

Preserving More Than Tomatoes

LOCAL FOOD PRESERVATION PROGRAM RUNS RISK OF BEING CANNED

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JENNIFER BURNS LEVIN

You don't know which strawberries make the best jam. You've found a jar of blackish tomatoes in the back of your pantry. Your dilly beans exploded. You're eating local this summer, and you can't live without beef jerky, so you'd like to dry local flank steak. To whom can you turn for the best advice on how to proceed?

The Master Food Preservers to the rescue! One of Lane County's best-kept food secrets is an organization that fielded almost 5,000 calls last year on a state-wide food preservation and safety hotline. The hotline, which runs from June through the end of September, is only one of the many services the MFP volunteers provide.

Founded in 1983 by OSU Extension faculty member Nellie Oehler, the Family Food Education/Master Food Preserver (FFE/MFP) program trains volunteers in an eight-week class in the basics of safely storing, canning, pickling, freezing and drying food. Almost 200 new and ongoing volunteers then take a state certification exam and devote at least 40 hours each per year, sharing their know-how in community programs, demonstrations and workshops. In 2007, volunteers made contacts with over 37,400 Oregonians.

One of the purest pleasures of life in the Willamette Valley is the seasonal produce, and the volunteer program trains local chefs, farmers, teachers and young homesteaders to handle the alchemical transformations known to our grandmothers. Training includes aspects appealing to different kinds of locals: It's

partly old-school home economics, with a vintage kitchen for several demonstrations each class and potluck sample lunches; partly an urban locavore fantasy, with workshops on making liqueurs, cheese and herbal jellies; and partly a survivalist's best case scenario with root cellar, pressure canning meat and smoking salmon workshops. Participants all join a close-knit community that never stopped their Slow Food movements, educating others in being more self-sufficient in these challenging times.

It is difficult to conceive that the program may be one more service cut with the loss of federal "timber money." Every dollar Lane County gives to Extension services like the FFE/MFP program is matched at similar amounts by state and federal grants, so the recent cuts in the county operating budget hit FFE/MFP particularly hard. It lost a third of its 2008-09 budget and is at risk of elimination because the program's federal and state funding for Extension are contingent upon continuing county funding.

"With high food prices, people are preserving more food this year," says Oehler. "We've seen an increase in interest in gardening and an increase in eating local. We need the Master Food Preserver program in Lane County now more than ever to provide more reliable information than what's available on the Internet."

With Oehler retiring in September and losses of program staff and facilities, the state has issued a challenge to the program to prepare a business plan for securing at least \$30,000 by March 1. The money will be used to hire a new part-time supervisor who will divide her time between Lane and Douglas Counties. Oehler says that if the program can raise \$10,000 by the end of September, "We'll be in good shape."

"We're asking supporters to give what they can," she adds. "A dollar, \$10, \$25,000 ... it all adds up."

Anyone who has met Oehler knows that she will not go without a fight — and a delicious one. She has mobilized the volunteers to work on a range of classes at the Extension office in Eugene and at LCC, where a portion of the proceeds will be donated. Plans are in the works for bread-baking and holiday gifts classes in the fall, and options to sustain the program, including corporate and governmental sources, are being developed.



Chive blossom vinegar with lemon



Strawberry pinot gris jam

Meanwhile, the Extension offices in Eugene have reduced their hours of operation, but you can still visit to have your pressure canner gauge tested or buy packaged Clear-gel, a commercial-grade stabilized cornstarch for pie fillings. The FFE/MFP program will have a booth at the Lane County Fair, and proceeds for parking in the Extension lot on August 12 and 13 will be donated to FFE/MFP and Extension Homemakers.

The MFP volunteers are planning a series of fundraising preservation classes that include garden green vegetables on Aug. 23, tomatoes in September and nuts in October. The August class will include instruction on using water bath and pressure canners, freezing, drying and pickling your garden veggies.

To register for the courses, learn more about the volunteer program, ask culinary questions or donate, call the hotline at 682-4246 or 800-354-7319 or visit the Extension office at 950 W. 13th Ave. (10 am-1 pm and 2 pm-5 pm Monday through Thursday). Hotline hours are 9 am to 4 pm. Donations to Lane County Extension can be earmarked for the Master Food Preservers by writing "FCD/MFP" on your check. For more information and downloadable publications on preservation, emergency preparedness and food safety, visit extension.oregonstate.edu/extension/lane/food-preservation ■

Jennifer Burns Levin became a certified Master Food Preserver in June of 2008. She lives in Eugene and blogs about gastronomic adventures in the Willamette Valley at culinariaeugenius.wordpress.com

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