

## Sliced Cucumbers in a Marinade Sauce:

making a big damn deal out of the simplest dish in the kitchen.

The first step in preparation of cucumbers is the selection of fruit. Yep, it's a fruit. You'll have the most fun (!) if you grow your own, but this cook realizes that when (not *if*) you get a phone call Friday for that Saturday picnic, it's a little late to hill up seeds, build a trellis and start watering. Firmer cukes make for safer slicing; if you have a choice at your grocer's, try to get one of the less seedy breeds. A marinade can resurrect marginal fruit, but doing this requires practice (and well-developed knife skills. Be careful). "Burpless" is not even a factor. You are making food for men.

The fresh cucumber must be rubbed vigorously to remove those prickly little stubs on the skin. This cook does not care how you do this, and doesn't really need to hear about it. After handling, rinse well: cucumbers like to grow up in the open air, not dragging on the ground, so are not prone to many food infections, but come on—how much do you really trust your produce supplier? Next year, grow your own. Then you'll know.

A side-dish salad serving can be made from one cucumber, about the size your husband thinks his man-part is. If company is coming, use a second one, about the size it *really* is. Use a vegetable peeler to make shallow, long stripping cuts (on the *cucumber*, you awful person) and remove all the green and yellow. Grandma did this with a straight-bladed knife, but she was good with a knife, and probably wasted a little too. You will be surprised how many cuts it takes to get all the way around that little sucker. Trim a little off each end. Now fire your marriage counselor; you won't need him any more.

Now comes the dangerous part: using an 8- or 10-inch chef's knife, cut that cucumber on a safely-mounted cutting board into paper-thin slices, just as thin and transparent as you can. When you are practicing and going slow, you may use your thumbnail as a starting guide for each cut. Hold the cuke firmly down to the cutting board, and keep the rest of your holding hand to hell away from that knife. Do not look away or get distracted while doing this operation. Do not ask this cook how he knows this. A chef's knife has a belly-shaped blade, not straight. The reason for this is that you finish each slice with a little rocking motion against the board, making sure each piece is separate without chunking the cuke. It's an art. Do not bleed in the salad.

Slice about a third of the cucumber, then flip the slices with a grand artistic movement into a clean bowl, one size bigger than you think you need. Sprinkle this first layer heavily with dried dill weed (not "dill-seed"—they are different spices). Then do the next third of the fruit and add it to the bowl. This layering process is important in how the slices absorb flavors, and helps when you start tossing the mixture. Add mayonnaise, Greek (sheep's milk) yogurt, and Marzetti's slaw dressing, by single spoonfuls and in roughly equal parts, to each successive layer as you continue slicing.

Now do the same cut to the center section of a large onion. Cut across each thin onion slice once (twice if the onion's *really* big), and use your clean fingers to shred the individual long onion fibers into the bowl. Don't just chop the onion—these long shreds

add a high-toned texture, and promote the subtle exudation of sweetness and sharpness that make this absurdly simple dish such a masterpiece. Really.

It's possible to make a decent sauce using a (low-fat) sour cream instead of yogurt, but the Greek stuff adds character and helps you respect yourself in the morning. Low-fat mayo works just fine—this cook recommends the kind made with olive oil, if you can get it on sale. One cannot stress enough the importance of using real Marzetti's, from Marzetti's famous restaurant in Columbus Ohio. It is thick, rich, and expensive. You will not need to drain or pat-dry the cucumber slices if you use quality marinade ingredients: the water in the fruit will seep and mix into the thick sauce, and its consistency will end up just right. Cut-rate dressings are often watery.

When it looks like you have enough, add a little more! Top the mixture with another dusting of dill, and stir the ingredients gently with the rubber scraper we usually call a spatula. Here is where the big bowl comes in handy: the point is to keep everything inside--not as easy as it looks. After mixing, transfer to a smaller container if you need to (scrape it all out!), cover with a snap-top or saran wrap, and store in the refrigerator. An hour is about the minimum; overnight is better. Before serving, use a spoon to give the whole thing another little toss to mix fluids and flavors. Don't spill any; you'll have to lick it up.

Unless your guests use a straw, there will be some sauce left in the bowl when the cucumbers are all eaten. And while this sauce is a surprising garnish for most vegetables and cuts of meat, it is perfectly all right for you to recycle fresh cucumber and onion into the same sauce. Don't get carried away; there's a shelf life to everything, after all. This cook assumes you have a way of managing your refrigerator's contents, just like you manage your chef's knife, your thumbnails, and that husband. Don't come crying to me.

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*This Cook* is a retired geographer and master truck-farmer in northwest Ohio who learned chefcraft late in life. His recipes, derived from camp cookery and cheap bachelor tricks, have won The Scoutmasters' Invitational, made strong men weep, and reduced dignified ladies to quivering jelly. Don't mess with him: he's got a knife.