

Strawberry Balsamic Black Pepper & Basil Preserves

A bright, low-sugar strawberry preserve with real fruit texture, set with low-sugar pectin so the strawberry stays fresh and the color stays true. Aged balsamic gives it depth, black pepper wakes the fruit up, and fresh basil ties it to the garden. Built for boiling-water canning, and built to teach.

Two sizes, your choice.

Make the small batch if you are an empty nester or came home with a pint or two of berries. Make the double if you have a big family or a half flat to put up. The method is exactly the same for both, and the math is done for you either way.

Why we set it with pectin here.

I usually skip added pectin and cook a preserve down by hand. For a series opener we start with a net. A short cook with low-sugar pectin keeps the strawberry tasting like strawberry, and it gives a first-time canner a reliable set. The no-pectin method comes later in the series.

Ingredients

Ingredient	Small batch about 4 jars	Double batch about 8 jars
Strawberries, crushed	about 2 3/4 cups (about 1 1/2 lbs whole)	about 5 1/2 cups (about 3 lbs whole)
Water	1/4 cup	1/2 cup
Bottled lemon juice	2 tablespoons	1/4 cup
Aged balsamic vinegar	2 tablespoons	1/4 cup
Ball Low or No-Sugar Needed Pectin	3 tablespoons	6 tablespoons
Organic cane sugar	3/4 cup (up to 1 cup)	1 1/2 cups (up to 2 cups)
Freshly ground black pepper	1/2 teaspoon	1 teaspoon
Fine sea salt	1/8 teaspoon	1/4 teaspoon
Fresh basil, very finely sliced	2 teaspoons	4 teaspoons
Butter, optional (cuts foam)	1/4 teaspoon	1/2 teaspoon

Vanilla extract, optional

1 teaspoon

2 teaspoons

About the pectin.

This is built for Ball RealFruit Low or No-Sugar Needed Pectin, the kind in the shaker canister that you measure by the tablespoon. If you have Pomona's, it works too, but follow the calcium-water method on its own box instead. Do not swap in liquid pectin, the Certo kind, because it needs a full load of sugar to set and will not gel in a low-sugar recipe like this one.

Give it time to set.

A low-sugar jam can take up to two weeks to reach its full set. Do not judge it on day one, and do not re-boil a jar that just needs a few more days.

Double is the ceiling.

Do not cook more than a double, about eight jars, in one pot. Low-sugar pectin will not set reliably in a bigger batch. For more jars, run the recipe again rather than filling a bigger pot.

A word on safety before you begin

Strawberries are a high-acid fruit, which is why strawberry preserves are safe for a boiling-water bath. The bottled lemon juice and the balsamic only push the acidity higher, and the basil and pepper are small flavor additions to that acidic base.

This is an adapted recipe, not a lab-tested one. If you want to be airtight for your own peace of mind, check a batch with pH strips or a meter. You are looking for a reading at or below 4.0, well under the 4.6 line that matters for safe canning. Two things that keep it safe and are not optional:

- Use bottled lemon juice, not fresh. Bottled has a standardized acidity. Fresh swings from lemon to lemon, and in canning that is the difference that counts.
- Do not increase the basil beyond what each size calls for. A small amount finely cut is flavor. A big handful changes the character of the jar in a way you do not want on a shelf.

Equipment

- Boiling-water canner with a rack
- Half-pint jars with two-piece lids (4 to 5 for the small batch, 8 to 9 for the double)
- Potato masher for crushing the fruit
- Wide 8-quart preserving pan or a broad heavy pot
- Jar funnel, bubble remover, ladle, clean towels
- 2 or 3 small plates in the freezer for the set test

Before you begin

1. Wash jars in hot soapy water and keep them hot until you fill them.
2. Prepare lids and bands according to the manufacturer's directions.
3. Put 2 or 3 small plates in the freezer for the set test later.

4. Fill the canner with enough water to cover the jars by 1 to 2 inches and bring it toward a simmer while you cook.

Step 1 · Prep the fruit

1. Hull the strawberries. Working one layer at a time, crush them with a potato masher. Crush most of the fruit but leave a handful in small pieces so the finished jar still shows real strawberry.
2. Measure the crushed fruit: about 2 3/4 cups for a small batch, about 5 1/2 cups for a double.
3. Optional, for deeper flavor: stir the balsamic and bottled lemon into the crushed fruit and let it sit 30 to 60 minutes before you cook.

Step 2 · Combine and add the pectin

1. Pour the crushed fruit into a wide 8-quart pot. Add the water, bottled lemon juice, and balsamic if you did not already macerate with them.
2. Gradually stir in the pectin a little at a time, stirring after each addition so it does not clump. Stir in the black pepper and salt. For less foam, add the 1/4 teaspoon butter.

