
Devonshire Pickled Apples

A Research Companion & Traditional Recipe

*Tracing a West Country preserving tradition from the orchards of
Edwardian Devon back through the kitchens of Cornwall*

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Compiled from web research, primary-source analysis,
and first-hand observation of BBC's Edwardian Farm, Episode 2

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I. The Question

Can we find a traditional, Edwardian-era recipe for Devonshire pickled apples—specifically the kind demonstrated by historian Ruth Goodman on the BBC series *Edwardian Farm*? And if the exact recipe proves elusive, can we reconstruct an authentic version from period sources, regional food history, and Ruth’s own on-camera description?



II. The Television Source

Edwardian Farm (BBC Two, 2010–2011) followed historian Ruth Goodman and archaeologists Alex Langlands and Peter Ginn as they lived and worked on a farm at Morwellham Quay in Devon for a full calendar year, using only Edwardian-era tools and methods. In **Episode 2**, set in October, Ruth preserves supplies for winter: she pickles apples, salts a ham, and smokes bacon.

On camera, Ruth identifies the apples she is using as “**Sweet Larks**.” She describes them as “not that sweet, but not sour like a crabapple.” She calls pickled apples “traditional” around Devon and notes she has never encountered the practice anywhere else. She does not name a specific source book or recipe.



III. The Household Manual

Ruth Goodman is known to reference a household manual called *The Best Way: A Book of Household Hints & Recipes*, originally published in 1915. Described as a practical guide written “for housewives by housewives,” it includes a section on Sauces, Pickles, and Preserves among many other chapters covering everything from invalid cookery to toilet hints. The 1915 date places it at the cultural tail end of the Edwardian era.

Although Ruth does not cite this book on camera during the apple-pickling segment, it remains a strong candidate for her broader source material throughout the series.

Availability: The Best Way has been republished by Vintage Cookery Books in affordable modern editions using the original text and artwork.

Print: ISBN 9781406798326 or 9781443736787 (Amazon, Barnes & Noble, AbeBooks)

eBook: ISBN 9781473390218 (VitalSource)

The companion book — Ruth Goodman’s *Edwardian Farm* (Pavilion Books, 2010, ISBN 9781862058859) — includes projects and recipes and may also contain the pickled apple recipe.



IV. The Apple: Sweet Lark

Sweet Lark is a folk name for the **Cornish Aromatic** apple (*Malus domestica*), a heritage variety first documented in Cornwall in 1813 but believed to be considerably older. The name “Sweet Lark” was used within Cornwall but was eventually lost in favour of the current moniker. One contributor to the Orange Pippin apple database noted that the variety grew in her grandmother’s garden under the name “Sweet Lark” — “couldn’t be a prettier name, could there!”

Cornish Aromatic produces yellow fruit, relatively small (roughly the size of a mandarin), with a firm, dry flesh and a rich flavour described as having hints of pear drop and spice. It is a late-season apple, harvested in mid to late October, and stores well into winter — precisely the profile needed for a preserving apple.

The Cornwall & South West Fruit Focus project confirmed that Sweet Lark, Cornish Longstem, and Chasewater Longstem were all traditionally used as pickling apples in the region. Devon sits immediately adjacent to Cornwall; these orchard traditions did not respect county boundaries, particularly in the Tamar Valley where the two counties meet — and where Morwellham Quay is located.



V. Reasoning About Authentic Ingredients

Vinegar: Cider Vinegar, Almost Certainly

Devon and Somerset were the heartland of English cider production. Every farm would have had cider vinegar in abundance — it was simply cider that had turned. Using malt vinegar or wine vinegar when sitting on barrels of the homemade stuff would have been impractical to the point of absurdity. For a Devonshire farm context, cider vinegar is the overwhelmingly likely choice.

