



Photograph: Liz Driver

FOOD ROOTS THE PRESERVING INSTINCT

BY LIZ DRIVER

Above: Liz Driver's collection of old Canadian Crown preserving jars, sitting by the enamel kitchen sink with pump in her 1860 farmhouse near Milford in Prince Edward County. The year of manufacture of each jar (1930 to 1956) is moulded into the glass bottoms.

Who hasn't cast an admiring gaze on an enticing display of seasonal soft fruit or fresh field tomatoes and thought to themselves, "I should preserve that," knowing full well that their schedule is filled up with other activities. In today's world it's difficult to set aside an afternoon or evening for a satisfying session in the kitchen making chili sauce, mustard pickles, jam or bottled fruit. In Canada, in 2008, it's not necessary to preserve food for survival over the winter, but we may still feel the urge to do so!

As Alice Stevens wrote in the 1947 edition of her *Home Canning of B.C. Fruits*, "The 'squirrel' instinct to 'store up for the winter' is strong and is to be encouraged in the Canadian housewife." In the same year, a British author, Mollie Stanley Wrench, began her preserving cookbook with a Canadian saying: "Use what you can, and can what you can't." The advice is in the form of a pun on the verb "to can," which for twentieth-century homemakers meant to fill glass jars (not tin cans!) with all kinds of foods, such as fruit, vegetables, meat, sauces and soups, and then boil the filled containers in a hot water bath to sterilize the contents. Before the availability of year-round imports of fresh produce – when an abundance of food was grown locally and the fresh-from-the-field taste could be enjoyed for just a few short weeks – a natural cycle played itself out in our kitchens and at our dining tables: Canadians indulged themselves during harvest time, and then canned, or preserved in other ways, the surplus.

This culinary rhythm reaches back centuries. In the past, a scientific understanding of food preservation may have been limited, but through observation and experiment, cooks developed many ingenious methods to prevent spoilage. Their techniques can easily be carried out today exactly as described or sometimes with modern adaptations.

Meat was dry-cured for several weeks in a mixture of salt and salt petre, or pickled in a brine (salt and water). Sugar and spices were optional ingredients in the curing process. After the dry or wet cure, slow smoking over several days imparted a distinctive flavour to the meat, depending on the wood used. Proprietary brands of meat cures have replaced salt petre today.

Vegetables and vegetable mixtures of every sort – onions, beets, cucumbers and cauliflowers, to name a few, even walnuts – were pickled in vinegar and stored in stoneware jars, covered with a pig's bladder. As the bladder dried, it made a tight seal over the mouth of the jar and it could be reused if soaked in water to make it pliable again. Perhaps the most surprisingly good taste for the twenty-first-century palate, and so easy to make, is homemade tomato ketchup (tomatoes, vinegar, salt, spices), a favourite nineteenth-century condiment, along with mushroom and walnut ketchups. By the turn of the twentieth century, almost every Canadian housewife had a repertoire of favourite chili sauce recipes and green tomato relishes; for example, the classic combination of chopped red tomatoes, onion, red and green peppers, cider vinegar, salt, sugar and spices; fruit chili sauce with red tomatoes, pears and peaches; green tomato chow chow; and governor's sauce. So long as jars of pickles and ketchups filled the pantry or root cellar, meals were never bland.

In the early days of settlement, drying food was a common technique. Cut-up pumpkin, tomatoes, or apples were boiled in water to a smooth consistency, then dried on plates and stored in cloth bags for re-hydration later. Apple-drying bees were a social occasion, when women and men would gather to pare, core and slice many bushels of apples; the apple rings were dipped in boiling water, and then strung up in the kitchen to dry until ready to transfer to cloth bags. If you enjoy dried apples, try this yourself and avoid the sulfur compounds found in commercially dried fruit. A simple method of preserving peaches and plums (and easy to duplicate in a modern oven) was to slice each piece of fruit in half, remove the pit, sprinkle the cavity with sugar, then let the fruit dry overnight in a still-warm brick bake oven, before storing in wooden boxes. Orange and lemon peels were candied in a sugar syrup. Try making your own candied peel. It is far superior to the commercial variety, both as a sweetmeat after a meal or in cookies and cakes.

Chopped apples were boiled down into thick "apple butter" or the pectin-rich liquid drained off to make apple jelly, sometimes coloured with red beets or yellow saffron. Apple butter, jellies and jams were often poured into glasses; a brandy-soaked circle of paper was laid on the surface of the jam to exclude the air; and then a larger circle of paper was dipped into egg white, placed over the top of the glass and pressed smooth against the outside edge of the glass, where it quickly dried to make a seal. The introduction of Mason jars in the 1860s, and the many different styles of glass preserving jars that followed, made jam-making and "canning" simpler and more reliable.

Canadians honed their preserving skills because winters were long and frugality was a necessity for most families well into the twentieth

century, through both world wars and the Depression in the 1930s. From about 1900, provincial and federal governments developed safer methods of preserving, and educated the public through demonstrations and free cookbooks, reinforcing our longstanding seasonal routines. It is only since the Baby Boom generation of the 1950s that Canada's preserving tradition has weakened, as women moved from the home to the workforce, and rising prosperity reduced the need for this economical culinary practice. Freezing food in the increasingly popular new chest freezers also displaced older preserving methods.

Preserving, however, is more than a skill. It is also an art that brings aesthetic and tasty pleasures to everyday life. It has never entirely deserted home kitchens, and professional chefs such as Jamie Kennedy may be inspiring a preserving renaissance. I predict that as we see more seasonal, local produce in our markets, our collective preserving instinct will be reawakened. Perhaps the squirrel, rather than the beaver, should be our national emblem. □

Liz Driver is the author of *Culinary Landmarks: A Bibliography of Canadian Cookbooks, 1825–1949*. As the Curator of Campbell House Museum in Toronto, she invites volunteers to join the cooking program in its nineteenth-century kitchen with open hearth and bake oven. She also teaches Applied Food History at George Brown College, and serves as past president of the Culinary Historians of Ontario.

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