

Bourne toWrite...

creative writing
workshops

Marmalade

by Sue Hitchcock

1 Kilo Seville oranges

1 ½ kilo sugar

There is a mystique to marmalade – it isn't just orange jam. To start with the name is curious. When I was at school, I was told that Mary, Queen of Scots named it because it cured her sea sickness. Having been born in France, she would have suffered “mermalade” on her voyages between Scotland and France. The dictionary has a different source – marmela – quince, but I am not convinced. Quince is a fruit in the apple family and there are two varieties – Cydonia (like cyder) – pear shaped, and used in cooking, as it is very hard, but sweet and scented. The other, which can also be cooked is called chaenomeles (meaning like an apple), but is called “the stupid bush” by the Japanese because its branches do not grow upwards.

This is a digression! What we need is the Seville orange, a beautiful, scenty, bitter orange, whose perfume is like the bergamot, the oil of which is used to make eau de cologne. In Seville the huge trees are used like plane trees to give shade in the streets. They have the advantage of being evergreen, as it can be hot -30 degrees – even in winter. So in January look for the oranges in the greengrocer – they aren't waxed so need to be as fresh as possible. Look for green leaves mixed in. Relish their perfume, as it will not survive cooking.

So now you have your oranges, “naranjas”. The only other ingredient is sugar, “azucar”. My granddaughter's Spanish surname might mean “red sea”. Did her ancestors arrive at the same time as the Arab “naranjas” and “azucar”? Her grandfather came from Seville, where the Moorish palaces survive in exquisite perfection. Of course they were Catholic and denied any Moorish ancestry, but so do most Spaniards. You never expect the Spanish Inquisition! Or even General Franco!

Marmalade seems to be peculiarly British, so when my mother gave me a pressure cooker, with a recipe for quick marmalade, I started making it forty years ago.

Start, after enjoying the smell, by washing the oranges. Put the whole into the pressure cooker with a pint of water. Bring it to full pressure on the heat and cook for 15 minutes. Then cool it. Put the oranges in a big bowl, saving the water in the saucepan. Scrape the pith and pips from the oranges and return this to the saucepan, especially the pips, which contain the pectin which sets the jam. Bring this to the boil and simmer it while you cut up the peel. The peel which is cooked is extremely soft and easy to prepare.

Strain the liquid and return it to the saucepan with the peel. The pith and pips can now be discarded. Now add the sugar to the pan and stir well to dissolve before bringing it to the boil. Then you need to stir it regularly so that the sugar doesn't burn on the bottom of the pan. Wear a big oven glove as it can spit and the temperature is above boiling point. In the meantime, wash the jars you must have been collecting over Christmas and then leave them in clean, hot water till the marmalade is ready.

How do you know it is ready? Drip a little on to a cold plate. If it sets and doesn't dribble when you tip the plate, switch off the heat. Quickly dry the jars with a clean cloth and ladle a small amount of jam into each to keep it warm. Then fill the jars. Wipe the tops of the jars clean and if you have metal lids with pressure buttons, put them on while everything is hot. In an hour or so, when the marmalade cools, you will hear the pops as the pressure buttons suck in.

One last point, I forgot! Don't attempt to taste it till it cools!