

ASK MARTHA

Care for vintage wooden bowls, preserve watermelon rind to last all year, keep line-dried towels soft, and bake perfect cakes high in the sky.



WATERMELON RIND, PRESERVED

Q: *I'd like to pickle watermelon rinds this summer. How do I store the rinds until I have enough to pickle?*

A: Watermelon rind, pickled with sugar and spices such as cloves and cinnamon, is a traditional condiment in the South. With a sweet-and-sour flavor and slight crunch, it serves as a bright counterpoint to pork and other rich meats.

Most recipes call for the rind of a large watermelon. If the entire fruit won't be eaten at one sitting, cut the rind from each piece before it's served, and then rinse it and wrap it tightly with plastic wrap. Refrigerate the rinds for up to a week. Freezing is not recommended—high water content leads to ice-crystal damage, which makes the rinds mushy once thawed. (If you serve the watermelon with the rind intact, do not leave

it in the sun; doing so accelerates bacteria growth and shortens shelf life.)

Follow standard pickling procedures, such as sterilizing jars with boiling water. The rind should keep for up to a year in a cool, dark place. For recipes and more information on pickling and canning, visit the National Center for Home Food Preservation's website, uga.edu/nchfp.

MICHIGAN-MADE WOODEN BOWLS

Q: *I have a large wooden bowl marked "Munising." What can you tell me about it, and how can I restore it?*

A: Munising bowls hail from their namesake town, nestled on the South Bay of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Workers at Munising Woodenware Company, in business from 1911 to 1955, machine-lathed each vessel out of hardwood, usually maple, from the forests nearby. The factory produced other household items, such as butter molds, spoons, and breadboards. The goods were sold at department stores, where many found their way onto wedding registries. During World War II, the factory fashioned 50 million tent stakes for the Army and the Marines. Of the many items the company made, the bowls were among the few types of pieces branded with its name.

Today, Munising bowls surface in antiques stores and at online auctions. The salad bowls, 10 inches or more in diameter, are usually unadorned or painted a solid color on their exterior; some are footed. The largest vessels, at least 17 inches wide and unpainted, are dough bowls. Carved from the broadest trunks, these are more valuable and harder to

come by. In the 1940s, the factory began painting some with decorations, such as fruit or flowers. According to Karen Boaz, owner of Red Barn Antiques in nearby Au Train, artisans weren't allowed to sign their work, but many hid their initials in the painted swirls.

To care for a Munising bowl, coat its surface with food-grade mineral oil, and let it get absorbed for six to eight hours. Repeat until oil no longer permeates the wood, and wipe off excess. Treat the bowl every month, and keep it out of direct sunlight and away from extreme heat and cold. If you use the vessel to serve or prepare food, avoid any that may stain the wood, such as beets or berries. To clean it, wash it with hot water and gentle dishwashing liquid. Do not let it soak. Dry it, and then reapply oil.

A SIP OF EGG-CREAM HISTORY

Q: *What is in an egg cream, and what is the origin of the drink?*

A: "Egg cream" is a misnomer for this New York City soda-fountain drink, which calls for neither eggs nor cream—only chocolate-flavored syrup, milk, and seltzer. The frothy concoction is a refreshing, seemingly rich treat: silky brown below, airy white on top.

As is often the case with iconic foods, the egg cream's origins are more legend than fact. One theory is that an early version contained the title ingredients; a recipe from 1906 includes both (but no chocolate). The name might have derived from *chocolat et crème*, a favorite French drink of a Yiddish theater actor, or from the foam, reminiscent of beaten egg

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whites. Most likely, a candy-shop owner (Louis Auster, some say) concocted it around 1900 on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, then home to many Jewish immigrants. Without using pricier ingredients such as ice cream, the drink was an economical and popular offering at candy shops, lunch counters, and soda fountains in Manhattan, the Bronx, and Brooklyn, with its heyday spanning from the 1930s to the 1960s.

The egg cream lives on across the country as a fizzy ambassador of its hometown. But purists insist that it still come with local flavor: In addition to ice-cold whole milk and seltzer spritzed from a pressurized bottle, the drink must be mixed with a chocolate-flavored syrup called Fox's U-Bet (foxs-syrups.com), made by a century-old Brooklyn company, for a sweet taste of tradition.

MILE-HIGH BAKING

Q: *I moved to the mountains, and now my baked goods don't come out right. How do I adjust recipes for altitude?*

A: At higher altitudes, the air has less atmospheric pressure. Starting around 3,000 feet—in the Texas Panhandle, for example—that difference can affect how a cake bakes. It may cook too quickly on top without setting in the middle, or turn out dry because water boils at a lower temperature and evaporates more quickly. The cake also might inflate and then collapse because gasses from leaveners rise to the surface faster.

Every recipe is different; there is no universal solution. But there are several things you can try. Start with minor adjustments, and keep notes on what works and what doesn't. You may need to make one change or a combination of them.

In general, the higher the elevation, the greater the modifications should be.

To counteract faster evaporation, try increasing the liquid by one or two tablespoons per cup at 3,000 feet, and up to four tablespoons per cup at 10,000 feet (in Breckenridge, Colorado). Evaporation concentrates the sugar, so you'll need to decrease each cup of sugar by one to four tablespoons. Increasing the baking temperature by 25 degrees may also help. To keep baked goods from rising too much, too quickly, reduce the amount of baking soda or baking powder by $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon at 3,000 feet and up to $\frac{2}{8}$ teaspoon at 10,000 feet.

For more information and a collection of recipes tested at various altitudes, read *Pie in the Sky*, by Susan G. Purdy (HarperCollins; 2005), or visit her website at highaltitudebaking.com.

COLD-HARDY KIWIFRUIT

Q: *I'd like to grow a hardy kiwi plant. What climate does it require? Is the fruit as tasty as those in the market?*

A: Hardy kiwi (*Actinidia arguta*) is a vine that does well in Zones 4 to 9. It requires full sun, well-drained soil, and average moisture. Like a grapevine, it produces heavy, twining stems and requires sturdy support, such as an arbor or pergola. Fragrant white flowers bloom in midspring, and the resulting fruit needs a ripening period of about 150 days. Smaller than supermarket kiwis (*Actinidia deliciosa*, hardy only to Zone 7), they have hairless edible skin and a flavor that's sweeter and more aromatic.

Hardy kiwis are dioecious (female and male plants are separate), so you should have at least one male for every eight females to yield fruit. The best-tasting varieties—try 'Issai' or 'Ananasaja'—come

from specialty nurseries. Green fruit is most common. Some have red skins, such as those that grow on 'Ken's Red' (the color can bleed when cooked, so these are best eaten fresh). Harvest can be a game of hide and seek, as the kiwis often hang in clusters behind large leaves.

PLUSH LINE-DRIED TOWELS

Q: *When I line-dry my laundry, the towels end up stiff. Are there any tricks to keeping them soft?*

A: You're smart to line-dry your clothes. Among home appliances, only refrigerators and washing machines use more electricity than dryers, according to the U.S. Department of Energy.

Although the airy scent is a plus, line-dried towels can feel stiff. Try using less detergent, especially if you soften your water. Or add ¼ cup of white vinegar or

baking soda to the wash (the vinegar smell dissipates during the rinse cycle). Before hanging each towel, and again once it's dry, shake it firmly—you should hear a sharp snap. Drape one short end over the line so it overlaps by several inches, and then clip. Towels hung this way dry faster and have fewer wrinkles.

If these steps don't produce fluffier results, toss the towels in the dryer while still a bit damp, for about five minutes.

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