



July 19, 2017

Food preservation: A Surviving Art

Food preservation has been around since the beginning of time. Preserving foods for later consumption has been key to man's survival and ability to remain in one community. Perhaps that is why home food preservation has survived the "in today, out tomorrow" ever changing societal trends.

The earliest food preservation included both drying and freezing. While the sun and wind dried foods naturally, Romans were known for building "still houses" to dry fruits, vegetables and herbs, especially in regions that did not get enough strong sunlight for drying. Fires was used to speed the drying process, or to smoke foods.

In parts of the world where cold temperature dominated, freezing was the obvious choice for food preservation. When temperatures were above the freezing mark, foods were kept in cold storage in caves, cool streams and spring houses.

In America, icehouses were built to store ice and to store food on ice. In the late 1800's, the icehouse became an "icebox" when Clarence Birdseye invented the mechanical refrigerator. His quick-freeze method at very low temperatures resulted in better tasting meats and vegetables.

Preserving foods in vinegar, or pickling originated with foods being placed in wine or beer. The beverage would go sour, but the flavor of the food remained appealing.

Early preservation pioneers, not wanting to waste anything, made use of leftover pickling brine and made Garum, a concentrated fish pickling sauce. Soon thereafter, chutneys, relishes, piccalillis, mustards and ketchups were created.

Dehydration was the earliest form of curing. Salting became a favored method as it was found to give meat a much more pleasing red color, instead of the usual grey. The mixture of salts and nitrates was later discovered to inhibit botulism.

Honey and sugar have been used to preserve fruit in cultures throughout the world. Ancient Greeks and Romans perfected a dried mixture of honey and quince. Preserves were later made through a process of heating the fruit with sugar, making it unnecessary to dry fruit before preserving.

Surprising to some, canning is the newest method of food preservation. Pioneered in the late 1700's by French confectioner named Nicolas Appert, canning was used to preserve food in sealed glass bottles. At that time, it was thought that the exclusion of air kept foods from spoilage.

Some 150 years later, Louis Pasteur discovered the relationship between food spoilage, illness, and microorganisms. It became evident that a very high temperature was necessary to safely can foods.

Today, commercial canning processes involve placing food in sealed containers that are heated to a temperature high enough to destroy microorganisms. The heating/ cooling process forms a vacuum seal to prevent microorganisms from re-contaminating the food.

While home food preservation has evolved from being a necessity to more of a novelty over the decades, it is now a growing trend among young adults who are interested in preserving their own produce. Buzz words like organic, pesticide free, sustainable, locally grown and fresh are used among these trend setters. Fortunately, farmers markets provide a bountiful supply of fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables, ready to be preserved.

The physical, spiritual and emotional connection one has with the land, as well as the age old need to preserve food for survival continues to inspire today's gardeners. Whether we grow and preserve food out of necessity or for enjoyment, the most important thing is that this survival skill and art is passed on to future generations.