



Heidi Fink prepares pears for canning.
Antique canning jars and red plaid tablecloth courtesy of Revive. - photo by G. Hynes.

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TRUE PRESERVATION

Every year about this time, I pull my canner out of the closet, dust it off and spend a couple of glorious days playing pioneer. I put up jars of Concord grape jelly, Okanagan peaches and pickled beets. I do this for the joy of having rows of beautiful jars in my cupboard, for the inexpensive Christmas gifts they make and for the satisfaction of having a plump pantry. I've never considered the possibility of canning for life preservation—until now. But one day I asked myself, What if preserving for the winter actually meant survival for my family?

THIS IS A QUESTION WE PRESERVING HOBBYISTS rarely ask ourselves. The fact that our jars of pickles and jams, our fillets of home-smoked salmon, do not stand between us and winter starvation turns what could be a stressful necessity into a sensuous cooking experience. But the luxury of stocking up only as a hobby is something most of humanity, past and present, has never known.

Our present society takes for granted the imported foods in the supermarket that see us through the winter (and, for many of us, through the summer, too). While such immediate access to fresh food year round liberates us from the constant worries of a farmer or hunter dependent on mother nature's vagaries, our apparent wealth of eatables comes at a cost.

Our current food system is far too dependent on outside sources—large, anonymous corporate farms and processors, fossil fuels for transport and the exploitation of workers in developing countries—to provide us with cheap cash crops. Vancouver Island imports more than 90 percent of its food. What would happen if the U.S. border closed due to an infectious virus, or if ferries became so expensive that the cost of food brought in from off-island was suddenly prohibitive? Unlikely events, sure, but think about what they could mean for the security of our sustenance. Our very lives are dependent, to a large extent, on strangers, profit-seeking corporations and continuing positive relationships with international neighbours. For years, it has seemed that we have prevailed over fickle mother nature, only now to find ourselves, to put it bluntly, enslaved to corporate agribusiness.

A growing movement, here and around the world, is seeking to change this dangerous and unhealthy state of affairs. Called the food security movement, it promotes sustainable agriculture, fairly traded commodities and regional food suppliers as part of our basic human right for safe and healthy food.

For most of us, making any kind of significant change may seem overwhelming and intimidating. But we don't have to get caught up in the apathy of despair. As consumers, we can make purchases that promote food security and sustainable agriculture on our island. As cooks, we can decide to eat with the seasons and make the most of a bountiful harvest. We can start one small step at a time: go berry-picking and freeze a bag of blueberries, buy some vegetables at a farmers' market, grow a small vegetable garden, drink only fair-trade coffee or take advantage of B.C. produce specials at the grocery store. Any of these can be a significant act of protest.

The flip side of eating locally is the comforting pleasure it brings. Who hasn't delighted in a trip to Oldfield Road to buy a flat of berries or cobs of sweet local corn? Supporting small and family-run farms has a positive impact on our community, our environment, our economy and (as anyone who has eaten an imported strawberry will tell you) on our palates. Best of all, supporting local farmers and producers encourages a strong regional food network.

I'd like to enjoy these benefits year round, but I have to admit that eating locally is a lot easier in the summer and fall than in the winter months. I enjoy my yearly binge of preserving—making my jellies, canning my peaches, filling my freezer with sockeye and blueberries. But these are frills, yummy extras

to gild my winter fare, not the basis of my diet. Besides, I overuse my freezer. My husband and I sometimes ask ourselves as we are packing away our sixth wild salmon and our 10th bag of berries, "What would happen if the power went out or the freezer broke down?" If we were forced to rely on these things for winter sustenance, or even if I simply were more earnest about food security, we would have to start putting more effort into local winter food, be it winter gardening or preserving the summer harvest.

Winter gardening, a special joy to those of us living on the West Coast, is really a topic onto itself. Many local farmers sell produce through most of the winter, through box deliveries or farmgate sales. But the main bounty of produce is available now, in the fall. The simplest way to eat locally year-round is to preserve what is available now for the coming lean months.

Around the world, preserving techniques have developed that don't involve modern conveniences: salt-curing, smoking, sun-drying, lacto-fermenting, confiting (potting), cheese-making (really a way of preserving milk) and cold-storing vegetables. Canning, which most of us consider a frontier method, is actually only a little over one hundred years old, coinciding with steel-making, factories and sugar plantations. However, canning still has a history several generations old in our country and was a main method of preservation for farmers and homesteaders across Canada, so I still think of it as a bona fide old-fashioned way to preserve the summer bounty. At least it doesn't require a year-round electrical power supply.

