



THE LOST ART
of
CANNING

Over Christmas my grandma, Blake Vines, was reminiscing about the rows and rows of canned fruits, vegetables, pickles and preserves that she used to keep in the pantry when they lived on “the farm,” a 40-acre plot in the hills of north central Alabama. It wasn’t a working farm, but the garden yielded enough for their family of three to eat fresh or home-canned vegetables throughout the year.

Most visits, we went home with a selection of pickles and preserves that my mother would dole out judiciously—we almost always ran out before the next visit. My favorite was my grandma’s Ripe Cucumber Pickles, which for years I thought were made from watermelon rinds because of their unique texture. They are actually made from late-summer cucumbers, the bigger, less tender ones left too long in the sun (see recipe, opposite page).

My grandma’s reminiscences coincided with my research for the new cookbook we’re publishing, which will span 1944-2000. While researching the 1940s, I came across some posters produced by the USDA that are emblematic of the domestic role during the years of America’s involve-



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ment in World War II. For some of you, this is a trip down memory lane; for others, a lesson in history.

Canning was immensely important in rural life before electricity—and thus refrigeration and freezing—came to the countryside. How else could you preserve a summer tomato into the winter and still have it taste like something approaching the original?

During World War II, canning was a natural extension of the Victory Garden (see sidebar, opposite page). In the boom years after the war, when most people had electricity, many homemakers still chose to can because they preferred the taste.

By the 1970s, when my generation was growing up, canning was falling by the wayside. Most of my friends were not taught to can when they were young. I know I was in the kitchen when my grandma canned, but I didn’t make a conscious effort to learn how.

Today, there’s a renewed interest in canning, just like there’s a resurgence in knitting, quilt-making and other “home crafts.” There are websites dedicated to sharing canning instructions and recipes (like www.homecanning.com)

and books galore. For the total novice, check out *Canning and Preserving for Dummies* by Karen Ward (Wiley Pub. Inc., 2003). The classic tome on the subject, in print since 1973, is *Putting Food By* by Ruth Hertzberg, Beatrice Vaughan and Janet Greene (Plume, 1992, fourth ed.).

The recipe on this page doesn't include instructions for safe canning. Be sure to use a reliable source if you plan to can, be it a website, a book or your grandma. Canning is a way to bridge the generation gap. If you know how to can, teach someone. If you don't, find someone to learn from. It's a rewarding way to enjoy the fruits (and vegetables) of your garden or local produce stand throughout the year.

Blake Vines' Ripe Cucumber Pickles

Step 1

- 7 pounds cucumbers, peeled, seeded and sliced lengthwise into spears
- 2 cups pickling lime
- 2 gallons water

Dissolve lime in water. Soak cucumbers in solution for 24 hours, then drain and thoroughly rinse three times.

Step 2

- 1 box (2 ounces) powdered ginger
- 2 gallons water

Mix powdered ginger in water. Soak cucumbers in mixture for 6 hours and drain (do not rinse).

Step 3

- 5 pounds sugar
- 2 quarts vinegar
- 1 teaspoon celery seed
- 1 teaspoon allspice
- 1 teaspoon cloves

In a large pot, dissolve sugar in vinegar; add spices. Put cucumbers in mixture, let stand 1 hour, then bring to a boil. Turn down and cook slowly for 1 hour. Pack and seal.

NOTE: The original recipe had instructions between steps 1 and 2 that called for a "10-cent box" of alum and 2 gallons of water. The FDA no longer recommends pickling with alum. If you want especially crispy pickles, you can either soak cucumbers in ice water for 4 to 5 hours before pickling or use a product called Ball 100% Natural Pickle Crisp, available online at www.canningpantry.com. Use according to directions on box.

CANNING IN WORLD WAR II



As these posters illustrate, canning was a patriotic act—food saved at home meant more for the troops abroad. In suburban areas, women's volunteer groups got together to put up foods for their families and for "casualty stations" that were kept stocked in case of emergency. In rural areas, canning centers were set up for families to use, as reported in a 1944 issue of *Texas Co-op Power*: "Wideawake Gilmer community has built a year-round canning center to combat war food shortages with the aid of the Upshur-Rural Electric Cooperative. During a 38-day season last year, the 212 families using the center canned 14,261 containers of fruits and vegetables, worth 146,710 ration points and \$2,500."

JUNE RECIPE CONTEST



Used to be when I thought of blueberries, I thought of Maine. These days, I think of Texas. Farms in Texas are producing bushels of blueberries. It's a crop that doesn't get a lot of attention, but should. Send in your favorite **Blueberry** recipes for June's contest. You may mail them to Home Cooking, 2550 S. IH-35, Austin, TX 78704. You may also fax them to (512) 486-6252 or e-mail them to recipes@texas-ec.org. Be sure to include your name, address and phone number, as well as the name of your electric co-op. The deadline is March 10. The top winner will receive a copy of the *Texas Co-op Power Cookbook* and a selection of spices from Adams. Others whose recipes are published also will receive a selection from Adams.