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How to make perfect lemonade

Forget that colourless carbonated stuff – real lemonade is sweet and sour and 10 times as refreshing. But do you add salt, or cucumber, or mint? Time for some taste tests



A glass apart ... Felicity's perfect lemonade. All photographs: Felicity Cloake

Bitter shandies aside, I'm not a habitual lemonade drinker – it's a thirst that seems to have quietly died away at about the age of 17, the same time as that for orange squash and blue raspberry Panda Pops. No wonder the distinctly more mature R Whites chap had to sneak downstairs in the middle of the night to get his fix.

But at this time of year, when I'm toiling up a hill in the sunshine or stuck on a stifling bus in the bad-tempered traffic, a cold glass of lemonade often appears before me, unbidden, like a mirage of refreshment. Not the saccharine-laden, aggressively carbonated sort, of course: no, my daydreams tend more towards the mouth-puckering, traditional drink – the kind that suggests rolling lawns replete with croquet hoops rather than a warm can from the ice cream van.

For reasons probably clear to anyone of a more scientific bent, the sweet and sour flavours of real lemonade seem to hit the spot like nothing else on a hot day. (Interestingly, however, Jane Grigson reports in her Fruit Book that, when she was a child, it was a late-winter drink intended to "cleanse the blood" of all that season's stodgy food.)

The cloudy sort sold under the name of "old-fashioned" lemonade is often just as sugary as its colourless cousin, and the fresh kind is extortionately expensive if you actually want to quench your thirst rather than wet your whistle, making lemonade an ideal candidate for trying at home.

Paula Deen

One of the simplest recipes I find is from down-home southern US celebrity chef [Paula Deen](#). She dissolves two cups of sugar in one cup of hot water, and then stirs in two cups of fresh lemon juice and dilutes it with a gallon of cold water. The results are intensely sweet and sour – nice in small quantities, but not terribly thirst quenching. It finds favour with the most sweet-toothed of my housemates, who screws up his face at every other lemonade of the day: perhaps one for the children.

Constance Spry

The indomitable Constance Spry, first principal of London's [Cordon Bleu cookery school](#) and author of what the Observer Food Monthly describes as "[one of the greatest cookbooks of all time](#)", gives an [almost equally simple recipe](#), which involves pouring 1.2 litres of boiling water over three diced lemons along with 3tbsp sugar and leaving it to soak for 15–30 minutes "until strong without becoming bitter". Slices of lemon and a sprig of mint are added for the final hour of chilling. Despite me checking it assiduously, it's still rather bitter for my taste after 20 minutes – and the lemon doesn't seem to have released any of its juices. Perhaps mashing the diced fruit through the sieve might have yielded better results, but I don't dare second-guess Constance.

Jane Grigson



Jane's [Fruit Book recipe](#) involves infusing water with the peel of three lemons and simmering it gently – "the peel gradually flavours the water quite strongly". Once cool, I stir in the lemon juice and sugar to taste and chill, then dilute with soda water and serve with a sprig of mint and a slice of cucumber. Although I find a still lemonade more refreshing, the balance of sour and bitter flavours is much better than in the Constance Spry recipe, although perhaps a little muted for my taste. The mint and cucumber provides a distinctive and very British taste of summer which makes this particular lemonade stand out from the rest.

Delia Smith

[Delia's method](#) also involves infusing hot water with the zest of three lemons and then stirring in the juice of six fruits, along with 150g sugar. She then leaves it overnight, which, given how rapidly Constance Spry's lemonade turned bitter, makes me anxious, but actually the flavour is very well balanced and my favourite of all the recipes I test.

Gary Rhodes



Gary's recipe, in [The Complete Rhodes Around Britain](#), is billed as going well with griddled scones and homemade biscuits, which is endearing – it sounds just the kind of thing to set off a sunny afternoon in a striped deckchair. The method, however, is unusual: I chop up two lemons, pith, pips and all, and stick them in a blender with 4tbsp caster sugar and a pint of water, whizz it all together, sieve it and it's ready to serve over ice. I really want to like this one (so easy!) but like the Constance Spry lemonade, the bitterness of the peel is a little overpowering.

Mamta's Kitchen



You never appreciate a glass of chilled lemonade more than in a hot climate, and India can't get enough of the stuff. In my experience, lemonade on the subcontinent tends to mean a glass half-full of freshly squeezed citrus juice (what were described as lemons always tasted more like limes to me) served with a bottle of soda water and a bowl of sugar to be added as desired – along with a good pinch of salt.

Blogger [Mamta Gupta's simple recipe](#) for nimbu pani involves stirring the juice of a lemon or lime (I use lemon, for consistency rather than for authenticity's sake) into a jug of water, then adding sugar to taste and serving with ice and a slice of lemon. A pinch of chat masala spice – which doesn't seem quite in keeping with the drink I'm trying to achieve – or salt is an optional extra: Mamta observes that "salt and sugar together help to replace the lost electrolytes in the intense heat of India", and indeed this subtly flavoured drink is hands-down the most refreshing of all the recipes I try. I quite like the salt, but that could just be nostalgia – it doesn't go down quite so well with some of my testers, so I'm going to leave it to your discretion.

Perfect lemonade



The simplicity and speed of Gary Rhodes's method appeals to me here – lemonade is something you should be able to enjoy on the spur of the moment rather than having to prepare it the night before as Delia's recipe demands. I did enjoy the balance of flavours in her lemonade though, which I put down to the ratio of one part zest to two parts juice, as opposed to the equal amounts favoured by most of the others. I've added slightly more juice to make it a little more thirst-quenching, however. A pinch of salt, and a slice of cucumber and a sprig of mint to serve, adds a final touch of summer – if time permits, soaking them while the lemonade chills, as Constance Spry suggests, allows their flavour to infuse further. If not, dive straight in.

Makes 600ml

If you prefer a sparkling lemonade, add only 250ml cold water to the blender and then top up the jug with cold soda water just before serving.

2½ unwaxed lemons

50g white caster sugar

570ml cold water

Pinch of salt (optional)

¼ cucumber, sliced

Small bunch of mint

1. Cut one of the lemons into chunks and put into a food processor or blender, along with any juices from the chopping board and the juice of the remaining one and a half lemons, the sugar, the salt if using and a little of the water. Whizz to a puree, then add the rest of the water. Taste and add a little more sugar if necessary.
2. Pour into a jug add the slices of cucumber and a couple of sprigs of mint, then chill until ready to serve.
3. Serve over ice with a fresh slice of cucumber and a fresh sprig of mint for each glass.

Is lemonade the most refreshing drink on earth – and if not, what do you use to quench your thirst when the temperature soars? And has anyone any good suggestions for lemonade cocktails – a gin fizz, perhaps?

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