These preserving methods all produce tastes mostly lost in today's flavour profile. Once a salt-cured and smoked piece of pork supplied the defining flavour of a whole region. Today we enjoy a hodgepodge of international tastes. Dried fish, fermented vegetables, cured meats and cheeses have all formed the basis of entire cuisines, now changed by the everlasting availability of lemongrass, cumin seeds and fresh broccoli. I am not advocating a return to subsisting all winter on smoked and salted foods. I definitely enjoy the freshness and variety of our globalized supermarkets and restaurants. But we must have balance. The most satisfying meals I've made come from the limits placed on my cooking: using only what I have in my fridge, or only what I have in the garden, or only what I bought from the market. Some of the most famous and delicious dishes in world cuisine are strictly regional: bouillabaisse, tamales, choucroute garni, paella, tourtière, the list goes on. Surely we are missing an opportunity for the emergence of a truly west-coast cuisine when we rely so heavily on imported or exotic foods.

So in honour of the fall bounty, of an expanding local cuisine and our regional food security, I will explore some of my favourite ancient preservation techniques.

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Of all these time-honoured, low-tech preserving methods, the one that fascinates me the most is lacto-fermenting, also known as pickling. In these fast-paced factory days, pickling is often done using a strong "marinade" of vinegar and salt, but this is a poor substitute for the real thing. In the traditional method, whole or sliced vegetables are layered in large crocks with flavourings and dry salt or a salt brine, weighted down and allowed to ferment for several weeks. The salt keeps the food from spoiling in the early weeks while providing the perfect environment for lactic-acid-forming bacteria to flourish, feeding off the sugars naturally present in any vegetable. The lactic acid content will continue to grow until enough has formed to kill off any food-spoiling types of bacteria.

Lactic acid content in the foods provide a quadruple boon: it prevents the food from spoiling, it gives the salted or brined food a pleasantly tangy flavour (much nicer than the harsh acidity of commercial vinegar-brined pickles), it predigests the vegetables, making the vitamins and minerals more easily absorbed, and it is a beneficial bacteria to the human digestive tract, much like the acidophilus in yogurt, another, more popular, fermented food. Sauerkraut is probably the most commonly known form of lacto-fermentation; however dill pickles and kimchi are both traditionally made in this manner. Several times I've made traditional lacto-fermented cabbage and loved every last tangy shred of it.

Salt curing can also be used for meats and fish of many kinds, although in that case the idea is not to create lactic acid but to draw blood and water out of the muscle tissue, allowing salty brine to penetrate the meat and replace the lost fluid. Salt retards spoilage and flavours the meat to boot. This is still a very commonly used form of modern preservation, now often enhanced with nitrites, flavourings and other chemicals to speed up the process and make it more spoil-proof. Popular versions of salt curing include ham, corned beef, salami and anchovies.

A favourite on the West Coast, smoking is common worldwide. Many foods, but especially meats and seafood, are salt-cured then smoked to provide a double measure of protection. If used strictly for preservation, smoking partially or fully cooks the salted food and also dries it out. The salting/cooking/drying combo eliminates almost any possibility of the food going bad, a very important consideration when the butchered meat or fish had to supply a whole winter's worth of protein.

Today, smoking is almost always done for the sake of flavour and injecting food with artificial smoke-flavoured salt brine is common. The smoked foods available in our delis are now moister and less salty than they traditionally would have been. This means better taste but worse preserving qualities, so these foods are now almost as perishable as their fresh counterparts. Smoked foods such as bacon and smoked salmon continue to be very popular even though they aren't needed to help us survive the winter.

Confit, still prized today in upscale restaurants, was for a long time known by its less elegant English name of "potted."

Whether to call it confit de canard or potted duck is beside the point once you taste the succulence of its outcome. This preserving method is very simple, but fat-conscious eaters beware! Potting involves poaching a food, almost always a protein, in plenty of gently simmering saturated fat (ideally, the fat of the chosen animal itself). Once cooked, the flesh and its cooking fat are poured into crocks and sealed with a final addition of melted fat that congeals to form an airtight seal, protecting the meat from contamination and spoilage. Yes, it's no wonder confit just tastes so damn good.

