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Interview with Ella May Bard

Ella May Bard

Lisa M. Groesz

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Researcher's name: Lisa M. Groesz
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Place: My apartment, 105A Aclands, 2:15pm
Co-workers present: None

LG: This is Lisa Groesz interviewing Ella May January 29, 2001. And you were talking about the apple cider and the problems with e coli.

EB: Well, there is the potential. Ah, then we do end up then with some regulations. And also you will see labeling that specifies when a product is not pasteurized so that there is a due warning. Probably the ones that would be at risk would be children in that they're small and if there is a bacteria present it takes less amounts for a small child to be a concern. With a pasteurized product we don't have any questions at all and so apple juice and things in the regular market will not be a question at all. It will only be fresh cider that would raise a potential question and it would be labeled so people know what they're buying.

LG: Hmmm. So if you're making apple cider in your own home, what can you do to insure that there is no problem.

EB: Uh, first of all I would thoroughly wash apples so that we don't have, we lower the bacteria going in. You won't totally eliminate it, but lower it. Uh, if it were a product like that often with apple cider, the bruised apples and all of that go into it just because of the type of product that it is. To lower that risk, we remove all bruised areas and that kind of thing.

LG: Okay.

EB: Uh, a few people might make cider at home. It really takes special equipment to make juice out of apples so we probably don't find too many people doing it at home. If someone does have that interest there are some special bulletins and information to help them. That's not on our website because that, at this point, is not a home product. Probably an older bulletin made before the website started. Any new publications that come into our fact sheet system or bulletin system are going on website as they are added to our listing.

LG: Okay. And so do you, do you preserve?

EB: I have. I frankly don't do as much as I used to when my mother was still living because she's the one who grew the produce.

LG: Okay.

EB: Uh, and that's probably one of the key factors in home production. Where does the produce come from. If you have to go to a market to buy produce, so you're buying

produce, you're having all the equipment, taking your time. Frankly, it can be expensive. You don't save money except from the fact that you have your own produce and you're donating the time. Otherwise it's not a cheaper way to go. But, uh, for people who have the interest in their garden. Maybe it's a hobby, it's exercise, there's a personal satisfaction to canning. The others are a special diet interest. Uh, we used to see that more so when commercially there were not many low-sodium, low-sugar products. That's expanded a great deal on the commercial market and the price has come down considerably. Uh, years ago, those people found it very much to their advantage to can or freeze at home because they could eliminate the sodium and decrease or eliminate the sugar.

LG: And do you find also with supermarkets, because now you can get anything out of season, does that change canning?

EB: Some people, they will want to just go for fresh stuff.

LG: Uh huh.

EB: Now, out of season produce in the market is a premium. Strawberries are probably available right now but you're going to pay double or even triple what you would in June.

LG: Right.

EB: So that's a budgetary consideration for the family and they make choices. Do they spend their money there or, in case of the strawberries, the primary vitamin would be vitamin C so you can get an orange which would be more in season and spend a lot less money and have the same nutrition.

LG: Do you find, like, with the development of the pressure canner, and that it saves time, do you think that that saves time, it helps?

EB: Well, the pressure canner actually, the key point there is that it made possible higher temperatures that lowered the risk of canning low acid foods. So it's not a time factor when it comes to those. It is the only approved home canning procedure. For some products such as fruit, there would be a slight difference in the time. But we actually find because it is so quick and can be such high temperatures that people are at risk of overcooking the fruit. So often they will still go with the water bath.

LG: Okay.

EB: It's possible, and you do it at a lower pressure, and the timing is very critical to not overcook them. Because you will get mushy peaches and overcooked things. In the case of peaches in a heavy syrup, you might even caramelize them if you get them really extra hot so some people will just keep with the water bath procedure which is jars totally immersed in water and that's adequate for a high acid food such as fruit.

LG: Umm, actually when I was talking with Kate Brown, she was giving me times and like, with beef, and with, the other one was corn, there was a difference in about twice amount of time between pressure canner and hot water bath. But am I looking at it wrong?

EB: Okay, okay. That is totally wrong. Ha ha. Beef and corn should never be done in a water bath process and you can't look at times because there are no times printed in any reliable source for beef or corn in a water bath. It won't be there because it is not a recommended process. It is not safe. So I don't know what she was looking at to give you times because there is nothing printed in legitimate literature that you would tell you that.

LG: I'll just leave that piece alone then.

