



Lara Chew makes spiced eggplant preserves using produce from her garden.

Preserving tradition

The sweet taste of Appalachian heritage

Story and photos by Carolyn Morrisroe

Lara Chew plucks ripe raspberries off a bush in her sunny garden, the sound of cicadas and chickens providing harmony for her impromptu harvest. The berries could be eaten fresh during these waning warm days of summer, or they can be preserved as jam to be enjoyed on a cold winter's day to come, calling up this sunshiny moment.

Chew lives in a log cabin built in 1829 in a green nook in Otto — green because her lush permaculture garden produces enough fruits and vegetables to sustain her throughout the year. The bounty of the garden is more than one person can possibly consume fresh, and the growing season is limited in the mountains. For Chew, the solution for year-round sustenance is the same as it has been for generations — preserving, canning and pickling.

Jodie Zoellner remembers going out to her grandmother's house in Franklin, watching her kill chickens, picking wild blackberries, canning and putting things up. Zoellner retired from teaching at Highlands School in 2004 and since then has spent her time producing jams, jellies and pickled items for sale at local markets.

In Western North Carolina, the roots of tradition go deep. Old ways of living are still practiced by many — sometimes simply out of habit but often because people prefer to do things the way their grandmother did. In kitchens across the country, a whole new generation of cooks is discovering that making preserves, fermented foods and canned vegetables can

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Drying apples is an age-old method of keeping fruit through the winter.



Sauerkraut serves as a way to keep cabbage and to add flavor to a variety of meals.



Lara Chew checks on her kiwis.

be a satisfying hobby. Traditions are being rediscovered and perpetuated, driving a revival of a lifestyle that people like Chew and Zoellner find natural.

Preserving practices passed down

Chew's grandparents lived in Macon County near the log cabin she calls home, but she grew up on a farm in Georgia, where she learned to survive independently of grocery stores.

"We raised everything we ate, practically," she said. "And in order to have anything to eat in the winter, we had to either dry it, can it or preserve it in lard or salt. Everybody preserved in some way or another because it was a very rural area and

we depended on what we raised to get us through the winter."

Before Chew's family had a refrigerator or freezer, chicken and pork were stored in a cool place under a thick layer of lard, fruit was dried in the sun, and eggs were kept in salt. In the 1950s, they got a freezer and could start storing items such as beef.

"Refrigeration made a big difference in how we preserved our food," Chew said. "I didn't know anybody who had beef when I was a child until we got freezers, and then we started raising our own beef. We got a milk cow and she'd have a calf we'd raise that for beef."

Zoellner said both her grandmothers in Western North Carolina canned because there was no other option.

"It is an Appalachian tradition and people had to do it," she said. "I grew up with that tradition."

Zoellner started preserving food when she was a "poor college student," canning beans and making jam to take to school, and she kept up the practice after she married Bob Zoellner and moved to his family's land in Highlands, where they grew raspberries.

"My mother-in-law would make jams and pickles and jellies and sell them," she said. "She was a hostess at Highlands Country Club and she would sell them to the guests and they would take them back home with them."

Eventually, Zoellner took over making items for people when her mother-in-law

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could no longer do so.

"I just kept doing it and I love it," she said. "I've never bought a jar of jam or jelly. I've never bought green beans in a can. And I don't like the flavor of them, I don't like the taste of them."

Advantages of preserving food at home

Zoellner shows her 5-year-old grandson Sam how to pick produce from the garden, and she believes it's important for younger generations to see the benefits of preserving your own food.

"When you have grown up with it being fresh and being put up like that and not coming from a store and not having preservatives and additives and being in a tin can, the flavor is so much better," she said.

Zoellner sells her jams, jellies, pickles, relishes and chow-chows in Highlands at Bryson's Food Store, August Produce and Dusty's Rhodes Superette and at the annual Highlands Own Arts & Crafts Show. She said mass-produced jellies can't hold a candle to the quality of homemade preserves.

"People will say, 'How come yours tastes better?' and it's like, it's whole fruit, it's whole juice, it's not watered down," she said. "I make it in small batches and I try to keep it as fresh as I possibly can."