In the realm of canning, there are so many things to choose from: pickles, meats, fish, pâté, fruits, vegetables, sauces, preserves, conserves, jams and jellies ... the options are limitless. And because this is a very popular hobby among gardeners and cooks, there are plenty of fabulous resource books out there for the home canner. After years of canning experiments, success and failures, my favourites remain the jellies. Fresh and pectin-free, made from luscious fall fruits such as plums, currants, Concord grapes and crab apples, these softly set, crystal-clear jellies burst with flavour at every bite. Since they are free of fibrous fruit chunks and have a large proportion of sugar (a bacteria-retardant), they don't need to be heat processed to keep from spoiling.

A citizen of our Island can work toward positive change, food security and global protest in many ways. For some, buying B.C. fruit at a large supermarket is adequate contribution; for others, farm stands, berry fields and "putting food by" are the ways to go. No matter where you stand, do yourself, your family and your community a favour. Eat corn on the cob. Pick strawberries. Can some peaches. Smoke some salmon. Start a revolution for true preservation. **EAT!**

LACTO-FERMENTED VEGETABLES

While I've made these several times, and the recipe is quite simple, the tips, techniques and troubleshooting are quite detailed and lengthy. Rather than provide a possibly faulty recipe to readers, I direct you to two books on the subject: *Putting Food By* by Ruth Hertzberg, Beatrice Vaughan and Janet Greene and *Stocking Up* by Carol Hupping and the staff of the Rodale Food Center.

RECIPES

Pectin-free Concord Grape Jelly

1 basket Concord grapes (find one that includes some underripe grapes)

1 apple, not peeled or seeded, cut in quarters
White sugar

Wash the fruit. Remove the grapes from the stems and place in a large pot, crushing the bottom layer with a potato masher. Add the apple. Add about 1/2 cup water. Bring to a boil, reduce heat and simmer until grapes are soft and losing colour. Meanwhile, place a wet jelly bag or large, wet square of cotton (cut up an old sheet) in a large strainer (not a colander) and suspend over a deep receptacle (a stock pot or large, clean bucket). Pour the cooked grapes and their juice into the lined strainer. Let stand overnight so as much of the juice drips out as possible. Do not squeeze or press on the solids. Discard the solids.

Measure the juice and pour it into a large pot with a heavy bottom. If you have more than six cups, remove the excess for later processing. Old-fashioned cookbooks always say to do no more than four cups at a time, but I have had good results with six cups. Bring to a boil and boil for five minutes, skimming off any foam that surfaces. For every cup of juice, pour in 3/4 cup, or slightly more, of white sugar. Boil on high and stir frequently. I have generally found that this jelly will jell in less than 10 minutes, although cookbooks will often recommend up to 30 minutes of boiling. You can tell it is ready by putting a spoonful of the jelly juice onto a frozen plate. Wait a few seconds, then drag your finger gently across the top. If the jelly forms a thin surface "skin" that wrinkles even slightly, the jelly is ready, even if it seems totally runny. Ladle the boiling jelly into hot, dry, sterilized one-cup canning jars. Fill to 1/8 inch from the top. Put on fresh lids and screw the bands on firmly. By the end of the day, the cooling jelly will have sucked down the lids to form a vacuum seal. Any jars that don't seal, store in the fridge.

My Dad's Smoked Salmon

(in his own words)

My recipe? Well, there is no such thing. I started out by trying to follow what was written in the instruction booklet that came with the smoker. Heavy on salt and soy. I was not really happy. So, since then I have experimented; something like so in the most recent incarnation (this is only a best guess at the proportions).

2 cups of soy sauce

1 Tbsp of salt

Some Worcestershire sauce

Some Tabasco sauce (why not)

2 cups of syrup (maple syrup or corn syrup)

That's it (or so); then I marinate the pieces overnight 8 - 12 hours. After marinating, I lay the pieces out on paper towels and dab them dry and then let them sit for about 1/2 hour until they get a glossy sheen (read somewhere to do that. Why not.)

I put in the smoking wood and have played with chicory, mesquite, cherry and alder. Don't ask me what's best; my taste can't tell. Perhaps if I had a piece of each at the same time.

Then smoke them, depending on thickness, desired consistency, and outside temperature, for six to 10 hours. I noticed in the winter it took almost 12 hours to get the summertime eight-hour effect because the smoker is outside.