

From Drying Shed to Drying Chevy: Food Preservation Remains a Lively Tradition

By Gerri Johnson

In recent years it has become increasingly evident that we must broaden our conservation efforts to include resources such as food. Rising prices are forcing people to find alternatives to the grocery store. One way to combat the crunch is to store food. Not only does food storage save money, but it also allows seasonal fruits and vegetables to be available throughout the year. In many areas of the rural South, gardening, canning, drying, and smoking are traditional forms of retaining food that have remained vital for years.

Peer into the basement or root cellar of many rural homes and you will find summer's bounty stored for the winter. Potatoes covered with lime fill a bin in one corner of the room. Colorful jars filled with fruit, vegetables, and meat line the walls, while crocks full of still fermenting pickle beans sit in another corner. Dried apples, beans, peaches, and corn are stored in brown paper bags, and home-cured hams hang from beams overhead.

Even though they own freezers, many rural women prefer to can, dry, and pickle produce from their gardens because it is more economical and the food suits their regional palates. Blue Ridge women, for example, raise large gardens and may can from 200-600 quarts of food each year—"enough to last a lifetime," one woman says. People can raise food, Carrie Severt continues, "cheaper than they can buy it." In addition, her home-canned tomatoes, applesauce, and sausage taste better. "I'd rather have mine than buy it out of the store," she concludes.

Geraldine Johnson studied folklore at the University of California at Los Angeles and received her Ph.D. from the University of Maryland in 1980. Her dissertation, entitled Rag Rugs and Rug Makers: A Study of Craft and Community is a regional approach to a woman's craft. She is an Associate Professor at Strayer College in Washington, D.C. For the past 3 years she has participated in research projects for the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, and for the Smithsonian Institution Office of Folklife Programs.



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It is the variety of products available on the shelves of the home canner, however, that would stagger even the Jolly Green Giant. Carefully arranged among the familiar jars of tomatoes, peaches, and green beans, are neatly packed quarts of okra and tomatoes, squash, rhubarb, pumpkin, carrots, sweet potatoes, ribs, peas, beef stock, hominy, and cracklings. Several varieties of juices—including homemade Concord grape juice—add particularly vivid colors to the basement shelves. Butters are popular too, and many traditional cooks make, in addition to the common apple butter, pear, peach, grape, tomato, and pumpkin butter. Few jellies and jams are found on the shelves; most women simply can the juices and berries and prepare the fresh spreads as they need them.

Food that is not canned is often pickled. Dilly beans, chow-chow, pickled corn, tomatoes, and beets—as well as several varieties of watermelon and cucumber pickles—fill the cellars of traditional cooks. Many women still make sauerkraut and pickle beans in a large crock covered with towels and a heavy plate or stone. The kraut ferments, as one woman puts it, “until it gets through stinking.” It is then ready to put into jars or simply scoop out for an evening meal. Some older traditional cooks still follow the planting signs in their local almanacs for pickling and occasionally for canning; when the daily signs are above the waist, preferably in the head or heart, pickles, kraut, and pickle beans are less likely to spoil.

The women may can meat products, but in many rural households, it is the men who cure the meat they slaughter—especially pork. City dwellers who are weary of tasteless, watery commercial hams can appreciate Levy Cruise's efforts as he packs hams in salt for about ten days. He then washes and hangs them in his newly built shed, smoking them with a hickory fire for three or four days. Finally he puts the dozen hams in a special solution before storing them for a year. The Cruises, who live alone, have two freezers full of their own farm products—one for meat and the other for garden produce.



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1 Beans drying, Alleghany County, North Carolina.

2 W. H. Cleary and Mozelle Cleary hanging green beans to dry.

3 Wood-fired drying shed at the Easter farm, Surry County, North Carolina.

4 *The daily signs from Blum's Farmer's and Planter's Almanac for The Year 1967. Blum's Almanac Syndicate, Winston-Salem, N.C. p. 2. Courtesy American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.*



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4 Josh and Verona Easter and their daughter, Carole Lowe, prepare apples for drying in Surry County, North Carolina.



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5 Mrs. Mae Willey of Grayson County, Virginia prepares corn for canning.

Suggested Reading

Adler, Thomas A. "Sunday Breakfast Was Always Special With Us: Foodways," unpublished manuscript, American Folklife Center, 1977.

Brunvand, Jan. "Folk Foods," in *The Study of American Folklore*, 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1978. pp. 344-56.

Eliot Wigginton, Eliot, ed. *The Foxfire Book*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972.

Hilliard, Sam B. *Hog Meat and Hoecake: Food Supply in the Old South, 1840-1860*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972.

Marshall, Howard Wight. "Meat Preservation on the Farm in Missouri's 'Little Dixie.'" *Journal of American Folklore* 92 (October-December 1979), pp. 400-17.

Yoder, Don. "Folk Cookery," in *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*. Richard M. Dorson, ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972, pp. 325-50.

Food drying also remains popular in many parts of the country because some foods are easier to dry, or they simply have a different flavor when cooked. "Nothing tastes quite like leather britches," Mae Willey says of her dried string beans, and "dried apples make the best fried pies you'll ever eat." The Amish women dry corn, a particularly difficult food to can, by heating it in a dual-layered, galvanized pan with a little water between the metal layers. Dried peaches, also popular in some areas, are eaten as a "confection" during the winter.

At one time drying sheds dotted the Upland South and were used to dry beans, peaches, apples, and pumpkin. Apples, for example, were sliced into rings and strung onto long poles that were placed lengthwise in the shed; a fire built below would dry the apples in a few days. Now, many rural families build special racks to cover their furnaces so they can dry food indoors; they use metal tables for drying in their backyards, or recycle old window screens to use as outdoor drying frames. The old leather britches, however, are often still threaded on a heavy string with a darning needle and draped just about anywhere inside or outside the house, where they may take weeks to dry.

The automobile is the most innovative drying device found in areas where dried foods are popular. Thinly sliced apple wedges, for example, are arranged on the dashboard and rear shelf of a car parked at the house, shopping center, or factory. The sun's energy is soon put to effective use, and the automobile becomes a modern, mobile drying shed.

While food preservation techniques may have adapted to changing times, home canning, pickling, curing, and drying remain vital traditions. They are economical in many ways, and the final product is easily adjusted to community preferences. Like homemade biscuits, cookies, and pies, home-processed hams, dilly beans, sauerkraut, and leather britches simply taste better to people who are accustomed to them.

Although food storage may seem complicated for beginners, the Department of Agriculture has information available to the public with clear instructions on canning, drying, and other processes of home food storage. For further information please call or visit your local office of the County Extension Service. District residents should contact the Cooperative Extension Service at 1331 H St., NW, or call 727-2979.