

The Berkshire Eagle

Canning season gets under way

Berkshire Grown sponsoring food-preservation workshops

By Judith Lerner, Special to the Eagle

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Berkshire Grown, the non-profit organization that advocates for local farms and connects them with local markets and restaurants, has added a crucial new/old piece to the eating fresh and local food puzzle. It has organized nine local restaurateurs, caterers and other food services to offer workshops Sept. 9-25 in both old-fashioned and updated food-preservation techniques of canning, freezing, pickling and drying.

The series -- called "Preserving the Bounty" -- is being offered in partnership with Guido's Fresh Marketplace, the Mezze Restaurant Group, Storey Publishing in North Adams and Cricket Creek Farm in Williamstown.

"People are choosing to eat locally grown food because it's healthy and delicious and because supporting local farmers helps strengthen our communities," said Barbara Zheutlin, executive director of Berkshire Grown. "Preserving food is becoming popular because people want to eat locally grown food throughout the year."

She said the state of the economy, combined with the home gardening boom and local food movement, has also led to a revival in the old-fashioned art of preserving foods.

Many of the workshop presenters had a grandmother, mother or aunt, a friend's mother who made preserves or canned vegetables.

"I always have lots and lots of preserves at any time," said Fiona de Ris, chef and proprietor of S.O. L. Kitchen Catering and one of the workshop presenters.

In winter, she uses her sour cherries over cheesecake made from her own quark, a European fresh cheese.

The South Egremont native was raised on Jug End Road. She spent many childhood days following her healthy food-conscious mother around picking "berries, currants and gooseberries that were either mauvy red or greenish color with little seeds and thin fuzzy skin and a gelatinous texture," she recalled.

De Ris will teach workshop participants how to make grape juice, yogurt and naturally (lacto) fermented dilly beans on Friday, Sept. 25, using produce from a number of local farms.

"I will be doing pickling in the traditional style," she said. "I made a lacto-fermented jalapeño last year. The color stayed bright green and it was fun to use throughout the winter."

Presenter Erhard Wendt, chef and co-owner of the Williamsville Inn with his wife Kandy, preserves and pickles all the time.

"When I was a child," he said, "my whole basement was full with the preserves: cherries apples pickled apples, pears, plums, cucumbers. And the trees never got sprayed."

He does not spray his own small orchard of apple, peach, pear and plum trees, either. But his trees took

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a beating in last May's frost, so he will be using fruit from Don Baker Farm in Hudson, N.Y., for the plum jam he will show people how to make as part of his Sunday, Sept. 20 workshop. He will also be pickling mushrooms and garlic from other local farms.

"I made today over 60 pounds of European prune plum jam," he said last weekend. "This is one of Matt Rubiner's [of Rubiner's Cheesemonger and Rubi's Café in Great Barrington] favorite preserves. He gets most of them. I use a lot for our breakfasts, but the majority he is getting."

Not everyone was lucky enough to have parents as committed and knowledgeable about keeping food. So, Story Publishing is giving away a copy of "The Beginner's Guide To Preserving Food at Home" to each participant as a benefit of attending a workshop.

Roberta Russell, a Lenox psychotherapist, is an enthusiastic experimental cook. She has a home garden and shops at the Lenox farmers' market. Her garden is small enough that she can eat its bounty as it ripens, but she looks forward to the upcoming preserving workshops so she can, "keep the delicious flavors of summer at the farmer's market," and eat, "wonderful winter foods."

Chris Bonnivier, executive chef of Gala Restaurant in Williams-town, will be making "heirloom tomato and red onion jam and a caramelized fennel and ginger preserve" at his Wednesday and Thursday Sept. 9 and 10 evening workshops.

How grandmother made it

"It's a spin-off from the way my grandmother used to make it," he said. "I'm changing the fruit to vegetables and putting my own spin into it."

Bonnivier's maternal grandmother used to make

great blackberry jam and raspberry jam, he said. "She used to give it out as Christmas presents."

She started out in Pittsfield, then moved to the Blue Mountains of West Virginia where she showed him how to make preserves when he was "six or seven or eight and would go down there for summer."

He is getting all of his produce for his workshops from Ted Dobson's Equinox Farm in Sheffield and donating all the proceeds back to the farm.

"It's all about preserving the farm and preserving the community," Bonnivier said. "We can't forget where this comes from and we have to help them out. Every little bit will help."

"This was a very bad year," he noted, "with the rains and the tomato blight. Ted lost all the heirloom tomatoes except what he grew in the greenhouse."

De Ris has been able to look on a brighter side than the farmers.

"I think with the lack of our overflowing tomato crop that we usually have at this time of year, now we are free to explore other foods," she said.

For that reason, Lauren Gotlieb will be canning peaches from Lakeview Orchard in Lanesborough using honey from Berkshire Farms Apiary at her Sept. 12 workshop at Mezze Restaurant's new catering kitchen in Williamstown.

"Both of my grandmothers did preserving; it's part of my background," she said.

She grew up in Atlanta, then moved to Toronto, then to Williamstown two years ago when her husband became director of Williams College's graduate program in art history.

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"Preserving was my nod to my family. I was self-taught and continued the family tradition in my own way. I've been doing it about 20 years," she explained.

"Canning peaches is local and timely," she said. "I grew up eating peaches, so peaches are a little taste of the South, of my childhood. It makes me smile to think that that is what I'm doing."

Michael Pancheri, chef at allium restaurant in Great Barrington, will be giving his workshop with farmer Laura Meister, who runs and owns Farm Girl Farm in Egremont, on Wednesday, Sept. 23. They will be stressing the safety of canning and will can, pickle and dry vegetables and herbs.

Learned from aunts

Pancheri said, "I learned from my aunts and family friends and my mother who always made jams in the house and canned extra from her home garden of eight tomato plants she preserved."

Carole Murko, who owns Heirloom Meals in Stockbridge, will be making corn and bean salsa and warm-bath canning greens at her Sept. 17 workshop.

"I grew up in a three-generation household with my mom's parents, who were Italian. My grandfather always had a gigantic garden," she said, "and during the harvest we canned tomatoes and my grandmother was big into freezing."

"These workshops are the opportunity to share and preserve," Murko concluded. "I usually do it with my mom and [my husband]. It's not something you want to do by yourself. Many hands make light work."

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