



A Question of Taste

By Hilary Keating Callaghan

On making perfect jellies

"You make your jams and jellies with packaged pectin? Why?" The tone was sharp, inquisitorial and incredulous. I had a faint inkling of how Lizze Borden must have felt when questioned about her celebrated crime. My answer (I can't speak for Lizze) was a lame, "Because I don't know any other way."

I was soon to learn another way — one which yields a superior product. That the product would be superior was a foregone conclusion (even before a private, luscious tasting) for my tutor was a perfectionist — Yvonne Gill, owner of Tweeney's Cafe. What was surprising was how quick and easy this natural method proved to be. I had assumed that any such process would be long and tedious or why would they sell those boxes of pectin in the store?

Having always assumed that pectin came from a box, I was startled to learn that it is present in the fruit you are preserving. Why, then, pay extra money for a substance you already have?

Actually, the commercial pectin is not exactly the same as that found in the fruit. It has added sugar (Added sugar? With all the sugar you will add yourself?) and preservatives (Isn't one reason you put up your own food to avoid preservatives?). Some other change must also take place when pectin is powdered and packaged because the amount of sugar required for proper setting is greater when using packaged pectin than when relying on that in the fruit itself. The result is a jam or jelly that tastes less of fresh fruit than of sugar.

NO WONDER my confession of substance abuse had met with such incredulity!

The speed with which Yvonne's jams and jellies are made is more than just a convenience. It is an essential factor in producing a quality product. This need for quick-cooking influences both equipment and procedures used.

The piece of equipment most directly related to the length of time required for cooking is the pot. The pot used should be of heavy metal and large enough so that the fruit should fill it only about one-third full. For five pounds of fruit, this is a 15-quart kettle; for 8 to 10 pounds, this is a 20-quart kettle. The full, rolling boil which must be maintained for quick cooking would cause boiling over if the kettle was too small. This would not only create a mess on your stove, it would necessitate your lowering the heat to contain the boiling mixture in the kettle. It would, consequently, take longer for the correct temperature to be reached, sacrificing clarity in flavor and color.

A second, essential, piece of equipment used to minimize cooking time is a candy thermometer. The fruit mixture must reach a particular temperature in order for the jam or jelly to set. Depending

on the amount of pectin in the fruit, this temperature is somewhere between 210 and 220. When the correct temperature, as specified in the recipe, has been reached, the pot is removed from the heat. At this point, proper setting should occur. As a precaution, however, a saucer test is performed. A small spoonful of the jam or jelly is placed on a saucer which is set in the refrigerator for about 5 minutes. After this time, the fruit mixture should be softly congealed. If it is still quite liquid, more cooking is called for.

Cooking beyond this optimum point leads to a loss of color, producing a brown — rather than jewel-toned jar of jam. Worse, excessive cooking can lead to a break-down of the pectin.

Perhaps the single most important procedural step in minimizing cooking time is preheating the sugar in a 200 oven. Simply pour the sugar into a shallow, flat pan large enough so that the sugar is no more than an inch deep. Set the pan in the oven while the fruit is being warmed on top of the stove.

TO HELP insure a clear color and to prevent crystallization in the jam, it is important to stir the jam as little as possible. The mixture must be stirred when the warmers are added to the fruit but only until the sugar dissolves. (The sugar has dissolved when the liquid takes on a relatively clear appearance.) No further stirring should be necessary until a temperature of 190 is reached and then only the minimal amount of stirring to prevent scorching should take place. Heavy jams, in particular, need to be watched carefully at this point to guard against scorching.

The stirring can be accomplished more efficiently with the use of square-bottomed wooden paddles which make more contact with the bottom of the pan than the traditional spoon shape.

A single skimming at the end of the cooking time is also recommended to help produce a beautiful, clear jam or jelly. Skimming is the process of lifting the foamy residue that rises to the top of the cooked fruit mixture and discarding it. This is accomplished most easily by using a skimmer, an implement resembling a large, long-handled spoon with the bowl portion flattened out (available from restaurant supply houses). A large serving spoon could also be used. If the skimmer or spoon are wet before running them over the surface of the jam, the sticky residue will rinse off more easily.

The jam or jelly can now be poured into hot, sterilized jars with the aid of a wide canning funnel.

