



From fragrant dried rose petals to a shot of raspberry vodka: when inventing jam recipes, use whatever you can find in your pantry – or plot.



kitchen confidential

Sugar, spice and all things nice.
Lynda Hallinan reveals the secret ingredients she hopes will give her the edge in a homegrown jam competition



Rarely does a man boast that he makes the “best jam in the world”. So when Wellington computer programmer Craig Walker made that bold claim to his colleagues last year, his friend Catherine Field-Dodgson was surprised enough to issue a challenge: prove it. And that’s how the capital city’s newest culinary competition came to be.

Think *MasterChef*, but with jam jars. They could have called it *MasterConserve*, but Jam Off had a better ring.

This time last year, Catherine and Craig staged a public showdown at Mojo café, roping in chef Simon Gault and local MP Grant Robertson to taste their preserves. And the winner? Catherine’s ‘Damson’ plum jam narrowly got the nod over Craig’s classic raspberry conserve.

This month, it’s time for the rematch. Jam Off 2011 will be held on Saturday, April 23, as part of the Craft 2.0 event at Lower Hutt’s Dowse Art Museum. And while Craig’s main aim is to claim the crown from Catherine, this year they’ve opened entries up to the public too. Celebrity chef Al Brown will judge the jams, while I’ll be there as MC.

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Of course, it just wouldn’t do to turn up to a jam session empty handed, so I’ve been slaving over my stove in a bid to invent a scrummy new jam or gourmet jelly befitting the occasion.

You really can’t go wrong with jam. The basic recipe calls for equal quantities of sugar and fruit. Cook the fruit first, then add sugar, stir until dissolved, and boil hard (keep a wooden spoon handy to stop it sticking to the bottom of the pot and burning) until setting point is reached. And if it fails to set? Don’t panic. Runny jam tastes as good as firm stuff.

I’m a big fan of ‘Damson’ plum jam, not only because it’s the only type my Mum makes, but because it’s one of the few jams that’s sharp and tangy rather than sickly sweet. Small, tart ‘Damson’ plums are packed with pectin too, so ‘Damson’ jam always sets.

Nonetheless, I don’t want to step on Catherine’s toes – as reigning jam champ – so I won’t be flying to Wellington with a jar of plum jam in my handbag.

You’re only allowed to enter one jar, so I’m determined to invent something imaginative. (Catherine won’t say what she’s making, although she did let slip that alpine strawberries go surprisingly well with a splash of rose water.)

Having decided that my key ingredient must be homegrown, I’ve made fragrant Rugosa rose petal jam (looks better than it tastes), boozy boysenberry jam (stir in a liberal shot of raspberry vodka as you take it off the heat) and crabapple curd.

I found the crabapple curd recipe in Gloria Nicol’s new book *Preserves and Pickles* (\$29.99, from Southern Publishers Group). My interest was immediately piqued as I’ve planted a small grove of ‘Jelly King’ crabapples at the end of our orchard, largely for their stunning spring blossom but also to add bite to cider.

Gloria’s recipe requires 600g chopped crabapples, simmered till soft with a split vanilla bean and 1 tablespoon water. Purée and strain, then place pulp in a bowl over a pot of boiling water with 115g cubed unsalted butter, 2 cups caster sugar, 3 eggs and 2 extra yolks. Whisk constantly until thick (20-30 minutes).

Crabapple curd is original, but a tad anaemic. Not convinced it was a winner, I started tinkering about with ‘Albany Surprise’ grapes and elderberries in an attempt to invent my own mulled wine jelly. (It started off as mulled wine jam, but all the pips in the grapes gave the first batch an unappetising crunch.)

I lightly mashed the elderberries and grapes together, added a splash of pinot noir, the zest of an orange, a cinnamon stick, half a dozen whole cloves, a single star anise and half a teaspoon of ground ginger for good measure, then simmered it gently for an hour before straining the lot through a jelly bag to extract the juice.

Do grapes and elderberries contain any pectin? I have no idea, but Chelsea’s Jam Setting Sugar sure does. Five minutes of rapid boiling later, it was ready to bottle. Now I’ve just got to resist eating it all before judging day.

• *Jam Off, April 23, Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt. See www.jamoff.co.nz for entry details – and see you there.*

Top crops

• **ELDERBERRIES:** Both bushes in my city garden were laden with clusters of dark purple berries (above). I’ll start taking cuttings soon (they root readily) as I have my heart set on creating an English-style edible hedgerow around our farm orchard.

• **GRAPES:** For once, neither birds nor botrytis beat me to my green ‘Italia’ and ‘Albany Surprise’ grapes (also pictured). ‘Albany Surprise’ is one of the best sweet black table grapes. The flesh slips out of those inky skins like juicy jellied marbles.

• **PEARS:** Pear trees have a habit of only cropping prolifically every second year, but someone clearly forgot to tell the old tree in my city garden. It hasn’t had a bad year in all the time I’ve owned the place – and this year is no exception. Only problem is, this venerable tree – it’s as twisted as a corkscrew willow – is so tall and gangly that I haven’t a hope of harvesting the fruit from its upper branches. The result? The whole garden smells like a home brew explosion, as overripe pears drop and rot everywhere. Even the birds can’t keep up.

Flop crops

• **ONIONS:** I concede defeat. My onions didn’t even make it to pickling size this year. What went wrong? I don’t know – but when you can buy 10kg bags for \$10 at the local fruit and veg shop, why bother to find out?

• **BLUE LUPINS:** I sowed a bulk bag of blue lupins as a cover crop down the hill. Not one seed germinated. Or something ate the lot.

• **‘TUMBLING TOM’ TOMATOES:** This neat weeping cherry variety is great for hanging baskets but hopeless in garden beds. My plant grew into a low mound on the ground but didn’t fruit.

Or so I thought. Closer inspection (I lifted its skirts) revealed loads of tomatoes hidden by the foliage – and all rotting quietly.