For her preserves, Zoellner uses only fruit that's as local as possible, if not picked on her own farm.

"The jams that I make are things that are here or that could be here close: peach, strawberry, blackberry, apple butter, red raspberry, black raspberry, blueberries," she said. "People say, 'Do you do mango? Do you do fig?' But it doesn't grow here."

For those trying to be conscious of what they eat, one appealing aspect of the tradition of canning and preserving is that it supports locally grown and seasonal produce.

"Everybody now, you want to make your carbon footprint smaller," Zoellner

said. "You want to be sustainable, you want to know where your food's coming from and what's in it, how it's grown, what's on it, what's been put on it."

Chew's lifestyle epitomizes the local food movement, as she cans and preserves what she grows in her own garden, right outside the back door of her cabin. Her small plot of land yields a vast array of fruits and vegetables. On a visit in mid-August, Chew's garden was producing eggplant, tomatoes, squash, melon, raspberries, figs, beans, corn, asparagus, Brussels sprouts, apples, cabbage, kiwis, hazelnuts, hops, herbs, mushrooms, garlic, onions and potatoes.

"I try to plant things that are pretty and things that are edible," Chew said.

Getting started with preserving

Preserving, canning and pickling can be easy on the pocketbook as well as on the planet. Zoellner pointed out that the jars can be reused as long as they're not cracked or damaged, and the supplies don't cost much once cooks get going.

"Your initial investment, like if you're going to pressure (can) something, is ex-



Raspberries ripen in Lara Chew's garden that might work their way into wine or jam.

pensive, because a pressure canner is an expensive item, but it lasts you most of your life if you get a really good one," Zoellner said. "The other things that you use are not complicated."

Zoellner said aspiring canners need a big pot, a funnel-like tool, a tool to grab jars out of the hot water, and a magnet wand that picks lids from the water.

While cooks who've never canned might find the prospect daunting, Zoellner said the process is actually quite simple.

"If you want to make a batch of jam ... let's say you go buy your berries and you're going to wash them and clean them and chop them up," she said. "After you get them ready, it will take you approximately 45 minutes to cook that batch of jam and have them in the jars. It's not hard."

Zoellner recommends Ball's "Complete Book of Canning" for tips on how to make jams and jellies, how to can vegetables, how to make salsas and chutneys — and how to safely process food this way.

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Canned items at Shearl Produce

Chew suggests people who want to get into putting up food get their hands on the book, "Preserving" by Oded Schwartz, which contains a plethora of recipes with colorful photography. One of her favorite recipes is eggplant preserves spiced with cinnamon, ginger and cloves that she serves with pork or on yogurt.

Beginners might feel overwhelmed, so Chew's advice is not to tackle preserving alone.

"Start slow and get someone to show you," she said.

Variety is the spice of life

Chew cans food but she also preserves food in myriad other ways. In August, rosehips floated in sugar water in a jar on her kitchen counter, working their way into wine.

"You can use elderberries, blackberries — you don't have to have grapes," she said. "And that's a way of preserving the fruit."

Chew also periodically adds fruits as they ripen to a concoction of German derivation called rumtopf. She keeps honey, which she said is the one thing she knows that never spoils, unless it's contaminated in some way.

Some fruits and vegetables get dried in a food dehydrator Chew found for \$3 at a flea market years ago. That's how she makes the dried apples she bakes into Lara's Famous Dried Apple Turnovers she sometimes sells at fundraisers. She leaves herbs out to dry and she preserves soft cheeses and tomatoes in olive oil.

Chew uses the old ways of preserving because they are familiar, but also because she feels they result in better food.

"A lot of things that started off for preserving are now used for flavor," she said. "We don't have to make sauerkraut — we just like it."

In an age when we have round-the-clock access to bright shiny supermarkets and produce from all over the globe, Chew prefers to keep up the traditional ways of living, in tune with the seasons and what the earth provides. She puts up what she grows because it seems like the right thing to do.

"It's partly economical. Part of it is just having it handy, having it available whenever you want it," she said. "And part of it is just the satisfaction of knowing that no matter what happens, I can make it. I could stay here." 🍷


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