Sides / Morocco

Preserved Lemons

Whole lemons packed tight in their own juice with coarse salt and spices, sealed in a jar and left for a month — transforming the rind from bitter pith to a silky, mellow, intensely savory and fragrant preserve.

Time 43200 min **Servings** 4

What you'll need.

- ☐ 100 parts Thin-skinned lemons (Meyer or Eureka, unwaxed)
- ☐ 20 parts Coarse non-iodized sea salt or kosher salt
- ☐ 30 parts Fresh lemon juice (from additional lemons for brine)
- ☐ 0.5 part Bay leaves (dried)
- ☐ 0.3 part Cinnamon stick (one small piece)
- ☐ 0.2 part Whole black peppercorns
- ☐ 0.1 part Whole cloves (2–3)

Let's make it.

01 Scrub the lemons thoroughly under warm water to remove any surface wax or pesticide residue — unwaxed lemons are strongly preferred, as the rind is the prize and you want nothing between the salt and the natural lemon oils. Cut each lemon nearly into quarters from the top, stopping 1–2 cm before the base so the lemon holds together in a fan shape. This quartered-but-hinged cut maximizes the surface area exposed to the salt while keeping the lemon whole for an attractive presentation. Pack 1–2 tablespoons of coarse salt generously into the opening of each quartered lemon, pressing the salt into the flesh. The quantity of salt is not negotiable — undersalting will allow harmful bacterial growth rather than the desired fermentation.

02 Sterilize a wide-mouth glass jar (large enough to hold all the lemons tightly) by boiling or running through a dishwasher's hot cycle. Place a bay leaf, a small piece of cinnamon, a pinch of peppercorns, and the cloves in the base of the jar. Pack the salt-stuffed lemons into the jar as tightly as possible, squeezing them in and pressing down so the lemons compress and release their juice. Tuck additional spices between the lemons as you layer. Once all lemons are packed, press down firmly with your fist — you want the jar to be so tight the lemons cannot rattle or move. Pour fresh lemon juice over the top until the lemons are fully submerged. If needed, add a small amount of additional salt dissolved in lemon juice. Seal tightly.

03 Store the sealed jar at room temperature (18–24°C / 65–75°F) for 30 days minimum, turning the jar upside down once daily for the first week to redistribute the salt and juices, ensuring all lemon surfaces are bathed in the brine. The lemons will gradually sink as they soften and the juice level will look different from day to day — this is normal. After a week, the turning is less critical, but occasional rotation helps. At 30 days, taste: the rind should be tender, translucent, and mellow — not sharply bitter but savory-salty-fragrant. The flesh is typically discarded when using preserved lemons in cooking; only the rind is used.

04 Once cured, refrigerate the jar. To use: remove a lemon quarter, rinse the salt from the rind under cold water, then scrape away and discard the flesh and pith — only the silky, translucent rind is used. Slice or mince the rind and use in tagines, grain salads, pasta, compound butters, or dressings. The brine in the jar is also excellent: use it as a seasoning salt substitute in sauces and braises. Preserved lemons can transform a dish from good to memorable with just a small amount — their flavor is concentrated, so use with restraint until you understand their potency.

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Servings are an estimate; check quantities in the source recipe.
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