EB: Yeah, yeah. I get a call once in a while and they'll say, usually it's for green beans. I don't know why, but usually it's green beans. And they'll say, "I looked in all the books and it doesn't have the time." And I'll say, "No, it won't have the time because it is not a recommended procedure and you will not find it in anything." And it's not a new procedure. Pressure canners have been around for fifty years so we're going way back. Actually, it's longer than that. They came out in the thirties.

LG: Oh, okay.

EB: So that's seventy years, isn't it.

LG: And, um, do you have a preference between drying and freezing and, oh, canning certain things.

EB: Drying is a very severe process.

LG: Uh huh.

EB: Uh, it's the most severe to vitamin loss.

LG: Uh huh.

EB: It is very suitable when people don't care about the vitamins. For example, dried onions are popular for people. Uh, there are a few snacky things where they might go for those like the dried apples or something of that sort. But the vitamin loss is the most.

LG: Okay.

EB: It was probably more of a popular, if you want to use that word, when they did not have freezers. And they did not have reliable home procedures. So you'll hear in old western stories or back into the eighteen hundreds, dried apples and some of those things. But that was the only means they had.

LG: Because you didn't have to worry about spoilage with drying?

EB: Right, right. Drying works because there is no moisture and it really goes back to a basic bacterial lesson in that for foods to spoil or, the factors in food spoilage, are bacteria have to be present. They have to have something to eat and that's the food we're talking about. Time, moisture, and temperature. So if we can disrupt any of those, we can change the life of the food. So that, with freezing, we do so by getting the temperature so cold, the bacteria cannot divide and separate.

LG: Okay.

EB: They are not killed but they cannot spoil the food. They just can't do it. So the spoilage can probably start when the food is thawed. We also cut down on how much bacteria is there by washing product and using clean tools and being clean in the process of freezing.

LG: Right.

EB: Canning works because we lower the number of bacteria by literally killing them off in heat.

LG: Okay.

EB: In the case of fruit, it's a combination of, uh, heat and the fact that there's acid present, on what kind of bacteria are present. Also, we're dealing with yeast and mold when we talk about fruit. So the pressure canner works because it literally kills off the bacteria. It's not a sterile product but it's commercially, uh, sterile.

LG: Okay.

EB: Is the term they use. So, in extremely high temperatures like, say someone has canned food, home canned food and put it in their truck and starts driving across the country in the summer, that food will spoil because that food is too hot. Or food stored in the attic in the summer. In the winter it could freeze. So we want to keep it in a, we'll say cool, it doesn't have to be cold, 60, 70 degrees would be good for storing food and ideally the 60 is good. Now, let's see. What else. Drying works because we take away the moisture. The bacteria won't grow because it has no moisture. Now, in Ohio, we can't do sun drying because our humidity is so high we can never get it dry enough to dry out in the sun.

LG: Okay.

EB: So they can do that in Arizona but we can't pull that off here. We need to use some system that provides a very small amount of heat, usually in the category of 100 degrees, like the desert heat—100, 110, and then a way of removing the moisture. A fan or something so the moisture isn't just sitting there on the food.

LG: And when you used to preserve with your mom, was it kind of a bonding experience.

EB: Yeah, I can remember the last canning we did was pickles. And one year we had made these pickles. Well, the next year for some reason I didn't get back home and she came up. She had this special kitchen in the basement and she could do her canning down there. And she said she just, it had taken so long this year, she just could believe, because she remembered last year it just seemed to go so fast and I said, now, you remember, last year you had slave year helping you. And she said, oh that's right, you were here when we made those.

LG: He he he.

EB: But, uh, she always had a garden.

LG: Okay.

EB: So we would do a hundred, a 150 quarts of green beans and a 100, 150, quarts of tomatoes. Usually peaches. And I don't remember, maybe closer to fifty quarts. And so those were family favorites. The peaches went into peach upside cake or just served as sliced, sliced peaches. And then green beans were a family favorite. Um, the tomatoes, chili and soup and the like.

LG: And with the tomatoes would you just make a paste or would you make the soup and then can that?

EB: No, we just canned tomatoes. The, just cut up tomatoes. If you were buying them in the store you call them diced. Or sometimes we would just quarter them and then they would get heat through.

LG: Okay.

EB: In making soup at home, people get into a suction in that if you put more than one kind of vegetable together you have to look up every vegetable and take the longest time. So in that process often you end up overcooking one vegetable to process another or, like some of the canned soups, it will take on a flavor, like to me, some of the canned vegetable soups all taste like carrots.

