

Canning and preserving is easier than you think ? and worth it!



By Chris McGowan

Nature is painting our trees with splendid colours that remind us year after year how beautiful York Region is.

In this season, we also enjoy the harvest of fruits and vegetables in abundance with many open markets and farms in our periphery where we can buy fresh Ontario grown fruits and vegetables.

Implanted in my memory are the smells of this time of year, the leaves mixed with rain, the smell of wood burning as the chimneys are started up again, and also the smell of home preserves with the combination of spice and vinegar, or sugar and fruit brewing away on the stove.

Coming home from school to see Mom busy at the stove with chili sauce and bread and butter pickles is one of my favourite memories. The house was filled with the sounds of Mom singing and whistling while she worked as the steam from the stove in the kitchen made the windows fog up.

There seems to be an awakening of ?what are we eating?? lately which makes this home grown, natural canning and preserving even more important. You are what you eat and, if you are a foodie, you know the taste of fresh preserved food is far better than the popular canned items at the grocery store.

Age does not allow Mom to do these tasks anymore but she taught us well and I find I too love to preserve the old way, the way I was taught, where there are no chemicals, no preservatives, just basic good food put away for those cold, dreary days of winter. And it is easier than you might think.

Patti Quagliarini of Aurora made tomato sauce for the first time this year.

It was a task her mother-in-law did for the family until she passed away earlier this year. To honour the family tradition, Patti and other family members happily did it. It was two full days of work for three people to put down eight bushel baskets of Roma tomatoes, which made approximately 110 ? 120 jars of tomato sauce.

Unlike my mother, and myself, they worked outside, saving their kitchen from the mess of it all.

The washed and crushed the tomatoes, cooked them for ten minutes, ground them to eliminate the seeds and skin, added spice, sterilized jars, filled the jars, stacked and sterilized the jars again to seal them, then let them sit over night to cool.

Doing this in two batches of four bushels of tomatoes, yes, it is a two-day job.

'It's a tedious task, but well worth it,' said Quagliarini. 'It is two full days of work to provide an extended family with a homemade Italian tomato sauce to use throughout the winter, with no chemicals, and no preservatives. Just imagine all of the yummy dinners with the homemade sauce throughout winter.'

Jan Freedman of Aurora, otherwise known as the 'Jam Lady' of the Aurora Farmers' Market, has a passion for jams. In the winter months, she moves into the Aurora Culture Centre with the monthly market and sets up her table loaded with jars from her diverse list of jams, jellies, marmalades and conserves.

Freedman has been jamming and preserving since her early twenties when she was introduced to the art, and has been making them ever since. She is known for her combination jams, such as apricot plum with almond extract, and sour cherry and amaretto. She attends local fairs to sell and enter contests for her jams and was the Royal Winter Fair Grand Champion in 2009.

She also sells sandwiches and soup during the cold months of the year.

Her brilliant eyes sparkle when she talks about her jams and her thoughts for future combinations of fruits for her preserves.

'I so look forward to Saturdays when I can see my regular customers coming to chat, I have so many loyal customers, and I love it,' she said. 'I absolutely love it!'

You can see Freedman at the Market, and if you have a notion to try canning and preserving yourself, you can also buy fresh local fruits and vegetables there. The Newmarket Farmers Market also boasts plenty of vendors to choose from and do not forget nearby farms that sell freshly grown Ontario vegetables such as Strawberry Creek Farm on Davis Drive that is located just east of Woodbine in Newmarket.

Go ahead, try it, it's easier than you might think, and you will love it.