

Sweet and full of flavor strawberry jam or compote were always an enjoyable adding for a peanut butter sandwich, a tasty filling for the turnovers or a pie.

But why do we have that type of sweet treats? Long time ago these were a sweet way of preserving fruits for winter, when they are out of season.

My family in Ukraine would make it every summer and every winter we would taste it with a great pleasure. Actually, I was not very enthusiastic with picking up berries, it is not a very funny way of spending time in a yard of a country house when you are a kid and have a river nearby. And the idea of saving berries for winter would not work for me.

But cherries were different – I could and was even encouraged to climb on the tree where nobody sees that I collect berries not to the basket but to my mouth.

Now, being thousands of miles away from that country house and my childhood I keep remembering of the warm tea and piece of bread with stewed strawberries. My favorite were those whole berries, which I would eat first and then finish the syrup.

Another treat traditional for our family would be the cherry or grape elixir – which is boiled berries with sugar that will be put on table both, in summer and in winter, as a lemonade or juice. Naturally flavored beverage is our family's signature drink awaited on big family gatherings.

The whole idea under these two treats is to not make the berry sweeter, not to add extra taste, but to preserve the natural flavor, texture, and look us much as possible. Also, these delicacies needed to be able to stay at the closet for at least 9 months, or even a year and a half – if next summer would not bring a good harvest. Each family has their own tricks in doing stewed fruit and berry elixir, I am going to reveal my family's secrets.

Mom and granny after collecting berries and bringing them home would spend many hours on sorting out them. Strawberries that are just have ripened and have a solid texture are good for a compote, those that are overripe would work for a jam, and strawberries that I would steal while helping them were meant to create minor signs of an allergy on my chicks from the enormous number of berries I consumed. Cherries were also sorted out for identifying the small live creatures that can live in them and those which was pecked out by birds. Grapes were the easiest – the branches were losing the spoiled berries while we were collecting them so needed just washing before being placed into a big jar.

The elixir was the easiest way to operate with berries, but were good only for cherries and grapes because they do not lose their shape while the boiled water would destroy strawberries. Compote is more complicated. Washed and drained berries, covered with sugar, and then cooked for all the next day needed more time and expertise in order to become a tasteful dish and look appetizing.

Needless to say, that every year the ritual of preparing compote and elixir in our family overgrown with many stories that were remembered, reminded and laughed at every following year. Those berries in a jar contain something more than sugar, they embrace the sweetness of memories that I nurture for more than 9 or 18 months, but for the rest of my life.

Receipt

For one-gallon jar of a cherry or grape elixir:

1 lb of cherries or grapes

1 cup of sugar

Amount of water is added to fill the jar

Cherries or grapes should be put into a jar to fill one third of it, then stirred in a boiled water for an hour for 3 times and then drained while all the flavored water would go to the pot for boiling. Only on the third round of boiling the sugar is added and after poring to jars - the lids which were sanitized on the steam are attached to tightly close the jar. All the jars are put upside down to the dark place for several days.

Strawberry compote

2 lb of strawberries

1 and 3/4 lb – to 2 lb of sugar depending on the sweetness of the berries

Sorted and washed strawberries should be covered with sugar overnight. If berries are not very sweet (when the summer is rainy) – the proportion is 1:1. For the sweet strawberries one should put per each kilo – eight hundred grams of sugar to not oversweet the compote and not make the sugar crystalize after a year in the closed.

In the morning the juice from berries should be drained and put on a low heat for boiling. The syrup should be mixed for sugar dissolution with a wooden spatula that was not used for other products. Then berries put in the syrup and boiled for 5-7 minutes depending on the size. Important is to not use spatula for mixing to not break the berries and all the foam that occurs should be removed. Then the syrup with berries should be put for cooling and taste enrichment.

In 6 hours, the boiling and cooling should be repeated and the third iteration should be done for 30 minutes on a low heat. The readiness of the compote can be checked by its density – the denser - the better. After cooling the stewed fruits – put into the sterilized jars and cover tightly with lids.