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Spicy Carrot Pickles

Makes 4 pint jars

I've been reading and hearing about the spicy carrots served with cheesy sandwiches at Tartine Bakery & Café in San Francisco and appreciating them from afar. Like my mom, who made the most amazing squab b'stillas back in the 70s, long before she tried the real thing in Morocco (only to learn that they don't even use squab there anymore), I have no problem copying something I've never tasted. I honestly don't know if the carrots I've come up with – which are very, very good – are even remotely similar to Tartine's, but maybe someday I'll find out.

Use the best carrots you can find, preferably small 1/2-inch diameter true baby carrots, which can be left whole.

2 pounds carrots, trimmed and scrubbed
5-1/2 cups cider vinegar (5% acidity)
1 tablespoon pure kosher salt
3 tablespoons sugar
3 cinnamon sticks
3 bay leaves
8 dried hot chiles, stemmed
4 cloves garlic, sliced
4 sprigs thyme
1 to 2 teaspoons crushed red pepper flakes, to taste
1/2 teaspoon whole black peppercorns
1/2 small white onion, thinly sliced lengthwise

Peel the carrots, if desired, and cut larger carrots into sticks no more than 1/2-inch thick. Cut into 4-inch lengths to fit upright in pint jars. Set aside in a bowl of ice water.

Prepare for water-bath canning: Wash the jars and keep them hot in the canning pot, and put the flat lids in a heatproof bowl.

In a wide, 6- to 8-quart preserving pan, combine the vinegar, 1 cup water, the salt, sugar, cinnamon sticks, and bay leaves. Bring to a boil, then simmer for 5 minutes. Add the carrots and cook until just crisp-tender, 8 to 10 minutes.

Ladle boiling water from the canning pot into the bowl with the lids. Using a jar lifter, remove the hot jars from the canning pot, carefully pouring the water from each one back into the pot, and place them upright on a folded towel. Drain the water off the jar lids.



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Spicy Carrot Pickles, (continued)

Working quickly, divide the chiles, garlic, thyme, red pepper flakes, and peppercorns among the jars. Using tongs or a slotted spoon, transfer the hot carrots to the jars (do not pack them too tightly) and fill in empty spaces loosely with slivers of onion. Ladle the hot pickling liquid into the jars, leaving 1/2-inch headspace at the top. Use a chopstick to remove air bubbles around the inside of each jar. Use a damp paper towel to wipe the rims of the jars then put a flat lid and ring on each jar, adjusting the ring so that it's just finger-tight. Return the jars to the water in the canning pot, making sure the water covers the jars by at least 1 inch. Bring to a boil, and boil for 15 minutes to process. Remove the jars to a folded towel and do not disturb for 12 hours. After 1 hour, check that the lids have sealed by pressing down on the center of each; if it can be pushed down, it hasn't sealed, and the jar should be refrigerated immediately. Label the sealed jars and store.