LG: Right.

EB: So to really get the best flavor of soup, you do better in either freezing it or canning the things separately and then putting them together later. Some people will do kind of a partial combination where they'll can two or three that become available at one time together and then later in the season something that comes later and then make a big pot of soup.

LG: Okay.

EB: If you add meat, it's automatically ninety minutes. Because meat takes more time.

LG: Uh huh. And I know it's kind of an expensive thing to start. Because if you want to get the pressure canner.

EB: There's a lot of equipment.

LG: And with drying, it's the dehydrator or?

EB: You can actually find a fairly decent dehydrator for under twenty dollars. It won't be huge. Now I have one. I use mine mostly for herbs because it really works well for herbs. Something that's light, doesn't have a lot of moisture to begin with. Those you might be able to do overnight. Like sage or something of that sort. But lets say you took apple slices. You probably, that's eighteen hours or so, depending on how thick you put them. And you have a change of color so you do need to either heat treat them or use something to keep the color from getting excessively dark. A product you sometimes see is sulphur, a sulphur treatment, some people have an allergy to sulphur so that's a concern. Uh, and also, sulphur can be very damaging to some treatment. It can be corrosive. So there are some limitations in doing drying. Uh, when people find out how much time it takes and how little they get, drying is only for the ones who are really dedicated. Except for herbs, a lot of people like it for herbs.

LG: Because you can just it let alone and do other things as well.

EB: Most of the little dryers have multiple trays and so it is probably good to rotate those every once in a while. About every hour or so. So it doesn't take any attention. Um, there is a little lightbulb in there. There's no heating device, it's a lightbulb so that's all you need.

LG: So with canning, you would want to get a pressure canner and?

EB: If you were going to do only fruit and tomatoes you can do a water bath. If you want to do any of the vegetables or meat then a pressure canner is a mandatory. Now, I've had people bring into my office a canner that they've found at a garage sale. And that's probably the best bargain. A new canner, there's several models, but the lowest I've seen in recent years has been 49.95. The super deluxe, particularly the tall one, can run 115, 120 dollars. And it wouldn't surprise me if those figures go up a little bit every year because prices don't come down.

LG: Right. With freezing you don't need anything other than a freezer.

EB: Well, there are a few tools that help because you are dealing with a hot product. There is a piece of equipment we call a blancher, it's a double decker pan, a big pan, and then an insert that goes in it with lots of holes. So that you can immerse the vegetables

into hot water, boiling water, start the timer, and one minute, two minutes, three minutes, depending on what the product is, and then you pull it out and you can just lift it out of that hot water and actually reuse the hot water that those vegetables are immersed into cold water. So some of those equipment make it easier to do, and a little safer because you are dealing with hot water.

LG: Right.

EB: Then many people are using just, uh, one use containers. Years ago some of those had limitations and people had kind of a collection of rigid plastic or firmer plastic. But now throw aways do real well.

LG: Right. And is the pan called a blancher, blancher, because it just turns completely white the vegetables?

EB: No, no. Blanching is just the word they use. They don't turn at all actually, they turn bright. If they're green, they turn bright green.

LG: That's interesting.

EB: Well, it's the chlorophyll. And if you over do it, then you get that dull moss green color. And you can think of frozen peas and see that nice bright green.

LG: Yeah.

EB: As opposed to canned peas that are the moss green.

LG: So I know this initial step to encouraging people is hard but can you think of any ways that get people into preserving.

EB: Well, actually, that may not be my goal. Because it is a lot of work. There aren't, you cannot take short cuts. So if someone does not have the time to do it right, they shouldn't be doing it at all. And if they don't have a source for the produce. Growing the garden, having some way of extending the life of that, preserving it into fall and winter. That makes sense. If they have a good source, whether it's family or maybe it's a roadside market that they know that will have a reasonable price.

LG: Right.

EB: Some might go to the new farmer's market in town next summer and find some. But you are, that's part of the cost of doing it and that all adds up. You are not going to be able to buy, at full market price, fresh produce, buy all the equipment, and spend all your time, and beat the prices they they can do when they can do it en masse. Everybody probably shouldn't want to can but, if they do, then we can provide them with the directions to do it safely.

LG: Okay. So your role with preserving at the OSU extension office is that you wait for people to contact you?

EB: Well, we sometimes have classes at the library and such. And I'll maybe do an article for the newspaper so they know where to go.

LG: Right.

