



Livin' High On The Hog!

~How I rendered my own lard.

by healthybratt (REVISED 2008 0913)

For many months, I looked for a source of healthy cooking oil. Due to the processing methods, I don't trust most (if not all) of the vegetable oils available. I don't care for the taste of coconut oil in my foods and it's a bit on the pricey side. Raw butter is hard to come by and also very expensive. Based on my findings, I decided that organic lard was probably going to be my best choice.

I found that organic lard retails at about \$10/lb. That's 5 times more expensive than butter! Not a good thing!

Determined to find a better way, I decided to see what I could find locally. I began calling the local meat lockers. This is the place local farmers and hunters take their stock for butchering. I managed to locate a locker that was willing to GIVE me the lard from the butchering of a few pigs. The animals weren't certified organic, but they were pasture fed and supplement free. JACKPOT!

It cost us about \$25 to drive the 1.5 hours round trip. The locker gave us 70lbs of pork fat already ground and frozen for storage.

Now the big question was whether or not I could turn these bags of fat into useable lard. I had read up on the subject, but the obscurity of the lost art somehow caused me to doubt myself and the odd looks from friends and loved ones sure didn't inspire much confidence.

Nevertheless, I did some online research, spoke to a few friends, and came up with a method I thought would work. So far, I have successfully rendered three batches of the pig fat into lard, producing 16 quarts (about the same as 32 lbs of butter). I figure, this amount is enough to last us about 8 months . . . AND I still have another 16+ quarts to go!

I've included some pictures along with an overview of the process(es) I undertook.



I thawed out one bag of the raw, ground pig fat. I estimated it to weigh about 18 lbs, but we had no scales around to verify. With a metal spoon, I scooped out hunks into my 5-quart crock pot (slow cooker) until it was full. The idea was to get about 4+ quarts in there to allow for cooking room when it began to bubble and boil. This wound up using up about 1/2 the bag.



For the first batch, I turned the crock pot on low for several hours, but it peaked well below the needed temperature. After about 6 hours, I turned it to the high temperature setting. On the second batch, I just started on high and everything worked out just fine.



For my third and fourth batches, I wanted to finish in one day and it wouldn't all fit in the crock pot, so I decided to do half in the crock pot and half in the oven. I put about the same amount of fat (4-5 quarts) into a large roasting pan and turned on the oven to **300° F**.



Some resources I found suggested that water should be put in the pan with the fat to render. At least one source mentioned that using water in the oven method might prevent scorching, but I had no problems rendering in the oven without the water. I chose to render without water, because I read that using water causes the rendering process to be very stinky and tends to fill up the house with very unpleasant odors for several days following the process.



After cooking for about 5 or 6 hours, most of the fat became liquid. There were some pieces floating around that resembled wadded up bacon or bits of gristle. All total, the process took about 9-11 hours depending on the method chosen (the oven cooked a bit faster).



I monitored the temperature with a candy thermometer to allow the cracklings (leftover bits) to brown without allowing the lard to reach its smoking point. I would highly recommend a faster reading thermometer if you want to cook in the oven, as I had to hold the thermometer in the pan for several minutes each time before I could get a clear reading. A few sources recommended regular stirring to prevent scorching. I stirred a few times to break up any large chunks. This seemed to speed up the melting process but I'm not convinced that it was crucial to the process. Once the temperature reached **260° F**, I was ready to strain and store it.



During my research, I learned that straining the leftover bits from the final product is crucial to stabilizing the fat, giving it a longer shelf life. Well-rendered, well-filtered lard should last indefinitely without refrigeration or other preservation methods, but since I'm new to all of this, I decided to can mine just in case I missed something. I discovered while rendering the first batch that the lard cooled off enough to keep the lids from sealing if I took too long to get it into the jars, so it was important to get the jars ready before turning off the heat.



To prepare the area, I got out my stainless steel bowl with a pour spout and my big metal strainer. I lined the strainer with a flour sack dishtowel.



I used standard 32 oz (1 quart) canning jars and lids. To keep from making a huge mess, I also used a typical canning funnel.



Smuckers® natural peanut butter jars have a canning seal on the metal lids that come with the jar. I have several of these and decided to try a couple. These jars withstood the heat of the fat and sealed the same as the canning jars. Someone had also told me that I could have reused pickle jars in the same way.



Once my jars and strainers were ready, I ladled the fat into the waiting strainer/bowl until the crock (roasting pan) was low enough I could pour it without dropping the crock or burning myself. I could have strained it directly into the jars with a smaller strainer, but because of the weight and size of my crock, I wanted a larger target for pouring and I didn't want to have to start over if I missed and poured some unwanted remnants into the jars. I figured it would be much easier to scoop the chunks out of a large open bowl if any slipped through the filter.



I filled my bowl with about half of the lard and left the rest heating in the pot to prevent it from cooling too quickly. While hot, the finished product was a liquid with a brownish gold color. It resembled most vegetable oils I've seen.



I had something resembling bacon bits left in my strainer. These are commonly referred to as crackling's. These are actually edible, but they are very greasy. I've heard that these are supposed to make good flavorings for cornbread and other savory dishes, but we decided to give them to our pets as a treat instead.



I poured the strained fat into the waiting jars and capped with fresh canning lids. I put the rings on snug being careful of the hot jars. I used potholders to protect my hands, as the jars were very hot once filled.



Alternate storage ideas

Try freezing in ice cube or muffin trays. A large ice cube is approximately 2 T and a standard muffin cup is about 3-4 T depending on how full you fill it.

If you use ice trays, they will pop out like an ice cube, but you'll have very greasy trays when you're done. You'll either need to wash them very well before using for ice or you might consider buying separate trays as they could be used to freeze other rendered fats such as beef or chicken stock in the future. If you use rigid muffin trays it might be more difficult to remove the fat in whole pieces. If you don't mind a fork hole in the middle, then this shouldn't be an issue, but if it matters, you might consider using silicon muffin trays and/or paper liners.

After popping out your frozen forms, throw them into a larger container such as a ziplock freezer bag and you'll have ready measured portions whenever you need them.



As the lard cooled over the next several hours, it began to whiten. When it was finished cooling, it became a solid that resembled shortening. The consistency was a bit grainier than shortening and since it was warmer than 70 degrees in the house, it was also softer--more like pudding.



The suggested yield is about 70% and based on my experience, I'd estimate that to be just about right.



I used some of my newly rendered lard in a couple of my quick bread recipes—banana and zucchini—with fantastic results. If you don't like the smell of slightly burnt lard, I wouldn't recommend using it to grease (prepare) your bread/cake pans; however, I used it in recipes and in the fry pan on the stove and had no issues with the smell.