Sweetener: Treacle or Brown Sugar, Not Maple Syrup

Some modern pickled-apple recipes call for maple syrup. This is a dead giveaway of contemporary North American origin. Sugar maples (*Acer saccharum*) are native to northeastern North America; the tradition of tapping and boiling sap was learned by European colonists from Indigenous peoples. Britain's native maples (sycamore and field maple) do not produce sap in the volume or sugar concentration needed for syrup. Maple syrup was known in Edwardian England as an expensive imported curiosity — not something a Devon farmwife would put in a pickle brine.

Refined white sugar was available by the early 1900s, but a practical farm adaptation would more likely use **black treacle** or **golden syrup** (Lyle's had been on shop shelves since 1883) — both cheaper, and treacle's slight bitterness and depth pairs beautifully with apples and vinegar. Ruth Goodman's on-camera "liquor" appears quite dark brown in the jar, further suggesting treacle or dark brown sugar in the mix.

Spices: Common English Preserving Spices

By 1900, Britain's global trade networks made common spices cheap and widely available even in rural shops. The traditional English preserving spice shelf would include **whole cloves**, **allspice (pimento)**, **peppercorns**, and possibly **mustard seed** — all cheap, all used in English pickles for centuries. Mace or nutmeg were possible but pricier. Cinnamon (usually cassia bark) was common enough.

What you would *not* find in an authentic period recipe: star anise, cardamom, vanilla, or other fashionable ingredients that appear in modern "pickled apple" recipes. These are contemporary additions.

Ruth makes no specific mention of spices on camera, but cloves are visible in the jar — consistent with the Cornish tradition, where a woman from West Cornwall specifically remembered pushing cloves into the apples as a girl.



VI. Ruth Goodman's Recipe, As Observed

The following is transcribed directly from Ruth's on-camera narration in Episode 2:

Devonshire Pickled Apples

As described by Ruth Goodman, Edwardian Farm, Episode 2

Ingredients

- Sweet Lark apples (a large bowlful, whole, small)
- 2 pints vinegar
- 1 lb sugar
- Cloves (visible in the jar)

Method

Boil the vinegar with the sugar. Poach the apples very gently in the vinegar as it cooks. As soon as the apples begin to soften, remove them and let them cool. Boil the vinegar down for another half hour so it reduces somewhat.

Ruth's note: "The liquor is quite sticky. Should taste like a sweet pickle, like a solid chutney or something."

Observations: Ruth does not specify the type of vinegar or sugar, nor does she mention cloves verbally — but they are visible in the jar. The finished liquor appears dark brown, suggesting treacle or dark brown sugar rather than white. The number of apples is not stated precisely; the apples are quite small (mandarin-sized) and filled a large bowl. The two-stage method — poach, remove, reduce, pour back over — is consistent with all the period sources we found.



VII. The Traditional Cornish Recipe

The following recipe was collected by Andrew Ormerod of the Cornwall & South West Fruit Focus project, from a woman in West Cornwall whose family tradition of making pickled Sweet Lark extends back at least to the Second World War.

Pickled Sweet Lark

Traditional Cornish recipe, collected c. 2011

Ingredients

- Sweet Lark apples (or other small, firm, sweet variety)
- Whole cloves (3 per apple)
- Vinegar
- Sugar

Method

Wash the apples in slightly warm water and dry them. Push three cloves into each apple. Heat the vinegar and dissolve the sugar. Place the whole apples in the vinegar syrup on the heat and boil for a few minutes. Apples should have a similar texture to beetroot when cooked — slightly soft but the flesh should not be collapsing.

Storage & Serving

Store in earthenware jars. Over time the flavour intensifies as the vinegar syrup penetrates the fruit and the apples turn a rich brown. Keeps extremely well — the source reported having some she made ten years prior.

Traditionally eaten in winter on Sundays, with cream and splits (a local bread roll), or alongside a Sunday roast.

“My mother used to make Pickled Sweet Lark during the Second World War with apples from the local orchards. I remember putting cloves in them when I was a girl. The pickled apples were stored in earthenware jars.”