EB: If they go to the library, uh, the librarian, the research librarian, or reference librarian, usually knows to send them to me. Or give them our website so they can find it on-line. Then there are several publications that are well known. The Ball Blue Book is probably one of the best known. Kerr, another manufacturer of lid products, also has a book.

LG: Is that C-U-R?

EB: That's K-E-R-R.

LG: Okay.

EB: Those are the two primary lid manufacturers. There's a few others but those are the primary ones.

LG: Okay. Thank you. Um.

EB: I probably should give, for some, I mentioned garage sales and flea markets for the equipment. And its hard to go wrong when you're paying five dollars for a big pot. You may end up spending $25 getting it ready to use because it is a dial type, it very likely might need a new dial. And we offer that testing in our office because nobody else does and it needs to be tested so we do that. And then most of them have a rubber gasket. There is one brand that uses a metal to metal seal. It does not have a gasket but that's another few dollars and I haven't priced them out recently to know what would be accurate so I probably shouldn't say a given amount. But you are looking at least 25 dollars to get that ready to use. And then there's a little safety device. In most of the models now, it's kind of a rubber like so that's what would blow if there was a problem inside. Uh, the other one I would mention would be jars in that it would be very possible to in that used market. There would be a risk factor in that jars can be susceptible to improper use. And ideally, a metal instrument is never put inside a canning jar. We use plastic or wood and metal inside the jar clanging around can weaken it. Particularly when it's going through a heat treatment. Uh, also there are jars that are designed for commercial use. There are designed what we call one-way jars. And those can be used at home if you can find appropriately fitted lids but probably best for just water treatment. In the pressure can, they are liable to crack and you've not only broke the jar but all the contents in it and there's nothing you can do at that point.

LG: If you're just looking at a jar you can't tell if it's been weakened?

EB: Now you obviously the ones that are broke you can tell but you can't tell which ones have had metal in them. The other thing is, with really old old jars, if they go back into the fifties the glass may well be still usable but at that time the predominant style was a one piece lid and the sealing edge was at the neck of the jar.

LG: Wasn't it a rubber band?

EB: Yes, a one-piece lid with a rubber band.

LG: Right.

EB: And a rubber band not like we use to put around a bunch of papers. It was a flat, uh, piece that just fit on this ledge at the neck of the jar. And those are no longer available. The jars, the sealing edge was at the neck. So when we use two piece jars that seal at the top, we might not get a good seal using old jars designed for one-piece lids with two piece lids. So there is a difference. There are some that would work for both but the current ones will have a flatter top where the sealing edge is. They may or may not have any ridge at the neck.

LG: You know, I would be so nervous about sealing it properly with just that one lid and the band.

EB: Well, ironically, peoples' concern may get them into more trouble than not. I find people who think 'oh I need to tighten this. I need to tighten this as tight as I can.' That's not true. It needs to be firm and in place and, what they call that turn, there's a measurement called torque, and there's a given torque tolerance on a proper seal. And sometimes for big canning programs we can get a special torque measuring machine and people can try and see. But basically you want to tighten it until it's firm and that's about it. If it's as tight as some people can do it, they can get it too tight. I've had people bring me lids that are buckled because they tightened it so tight, when it heated and expanded, it literally buckled. The other thing that happens at that point if it is too tight, the air inside the jar that expands when heated can't get out and we can hurt the canning process. So you don't want that. Uh, probably the other thing I hear about, people call up and say, I canned, usually it's green beans again…

LG: uh huh.

EB: And all the liquid came out. Well that tells me that the pressure in the pressure canner fluctuated a great deal. It went up and down, up and down. We're aiming for ten pounds in the one type of canner, 11 pounds in the dial type. Now let's say someone turns around and it got up to 15 and they turn it down and it goes down to 7 and 8 and it goes up and it will suck the liquid right out. Syphon is probably the better word. Syphon the liquid out.

LG: So how can you help it maintain equilibrium?

EB: You get familiar with your canner and with your range. And, um, not be moving that dial all the time. Oftentimes it needs, let's say with electric, gas can be a little more responsive. Start it on high and at that point the canner is not closed up. Pet cock is open and it will spew for about five to ten minutes. We call that exhausting. That's letting the temperature inside increase. It's letting the air expand and have a place to go. Then, at that point, the pet cock is closed and the pressure begins to build up inside. And, uh, as you do that, if you have a dial type, you can watch it move.

--Turned tape over and pressed play-record. The red light showed that voices were observed but nothing was taped.