



Bushel and Peck's Local Market co-owner Jackie Gennett shows off some of the locally produced foods sold in its flagship store in downtown Beloit.

Terry Maye

STATELINE NEWS--At Bushel & Peck's Local Market in downtown Beloit, some of the most popular items -- cherry bomb hot sauce, cherry lavender jelly, classic dill pickles and pickled beets -- are made in the market's own preservation kitchen.

The foods prepared in that kitchen, which began operating in 2010, fit in with the locally sourced milk, cheese, meats and more offered in the market. And many of the finished products, like the hot sauce, also are used in food served at the market's café.

"It's a way to enhance our farm-to-table spirit," said Bushel & Peck's co-owner Jackie Gennett, who noted that with the exception of an ingredient like sugar, the preservation kitchen produce comes from area farms including the one she runs.

"I do a lot of experiments at home," Gennett said. "I'll take a new type of pepper and experiment until I get the recipe right."

She's found more consumers like the idea of not only buying preserved food, but making their own, so Bushel & Peck's offers preservation classes in the winter.

A popular one on fermentation lets attendees create foods like sauerkraut and a traditional Korean side dish that has gone viral: kimchee -- a concoction of fermented cabbage, carrots, onions, ginger and other vegetables and spices.

Besides a tangy taste, fermented foods offer health benefits because of the probiotics, or good bacteria, found in them, which contribute to good health and healthy digestion, Gennett said.

The fact that more consumers want to avoid commercially processed foods has contributed to a growing interest in food preservation, Amanda Olsen, the founder of Preservation School in Woodstock, Illinois, said in an email.

“With food allergies and nutrition-related diseases on the rise, consumers are becoming more aware of what’s in their food and how it can impact their health. Being able to be in control of the food they feed their families is a big draw for most people,” said Olsen, who has been offering in-home and on-site classes since June 2016.

While fermentation is big, more traditional preservation methods like canning are seeing a resurgence, as well.

“One big sign is that when I first started teaching my classes nearly 15 years ago, a lot of the basic equipment and supplies needed for canning was not as readily available in the stores outside of Farm & Home or specialty stores,” Ann Wegner LeFort, owner of The Mindful Palate, said in an email. The Mindful Palate is a Milwaukee-based culinary school that offers cooking and canning classes around southeastern Wisconsin.

“Now you can find canning equipment and beginner kits at just about any big box store as well as the supermarket. Varieties of jars are no longer limited to the standard pint and quart Mason jars. As the interest has grown, the market has responded.”

For LeFort, it was her Gramma Lucille who was her muse in the kitchen.

Most of those who attend her classes now might have a fond memory of a grandmother who canned, but primarily want to use the excess harvest from their gardens, community-supported agricultural shares or even farmers market purchases, she said.

Her most popular offerings are an introductory class on food preservation and a tomato preservation class.

Canning and preserving aren’t part of the current programming offered through the family living departments at the University of Wisconsin–Extension at Rock and Walworth counties, but the offices provide a wealth of information and help, including a free service to test the gauge on pressure cookers for accuracy.

“We get about a dozen folks who come in for pressure canner testing each year,” said Angela Flickinger, an educator and the family living department head at UW–Extension Rock County.

People often have questions about the canning process, especially when it comes to safety, LeFort said.

“I still get a lot of students who are scared to death of pressure canners exploding or killing people via botulism,” she said. “After a basic intro class, I have found I can temper a lot of those concerns, but then I invite people to take a hands-on class to try it themselves. For me, actually trying is a better way to learn.”

Additionally, she gets lots of questions about older canning methods, such as using paraffin to seal jams and jellies and canning tomatoes in a hot water bath without adding acid.

"There are a lot of techniques that were used 30 or 40 years ago that are no longer recommended by food scientists and canning experts," she said. "If you're putting a lot of time, effort and resources into canning it's best to work towards the safest outcome."

Olsen, who has been practicing home food preservation for more than a decade, says many students are intimidated by the canning process because of misconceptions not only about dangers, but equipment needed and time commitment involved.

"The first thing I tell new students is, if you can cook, you can can! You don't have to spend all day in the kitchen canning bushels of produce into dozens of jars. Start small -- you can get started with supplies you have in your home kitchen already, and use recipes that are scaled down to create just a little bit of each thing."

By far, Olsen teaches more basic than advanced classes.

"The students that seem most drawn to hands-on instruction have had no practical experience with home canning," she said. "It's a skill that essentially skipped a generation or two -- most of us can remember our grandmothers or great-grandmothers canning, but our moms often didn't. So there is awareness of what it is, but not the practicalities of how to actually do it."

Preserved foods make sense economically, but there are other reasons for embracing the techniques.

"I always make dilly beans, if nothing else," LeFort said. "I don't have my grandmother's actual recipe, but I have found one that tastes just like hers. It's like a memory in a jar. I like to say that when she passed, it wasn't the fine china that the family (was) fighting over, but who would get the last jar of dilly beans from the pantry."

Resources

Books and pamphlets

- University of Wisconsin-Extension: <https://learningstore.uwex.edu/Food-Preservation-and-Safety-C60.aspx> or <http://fyi.uwex.edu/safepreserving/>
- The National Center for Home Food Preservation: <http://nchfp.uga.edu/>

Food preservation classes:

- Bushel & Peck's, 328 State St., Beloit, 608-363-3911. Schedule isn't up, but check Bushel & Peck's on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/bushelandpeckslocalmarket> for updates.
- The Mindful Palate, <http://mindfulpalatemke.com/classes>.
- Preservation School won't offer classes until spring; visit <https://preservationschool.com/> for details.

Dial-gauge pressure cooker testing:

- UW-Extension office at the Rock County Courthouse, 51 S. Main St., Janesville, 608-757-5696. Office open 8 a.m. to noon and 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.
- UW-Extension office at the Walworth County Government Center, 100 W. Walworth St., Elkhorn, 262-741-4951. Make an appointment to have the gauge tested on-the-spot, or drop it off at the office from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday and get a call back when it's ready.



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