

Yes We Can!



From food lovers to the
just plain frugal, preserving the harvest
is coming back

By MARIALISA CALTA

Photographed by
STEFAN HARD

ROBIN McDERMOTT OF WAITSFIELD, CO-FOUNDER OF THE MAD River Valley Localvore Project, is into gardening and food preservation in a big way. But she does not believe that “we have to do everything exactly the same way our grandmothers did it.” Her preserving is done with a decidedly 21st-century flair: frozen compound butters made with chanterelles she foraged, frozen pesto from her homegrown basil, and fermented kimchi and sauerkraut from her cabbage crop. She “cellars” root vegetables in an unused sauna and in a makeshift root cellar in her garage.

Current books about food preservation — and there have been at least 40 published this year alone — reflect the modern palate. A recipe for peach jam sounds traditional until you reach the cardamom pods and liqueur. Green tomato chutney has an old-fashioned ring, but a new spin includes grilling the tomatoes, then adding Szechuan peppercorns. A beef jerky recipe calls for Asian chile paste and star anise.

It wasn't too many years ago when, upon telling a friend that you were canning pickles or making jerky, you got the same kind of reaction as if you had told them you were wearing high button shoes or had taken up tatting. This was especially true if the friend was “from away,” but even many Vermonters seemed to think of preserving food as a nostalgic throwback, fuddy-duddy and quaint.

Today, canning, drying, freezing and otherwise preserving food marks you as a member of the food cognoscenti. The Vermont Department of Agriculture, in conjunction with the University of Vermont Extension and the statewide Grange organizations, reports renewed interest in canning workshops; this year they began in May with sessions on preserving rhubarb and will last through the fall.

It's easy to understand why the craft of canning is making a comeback. The localvore movement, recent food safety and health scares, burgeoning interest in wellness and organic products, and



Robin McDermott shows off her cache of root vegetables in her transformed sauna.



Preservation society

The history of food preservation is ancient and complex and had much to do with basic survival and the development of civilization, according to Sue Shephard in her fascinating history *"Pickled, Potted, and Canned: How the Art and Science of Food Preserving Changed the World."*

"Food preserving helped make it possible for our nomadic ancestors to settle down in one place and build agrarian communities where they could live in reasonable confidence that they would not go hungry," Shephard writes. Conversely, "food preserving also made it possible for some of our ancestors to travel, taking their food with them." Because of food preservation, communities could grow; arts, trade and technologies could develop; and far-off lands could be explored.

Drying, salting, smoking and fermenting foods were the earliest means of preservation. But a technological breakthrough in 1858 made home canning a possibility. It was then that an American named John Mason patented a reusable glass canning jar with a threaded top and screw-on lid. By 1860, "Mason jars" were being sold all over the country.

Canning in Vermont reached its peak in the early 20th century, practically attaining the level of a competitive sport. Thetford native Beatrice Vaughan, recalling the era in her 1963 book *"Yankee Hill-Country Cooking,"* said: "It was considered a poor year if less than 400 or 500 quarts of vegetables and fruit were not put away down cellar."

just plain frugality spurred by recession have fueled an increase in gardening and a corresponding increase in, as it used to be called, "putting food by." (Also the title of an excellent book, co-authored by Janet Greene, Ruth Hertzberg and Beatrice Vaughan). If they don't grow their own, folks interested in supporting sustainable agriculture buy foods in bulk from local farmers. It helps that access to equipment — affordable water-bath canners, freezers and food dehydrators as well as home kits for wine, beer and cheesemaking (all forms of food preservation) — makes preserving the harvest that much easier.

"There is a desire for people to get back to the basics, what I call a 'renaissance of the past,'" says Vermont Agriculture Secretary Roger Allbee. But with a very up-to-date twist: Taste is paramount to today's cooks.

Andrea Chesman of Ripton, author of *"Pickles & Relishes: From Apples to Zucchini,"* marvels that a pickle recipe given to her years ago by back-to-the-land guru Helen Nearing called for nothing but cucumbers and vinegar. "I found them inedible," Chesman says. "It leads me to believe that in days gone by, the point was that you were getting some vegetables, not what they tasted like."

Chesman encourages home cooks to consider taste and texture.

"If you would never eat canned peas, why would you go through the trouble of canning them?" she asks. And why would you eat a California strawberry in January when a Vermont berry is in your freezer?

Dianne Lamb, a nutrition and food specialist with the University of Vermont Extension in Bennington, cans 100 jars of pickles each year along with tomatoes, salsa, horseradish, jams, jellies and myriad vegetables from her large garden. She also freezes asparagus, berries, fruits, beans and tomatoes. Lamb, who grew up on a dairy farm in Maine, was introduced to food-preservation techniques from her mother, who put by

enough food to feed the family through the long winters. As Lamb sees canning workshops grow at the Extension, she has also found that interest reflected at home: A young relative has asked Lamb to teach her how to make her favorite pickles. "I feel like the circle has been completed," says Lamb. Grandma would be proud. 🍁