Step 3 · Boil, then add the sugar

1. Bring the fruit to a full rolling boil that cannot be stirred down, over high heat, stirring constantly.
2. Add the sugar all at once. Return to a full rolling boil and boil hard for exactly 1 minute, stirring constantly. This one minute is what sets the jam, so do not cut it short.
3. Remove from the heat and skim any foam.

Step 4 · Finish with the basil and vanilla

Off the heat, stir in the fresh basil and the vanilla extract. Adding them last protects the color and the aroma. Basil that goes in early will darken and turn muddy, and vanilla cooked into the boil loses most of its fragrance.

Step 5 · Check the set

Low-sugar jam firms up slowly, so the plate test tells you where you are before you fill jars.

1. Spoon a little jam onto a frozen plate.
2. Return it to the freezer for 1 minute.
3. Push the edge with your finger. If the surface wrinkles slightly and does not run right back together, it is on its way. Remember it will keep setting in the jar for up to two weeks.

Step 6 · Fill the jars

1. Work with one hot jar at a time.
2. Ladle in the hot jam, leaving 1/4 inch of headspace.
3. Remove trapped air bubbles, adjust the headspace if needed, and wipe the rim with a clean damp cloth.
4. Set the lid and band to fingertip tight.
5. Repeat until all the jars are filled.

Step 7 · Process in a boiling-water canner

1. Place the filled jars on the rack in the canner.
2. Make sure the water covers the jars by 1 to 2 inches.
3. Bring to a full rolling boil, cover, and process for the time on the chart below.
4. Turn off the heat, remove the lid, and let the jars rest in the canner for 5 minutes.
5. Lift the jars straight up and set them on a towel-lined surface to cool undisturbed for 12 to 24 hours.

Altitude	Processing time (half-pint jars)
0 to 1,000 ft	10 minutes
1,001 to 6,000 ft	15 minutes
Above 6,000 ft	20 minutes

The processing time is the same for both batch sizes. Most of the country lives above 1,000 feet somewhere, so find your altitude once and write it on the recipe.

Step 8 · Check seals and store

1. After the jars have cooled, check the seals.
2. Remove the bands, wipe the jars if needed, label, and store in a cool, dark place.
3. Any jar that did not seal goes in the fridge and gets used first.

Sealed jars keep their best color and flavor for about a year. Give the set up to two weeks before you decide it is finished. Once a jar is opened, keep it in the fridge.

Notes for best texture and flavor

- Sugar range. The amounts above give a low-sugar, gourmet jam that lets the balsamic and pepper come through. You can go a little lower or up to the amount in parentheses for a sweeter, slightly firmer jar. The pectin does the setting either way.
- The findable pectin. Ball Low or No-Sugar Needed is on most store shelves. Pomona's is a fine swap if you have it, using its own calcium-water method. Liquid pectin does not work here.
- Keep the basil fine and modest. Too much makes the jar look muddy and can bully the berries. To protect the green, blanch the leaves 10 seconds and shock in ice water before you slice, or make peace with the flecks softening over time.
- Freshly ground black pepper only. It tastes warmer and cleaner than pre-ground.
- Keep the balsamic modest. It adds depth. Too much starts to crowd the strawberry out.
- Vanilla. Extract is what most kitchens already have, so that is what this uses, stirred in off the heat at the end. Homemade vanilla paste and extract come later in the series, and once you have them they go right here in its place.

What each ingredient does

Ingredient	What it does
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Strawberries	Main fruit flavor and body
Bottled lemon juice	Brightens the flavor and locks in safe acidity
Balsamic vinegar	Adds dark, elegant depth
Ball low-sugar pectin	Sets the preserve without a lot of sugar or a long cook
Water	Gives the pectin enough liquid to boil and spread evenly
Sugar	Sweetens and balances, but you control how much
Black pepper	Wakes up the strawberry with gentle warmth
Fresh basil	A fresh garden note that pairs with strawberry and balsamic
Salt	Balances sweetness and sharpens flavor
Vanilla extract, optional	Softens the edges and rounds out the fruit

Serving ideas

- Spoon over warm biscuits with salted butter.
- Set out on a cheese board with goat cheese, Brie, or mascarpone.
- Brush onto pork tenderloin or chicken near the end of cooking for a glossy glaze.
- Swirl into yogurt or spoon over vanilla ice cream.
- Spread on crostini with soft cheese and a thin ribbon of basil.

Troubleshooting

Too thin. Give it a full two weeks first, because low-sugar jam sets slowly. If it is still loose after that, empty the jars back into the pot, stir in 1 more tablespoon of pectin, bring it to a hard boil for 1 minute, then re-jar and reprocess.

Too firm. Next time cook the one-minute boil a touch shorter, or ease back on the sugar. A lighter hand keeps it soft and spoonable.

Herbs turned dark. The basil went in too early or was cut too thick. Add it off the heat at the very end and slice it very fine.

Flavor too sharp. The balsamic may be too young or too bold. Use a smoother aged balsamic and keep the amount modest so the strawberry stays in charge.