Yvonne Gill's jam and jelly recipes will appear in next week's column by Hilary Keating Callaghan.

Backyard gardener reaps harvest

"Lima beans don't do well in Michigan," Frank Sidney told me, pointing to the single row of limas in his garden. Though the plants seemed green and healthy, they clearly did not match the lush growth of the rest of his vegetable garden.

For the 27 years he has lived in Birmingham, he has planted a 16 by 40 foot plot in his backyard with neat rows of early broccoli, sweet peas, lettuce, onions, beets, peppers, carrots, green beans and tomatoes. Sidney plants a strain of cucumbers called Spacemasters which grow three feet in each direction, then stop. They are heavy producers and the limited growth of the vines make them ideal for home gardeners.

Last year, one 16-foot row produced fresh cucumber for salads as well as 25 quarts of bread and butter pickles and six quarts of dill pickles. A man of medium build whose face is distinguished by a salt and pepper mustache and gold-rimmed glasses, Sidney



Byrd's Kitchen

by Vivian Byrd

grew up on a farm near Salem, Ohio.

In the late 1930s, Ohio farmers were selling tomatoes for 25 cents a bushel, grade A jumbo eggs at 19 cents a dozen and a bushel of peppers would go for about 40 cents. Even for post-depression years, those prices represented little or no return for the farmer.

"That's when I told my father I was leaving the farm," said Frank Sidney. "It had gotten too hard to make a living."

Today he works for B.B. DuPont in Troy, heat treating dies for cold heading machines that make fasteners for the auto industry.

During the growing season, evenings and weekends, he becomes a farmer again. He breaks up the soil in the spring with a rototiller, then dispatches weeds with a five-prong long-handled weeder. The best fertilizer, he said, is rotted manure, which he used to get from the Oakland County Sheriff's Department, which at one time had three horses and, of course, a stable.

For a couple of years, he got manure from a private riding stable, a source which eventually proved unsatisfactory because the manure was cleared out of the stable before it had rotted sufficiently for garden use.

"We haven't bought green beans since we moved here in the fall of 1952," Mr. Sidney said. Six rows of green beans produce enough for summer meals and for freezing for winter use. Elaine Sidney is in charge of canning and freezing.

"I never buy green bean seed either," he said. Each year a few beans are allowed to dry on the vine, then stored in a basket in the garage. Then, on some quiet winter evening, Sidney shells them and grades the bean seed by size. The largest and finest are kept for the next year's seed. The result is a bean that continues to improve in productivity and flavor.

FRESH GREEN BEANS
1 lb. fresh green beans
3 or 4 quarts boiling water
Salt and pepper to taste
2 or 3 Tbsp. butter, or to taste
Few drops lemon juice

Snap the ends of the beans. Cook in the boiling water 8 to 20 minutes, depending on whether you like a crisp and crunchy bean or a tender one. Drain in a colander. Return the beans to the pot over very low heat and add the lemon juice, salt, pepper and butter. Shake the pot, tossing the beans, until the butter is melted and the beans are coated. Adjust seasonings, if necessary.

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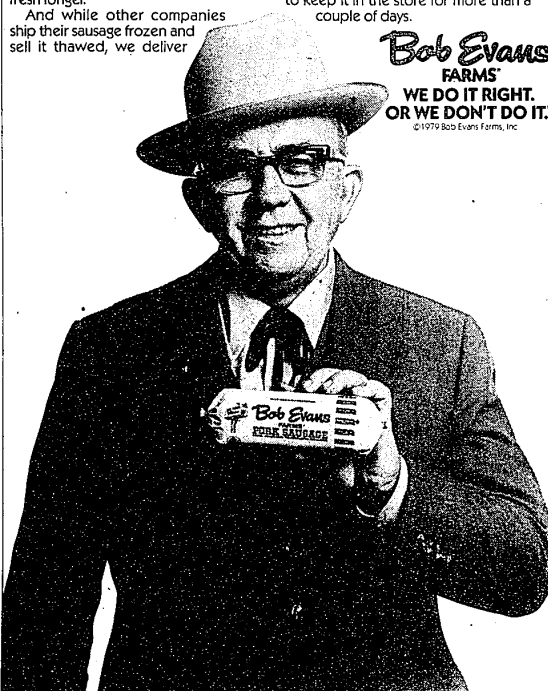
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