VIII. A Period Household-Manual Recipe

The following recipe, found on Food.com, is written in unmistakably period language — “a peck of apples,” “place over the fire,” “skim well,” the muslin spice bag — and is very likely transcribed from a late-Victorian or Edwardian household source. It represents the more formal, middle-class version of the same tradition.

Pickled Apples

Period household-manual recipe (source unattributed)

Ingredients

- ♦ 1 peck of apples (approximately 21), ripe, hard, and sweet
- ♦ 2 quarts vinegar
- ♦ 4 lbs sugar
- ♦ ½ oz whole mace
- ♦ ½ oz whole cloves
- ♦ ½ oz whole allspice
- ♦ 1 tsp mustard seed
- ♦ A few pepper grains
- ♦ A little salt

Method

Take ripe, hard, sweet apples. Peel evenly, and if the apples are perfect leave them whole, otherwise cut into quarters. Heat the vinegar and sugar together until it boils, skim well, put the spices into a thin muslin bag and add to the vinegar, then put in the apples. Place over the fire, and stew slowly until the apples are soft. Then take out the apples, let the vinegar boil down and pour over the fruit; cover and put away.

Note on adaptation: This recipe does not specify a type of vinegar. For a Devon interpretation, use cider vinegar. The sugar may be replaced in whole or part with black treacle or dark brown sugar for a more rustic, farm-kitchen character. The spice list here — mace, cloves, allspice, mustard seed, peppercorns — represents the full complement of an Edwardian preserving cupboard; the Cornish folk version used only cloves.



IX. Modern Substitutions

Sweet Lark (Cornish Aromatic) apples are a rare heritage variety, unlikely to be found at a typical American grocery store. The key characteristics to match are: small size, firm flesh that holds its shape when poached, and a mildly sweet (not tart) flavour.

Best Match: Lady Apples

Also called Api or Christmas apples, Lady apples are small (roughly mandarin-sized), firm-fleshed, mildly sweet with a slight tartness, and hold their shape beautifully when cooked. They are a genuinely ancient French heritage variety, period-appropriate in spirit, and available at better grocery stores and farmers' markets in autumn. They are commonly sold whole and unblemished — perfect for pickling intact with cloves pushed in. Widely available in upstate New York and New England.

Runner-Up: Small Braeburns or Small Fujis

Both are firm and sweet rather than tart, and hold up well to heat. The problem is they are usually too large — you would need to quarter them, which departs from the whole-apple tradition. Still, the flavour profile is reasonable.

Honourable Mention: Seckel Pears

Not an apple, obviously, but they are the right size, firm, mildly sweet, and pickled pears are themselves a long English tradition. If Lady apples prove unavailable, Seckels would capture the *spirit* of the thing admirably.

Varieties to Avoid

Anything from the McIntosh family — they go mealy when cooked. Granny Smiths, while firm, are too aggressively tart for what Ruth describes as “not that sweet, but not sour.”



X. Sources & Further Reading

Edwardian Farm, Episode 2. BBC Two, November 2010. Directed by Stuart Elliott. Featuring Ruth Goodman, Alex Langlands, and Peter Ginn. Filmed at Morwellham Quay, Devon.

The Best Way: A Book of Household Hints & Recipes. Originally published 1915. Reprint: Vintage Cookery Books. ISBN 9781406798326.

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"Cornish Aromatic." *Orange Pippin Fruit Trees*. orangepippin.com.

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"Devon Apple Variety Names." Orchard Link / South Devon AONB. orchardlink.org.uk.

"Victorian Apple Harvest at Audley End." English Heritage Blog. blog.english-heritage.org.uk.

"Pickled Apples." Food.com, Recipe #2960. Submitted by user Mysterygirl.

*"Over time the flavour intensifies as the vinegar syrup penetrates the fruit
and the apples turn a rich brown. It keeps very well too."*

— A woman from West Cornwall
