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Fermentation: More interesting than you think - Island Farm hosts old-school food workshops - inner banks

By Maggie Miles September 4, 2020 *Publication: Virginian-Pilot, The (Norfolk, VA)* *Page: 18E* *Word Count: 973*

Traditional food preparation methods like fermentation have been used by every culture around the world for thousands of years. The evidence of the earliest fermentation was the remnants of an Armenian winery that dates to 4100 B.C. The first naturally leavened bread dates to the Egyptians in 1000 B.C., the Croations were busy fermenting cheese a whopping 7,200 years ago, and beer, well, everyone knows we were drinking beer long before we were drinking water.

It wasn't until the 1800s that we learned how to utilize this technique to ferment our vegetables. In the days of old, these methods were used mainly for long-term preservation due to the obvious lack of an ice box. Now they're making a resurgence because of their amazing health benefits, and Island Farm in Manteo has teamed up with local experts to teach these ancient techniques in open-air workshops. And they're focusing on foods they think our ancestors were making here, on this island, in the mid-1800s.

"So what we're trying to do at the farm is create these opportunities for people to be able to interact with their history and kind of keep these real important traditional practices alive," says Ladd Bayliss, executive director of Outer Banks Conservationists, which coordinates the program.

So far, they have had a sauerkraut making workshop, a traditional pickle making workshop and a traditional fermented hot sauce workshop, all taught by local fermentation expert Owen Sullivan, of Hay Point Live Culture Foods.

Sullivan says his goal is "for people to walk away with a good basic understanding of lacto-fermentation, specifically why it's a safe, relevant and a tasty technique for food preservation, and why fermented foods are an important part of a healthy diet. Hopefully, attendees will also walk away with the confidence to continue to experiment with fermentation at home, and maybe most importantly have fun in doing so."

Attendees are provided a kit with everything they need to complete the fermentation process, including jars, brines and all locally sourced, organic ingredients, which according to Bayliss is easy to do if you put in a little work. The farthest they will go for vegetables is Somerset Farm in Edenton.

Bayliss has been delighted to see people's reactions at the workshops. According to her, a traditional pickle is very different than a canned pickle. Some people may never have tried a pickle that has sat on the counter for 10 days and utilized the natural bacteria in their environment, and the thought of making them is intimidating.

"So, that's a really cool, eye opening thing to witness when people come up to Owen or us and are like 'Those pickles were so delicious! I can't believe how simple it was. I can't believe how

great they are, and they're still crunchy!" says Bayliss.

Next up is a traditionally fermented sourdough workshop and a rustic cornbread workshop taught by local sourdough extraordinaire Jamie Wegener of Gutsy Grain. In her workshops, to be offered sometime in November, you can expect to get a hands-on opportunity to learn and understand the different fundamentals of each ingredient and how that all comes together to bring a loaf to life. She'll also be tapping into the nutritional value. There won't be any baking on-site, but she'll go through additional fundamentals, proofing and shaping and participants will take the bread home to bake. She'll also provide you with a starter and teach you how to keep it alive, as well as local North Carolina organic flour from Linley Mills, and corn from local growers.

"But the part of the demonstration I'm looking forward to the most is teaching people how flexible baking can be. I know there's a lot of information out there and I really want to show people that its not as intimidating as it comes off to be," says Wegener.

Plus, Wegener explains that once you taste real sourdough, you'll be hooked. Sourdough on the grocery shelf is not real sourdough. In fact, a lot of times they use a chemical to make the bread taste sour. Once you try real, traditionally fermented sourdough, Wegener says you can't help but wonder "How have we gone away from this for so long?"

Bayliss emphasizes that it isn't just about showing people these cool, simple techniques for preparing foods. "What we're trying to focus on is really reinforcing these characteristics of early Outer Bankers, like self-sufficiency, independence, attention to the seasons, and overall greater connection to the land, and we feel like this hands-on workshop model is something that we really want to develop and continue," says Bayliss.

She believes this resurgence in these traditional methods, and the local interest in these

workshops is because it's in the nature of who we are as Outer Bankers.

"This traditionally has always been a pile of sand that housed really hard working, self-sufficient people and I don't think that has changed very much," Bayliss explains. "So I think that it's really empowering to be able to look at something that you've created using super simple materials like salt and water and vegetables that were grown three miles away and, you know, to be able to create a champion hot sauce using those three ingredients is pretty cool."

More Information

To learn more about upcoming Island Farm workshops, follow along on Facebook (@IslandFarmRoanoke- Island). Visit www.obcinc.org or

call 252-473-6500.

Island Farm is a living history site on Roanoke Island in North Carolina. The centerpiece of the site is the Etheridge farmstead, where Adam Etheridge built a house on land that had been farmed by his family since 1757. Hay Point Live Culture Foods' owner Owen Perry Sullivan has taught workshops in sauerkraut making, traditional pickle making and traditional fermented hot sauce making at Island Farm in Manteo. Island Farm has teamed up with local experts to teach ancient techniques in open-air workshops focused on foods they think our ancestors made on this island in the mid-1800s. L. Todd Spencer/staff file Maggie Miles/Freelance Courtesy of Island Farm
Courtesy of Island Farm

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