Yes, you can make your own corned beef at home, without using the nitrate or nitrite chemical additives! All you need is time, space in the fridge, and a few simple pantry ingredients. Have fun!

**ESSENTIAL GEAR**

You will need a container for brining the corned beef. It should be large enough to hold your brisket, plus about a gallon of liquid brine mixture. Choose a non-reactive, sealable vessel for this purpose—in other words, do not use a metal pot! A plastic container with a tight lid is fine, as is a food-grade plastic brining bag. Depending on your container, you may also need a non-reactive bowl or plate heavy enough to weigh down the brisket so that it is fully submerged at all times.

**ESSENTIAL TIPS**

Prepare your brining liquid in advance, and allow time for it to cool completely before adding your brisket. I’ve seen some recipes that begin with cold water, and that may be OK, but the coarse salt and sugar will dissolve better and more quickly over heat, so I usually warm the liquid to incorporate those grainy ingredients, then cool it down (usually with ice cubes) before adding the rest. Do not pour warm brine onto the brisket—this would promote bacteria growth.

**ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS**

4-5 pound beef brisket, preferably flat-cut, trimmed of excess fat  
3 quarts filtered water  
About a cup of kosher salt or coarse sea salt* (see notes)  
About 1/2 cup dark brown sugar  
1 packet or bottle of pickling spices*

**OPTIONAL INGREDIENTS**

12 oz. bottle Irish ale*  
12 oz. bottle celery juice*  
1/2 cup real fermented sauerkraut brine*

**NOTES**

Kosher salt and coarse sea salt are about the same by volume and can be used interchangeably here. You can also use canning and pickling salt, or fine-textured sea salt, but because the crystals are much smaller, you should use slightly less (somewhere between 3/4 and 7/8 cup). **Do not use table salt containing iodine.**

Pickling spice is a blend of dry ingredients, usually including peppercorns, mustard and coriander seeds, allspice berries, ginger, garlic, bay leaves and sometimes chile peppers. You could whip up your own blend if you so desired, but the simplest thing to do is purchase a jar of spices ready to go. McCormick makes a good one that you will find in the regular spice aisle of just about any supermarket. You will use the entire bottle, and you’ll need a second bottle later for cooking your corned beef.
The remaining ingredients are optional, but I’ll explain here why I use them. A few years ago, a guest at our big Super Bowl party had left behind a growler jug of a local IPA that was much more “hoppy” than beers we usually enjoy. Not wanting to waste it, I glugged about a pint of it into our corned beef brine, and it was fantastic. Every year since then, I’ve put a bottle of Irish ale into the recipe and it always turns out great with that little extra layer of flavor. I think a bottle of Guinness would be great, too.

Celery juice powder is a natural source of nitrites, one of the same chemical additives in commercially processed corned beef. I haven’t yet seen the powder available anywhere, but my supermarket carries celery juice in the same refrigerated section as kombucha and probiotic drinks. Check the ingredients of any celery juice product you choose. This one I use is only celery juice and a hint of lemon juice.

Real sauerkraut is a naturally fermented product, containing loads of healthy probiotics. Good bacteria threaten bad bacteria, so a few splashes of the brine from the natural sauerkraut is my extra security measure during the brining process. I would not recommend using the brine in canned sauerkraut, as it likely contains vinegar and who-knows-what else. But if your kraut came from the refrigerated case, and the ingredients listed on your package are only cabbage and salt, and it says “naturally fermented” or “live cultures” somewhere on the jar, you’re good to go.

**Note:** Home-cured corned beef will not have the usual “pink” color, which is result of the added nitrites in commercially processed versions. The color does not affect the flavor. In other words, you’ll never miss it!

**READY? LET’S DO THIS!**

1. Heat about 3 quarts of filtered water to a near boil, then turn off the heat.

2. Add kosher salt and brown sugar. Stir until dissolved, then toss in a couple of cups of ice to cool it down.

3. When the brine is fully cooled, add the Irish ale, celery juice and sauerkraut brine.

4. Place your brisket into the non-reactive container. Sprinkle the pickling spice over the top of the meat. Carefully pour the cold brine over the meat.

5. Use a heavy, non-reactive plate or dish to hold the brisket under the brine liquid. You don’t want the top or any edges exposed to air while the curing takes place. I usually use a flat-bottomed Pyrex dish to press it down, and when I seal the container, it becomes sort of wedged to keep the brisket from floating to the surface.

6. Refrigerate on the lowest shelf of your refrigerator for at least 5 days for a smallish brisket, or up to 10 days if your brisket is on the larger side. Check on the brisket each day, and turn it so the brine and seasonings make their way into every fiber of the meat. Keep it submerged.

If you don’t have room in the refrigerator, you can do the brine step in a cooler. Be sure the container holding the brisket and liquid is fully sealed, and refresh the ice as needed to keep it cold for the duration of the brining process.

When brining is complete, rinse the brisket under cold running water for several minutes, then proceed with cooking as usual. 😊