

Yes We Can

The nationwide resurgence in home canning has local folks stocking their pantries with the season's bounty

By Amy Halloran

The month of September is ripe with food festivals. Maybe you celebrated the harvest with Honest Weight in Washington Park, or at Franklin Plaza with chefs at a fundraiser for Community Gardens.



Photo: Amy Halloran

Or maybe you've been celebrating the harvest all summer long, sliding jars in and out of hot water baths with rubber coated tongs, and finding extra nooks and crannies to stow away canned goods for the long winter ahead.

Take Tim and Brooke Hughes-Muse, for example. The Pawlet, Vt., couple began canning eight years ago, out of an environmental interest in keeping what they'd grown in the garden through the winter. They learned techniques from Brooke's grandmother, and now put up a laundry list of foods, including vegetable soups, tomatoes and tomato sauce, green beans, dilly beans, bread-and-butter pickles, gherkins, dill spears, pickled beets, jams and spreads.

"You end up canning a whole lot more than you expected, and trade off extras for other people's special extras," Tim says, referring to a salsa swap—tomatillo for peach. Tim's work at Denison Farms in Schaghticoke provides opportunities to quickly handle ripe foods and prepare them for storage.

Not everyone has access to food floods, and still, the popularity of canning food is undeniably on the rise. The Jarden Company, which owns the Ball brand of canning equipment, continues to post increasing sales through the recession. The company's two years of double-digit growth has slowed to a modest 5 percent increase in sales of Ball jars this season. Jarden is riding the momentum of this growth by further exploring consumer interest.

Jarden's newly launched Discovery Kit introduces canning on a very small scale with tools and instructions to guide people through making a small batch of jams, pickles or salsa. Another initiative of the company was partnering with House Party, Inc., to locate and support people interested in canning. These people hosted parties over a weekend in June where groups of 20 to 30 people got together to learn the process in private homes and church kitchens. 30,000 people participated nationwide.

Canning Across America is a similar weekend of nationwide canning begun in 2009 by cooks, gardeners and foodies. Jarden cooperated with these grassroots organizers to sponsor the effort in both years of its existence.

The company has long partnered with cooperative extension groups across the country in their efforts to teach safe methods of food preservation. The Albany County Cornell Cooperative

Extension offers copies of *The Blue Book*, the authoritative title for home canners, to people who take canning classes.

Cornell's resource educator, Sandra Varno, has been offering classes in canning at the Voorheesville office and other Cornell extensions. Once she taught a freezer jam class at a library.

Varno has been surveying her students over the last few years to explore this surging interest in canning. In 2008, following widespread contamination of vegetables, people were a bit more concerned about food safety than they were in 2009, when more than half of 128 respondents said they came to the canning class because they thought it would be a fun night out.

"The idea that most people have is that canning is a chore, which it can be, especially if it's hot and you're all by yourself," says Varno. "But in these classes, people are really excited about the whole concept. Some people have too much food from the garden. Some are people who are older, maybe doing it ways that are no longer recommended. Before a few years ago you would never see a man in a canning class, and now every single class I've taught since last year has at least one man."

In June, Jarden conducted a survey of 2015 people, half men and half women, randomly drawn from the population, and learned that 48 percent of those surveyed were canning, or were interested in canning.

These numbers suggest a different America from the one that runs on ready-made meals from freezers and drive-thrus. What's driving this time- and labor-intensive exploration of our nearly vestigial kitchens?

"I think people are interested in canning because they want homemade flavors and doing it themselves makes it taste better," says Amy Cotler, chef and author of *The Locavore Way*, a how-to-go-locavore paperback with a chapter on canning. "I'm kind of an old hippie, so I got into canning many years ago, and that whole back-to-the-earth thing was very big for my generation. I think a lot of people are returning to those values of wanting to be closer to nature, closer to healthy foods and really connecting in a whole different way."

Cotler recently taught a class in making herbs last throughout the winter as part of Preserving the Bounty, Berkshire Grown's second annual schedule of September classes. The local farming advocacy group organizes a series of classes in canning, dehydrating, lacto-fermentation and other food preservation methods. The classes have been, and are being taught at locations in the Berkshires—in restaurants, at markets, and on farms—by people who are passionate about local food.

Cotler's book is published by Storey Publishing, which is in North Adams in the MASS Moca complex. The publisher has roots in Troy, at Garden Way. The now-defunct rototiller company began publishing guides to go with its products, and eventually, the books migrated to a separate company.

"Since the beginning of Storey we have published books on dehydrating foods, preserving foods, but we noticed a few years ago that a book that we had published, *The Beginner's Guide to Preserving Food at Home*, was selling more strongly than when it was first published. We did a revise and an update and it blew right out of book stores and food stores, and anywhere that we had it," says Storey publicity director Amy Greenman.

Around the same time, Storey received a proposal from a local food advocate Sherri Brooks Vinton for a book on preserving with interesting recipes using preserved foods such as brandied

cherries and wasabi onions. The resulting *Put 'em Up!*, released in June of this year, has sold out of three printings (40,000 copies) and doesn't show signs of stopping.

"Any kind of book that has some preserving technique really seems to be selling strongly now," continues Greenman, musing on how this phenomenon differs from a similar back-to-the-land moment in the 1960s and 1970s. "I think we're a little more sophisticated about it, people want to use their powerful gas stoves to do their canning. They don't want to do it over the wood stove. I think people have more expectation of what it should taste like."

Whenever Vinton does a talk or demonstration related to her book, Greenman says, the first question is, "Am I going to kill someone?" Botulism poisoning, which can result from improper canning techniques, is a real threat, and canning books and classes generally align themselves with USDA recommended methods to steer clear of difficulties. Additionally, novices often turn to friends and family who have experience canning so they can observe and participate in the process before attempting to can on their own.

Erin Shaw has guided many friends through the canning process, and taught a class in food preservation at Honest Weight Food Coop earlier this month. One friend who learned canning from her then made strawberry-rhubarb preserves for the company she works for, Carlucci Catering in Chatham. Shaw works for the caterer herself now, and has preserved locally grown tomatoes and marinated bell peppers for them.

"Even with an enviable garden to eat from all summer, without food preservation the Albany locavore would have a pretty sad, repetitive diet come February," Shaw says when asked what's fueling the urge to preserve.

Food quality and food safety motivate people, too.

Jeannine Rose, a pharmacist from Schaghticoke, wants to control how her food is produced. When her kids were little, she wasn't interested in canning. Now that they are old enough to stay out of the way of boiling water and other potentially dangerous aspects of the canning process, she's taken the dive. Working with her mother in law, she canned 24 quarts of tomatoes, more than she knows how to use. She's looking forward to learning more, and expanding her canning repertoire next year.

Her interest does not come without a little fear. At a hospital where she previously worked, she witnessed two cases of botulism, one in an infant who was fed honey, and another, a woman went into a coma from home-canned goods. In both instances, the people survived, but she plans to investigate the science behind canning so she better understands the process.

"Usually I'm reassuring people that if you follow everything right, you can feel confident, you can feel safe, but then there's also those people you have to really scare," says Varno from Cornell Cooperative Extension. "I hate to have to do that. People who think they can use their common sense to adjust the cooking times or pressure—it's just not something you can fool around with."

There's one more chance this month to learn boiling-water-bath canning from Cornell Cooperative Extension. Varno scheduled an extra class because she had to wait-list so many people. On Monday (Sept. 27), people can learn the basics of this method, and go home with a jar of dilly beans and a copy of *The Blue Book*. Call 765-3500 to pre-register.



