're crisp, mild, and perfect for pickling. Slice them thin, drop them in a brine, and suddenly you've got a crunchy garnish for salads or bowls. Same with carrot tops — instead of hitting the trash, they can be chopped, pickled, and turned into a bright, herbaceous condiment that tastes incredible on roasted vegetables. Even leftover onions — the half that would normally sit in the fridge until it goes soft — can be sliced up and pickled into something that not only keeps longer, but adds punch to tacos, burgers, or even a charcuterie board.

This isn't just about being thrifty. It's about running a smarter kitchen. Pickling helps reduce waste, control costs, and create new flavors out of things you'd normally lose money on. It's sustainability and creativity working together, and that's the kind of thinking that keeps a kitchen profitable and a menu interesting.

Now let's talk about the real-world applications, because this is where pickling moves from theory into practice on the line.

First, garnishes. We just talked about this, but it's important so we're gonna touch on it again. Pickles make some of the best garnishes you'll ever use — not just for looks, but for impact. A few pickled shallot rings on top of a steak, pickled mustard seeds scattered across a plate, or even a thin slice of pickled radish folded into a salad — they add color, texture, and that pop of acidity that makes the whole dish feel complete. Garnishes shouldn't just be pretty, they should serve a purpose. Pickles do both.

Second, balance. Every great dish needs it, and pickling gives you the tool to cut through fat, mellow out richness, and keep your flavors in check. A fatty braised short rib with something bright and pickled on the side hits differently. A creamy sauce paired with a sharp, crunchy pickle keeps the palate awake. That push and pull — fat against acid, soft against crisp — is what separates a good plate from a great one.

And third, pantry building. A restaurant's identity often comes from its little touches, those house-made items that make diners say, 'I've never had this anywhere else.' House pickles are one of the easiest ways to carve out that identity. A signature pickle — whether it's spicy green beans, fermented hot sauce, or pickled fruit — becomes part of the brand. It's a detail that tells guests, *we care about flavor, we care about craft, and we make things in-house.*

So in practice, pickling isn't just about saving food or showing off technique. It's about giving chefs everyday tools to plate smarter, balance better, and build a menu that feels unique and memorable.

So when you look at how chefs use pickling, it's way more than just a side dish or a garnish. It's a tool. It's a strategy. It helps us amplify flavors on the plate, create condiments that become building blocks, cut food waste and stretch ingredients further, and even build a restaurant's identity through house-made staples.

Pickling in the professional kitchen is about control and creativity. It keeps dishes balanced, it keeps costs in check, and it gives us flavors and textures that can't be achieved any other way. That's why you'll find some form of pickling in just about every serious kitchen, from high-end tasting menus to casual gastropubs.

And the beauty of it all? The same techniques chefs rely on every day are the ones you can use at home. That's the connection. Pickling bridges the home cook and the professional chef — it's timeless, versatile, and it's here to stay.

Today's final thought leads us to this: pickling isn't just about survival anymore. It's about taking something simple and elevating it — adding brightness, depth, crunch, and character while staying connected to traditions that have been around for centuries. It's flavor and sustainability working hand in hand, and it's one of the easiest ways to make your cooking stand out.

So here's my challenge — this week, make a quick pickle. Doesn't matter if it's red onions, carrots, green beans, or something completely outside the box. Try it, taste the difference, and see how much it can change the way you cook. And when you do, share those jars with me — tag them with **#IncrEDIBLEDiscourse** on X so I can see what you're working on.

And if you haven't already, like and subscribe, please — Spotify, YouTube, Amazon or wherever you listen to the show — so you don't miss what's coming next. Because next episode, we're diving into **Sous Vide Simplified: Precision Cooking for Everyone**. If you've ever wondered how restaurants nail that perfect medium-rare steak every single time, or how chefs pull off those silky custards and tender proteins with precision, that's the one you're gonna want to hear.

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While you're waiting for the episode 22 to launch, head over to the website — check out the blog, grab some of the resources, and see what affiliates we're working with to bring you more tools for your kitchen.

Pickling proves that small steps in the kitchen can deliver big payoffs. And that's exactly what we're about here. Working smarter so we can cook better. Keep doing it chefs. I am Mark Grigsby, and this has been another amazing episode of the incredible discourse.