
Interviews

Foodways

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Interview with Kate Brown

Kate Brown

Lisa M. Groesz

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Researcher's name: Lisa M. Groesz
Event: Interview with Kate Brown
Place: Her Maple Syrup Farm, Fredericktown, 9:30am
Co-workers present: None

It was a cold, blustery day. I turned the defrost on high and scraped the windows before departing Kenyon. Still, I arrived in Fredericktown early so I listened to NPR and drove around the neighborhoods. When I eventually drove up the Browns' driveway, their dog, Ginger, ran out to greet me, slobbering on my jeans. During the entire interview, Ginger would paw at the door wanting in, then paw at the door craving to go out. Kate Brown would laugh and humor her fickle pet.

Married 53 years and a petite woman, Kate is packed tight with a vivaciousness that is catching. Her energy was infectious during the interview and plumped up her stories with life. We began by discussing the role her mother played when she learned to can.

She cans for several reasons. There is both a health and taste benefit to canning. One has control over the amount of sugar and/or salt placed in the jars. One winter food that Kate makes with the corn is mush. She slices it thick and fries it before placing it in jars. Her son loves the mush for lunch. She also pickles relish and makes salsa. One of her sons jokes that she could put it on the market and sell it.

She also cans because of the personal satisfaction she derives from it. "I can make chili just out of the basement. That's kind of fun to do. Maybe that's my pioneering spirit." She loves being able to walk down to the basement and gather everything she will need to make a dinner that evening.

She emphasizes that good products have to be used for preserving because the food never gets any better. Also, to reduce the chance of mushy vegetables, she prefers the pressure canner over the hot water bath. The food does not need to process as long in the hot pressure canner.

She is becoming interested in drying again, now that she has a dehydrator. The problem is the time—many foods require 12 to 24 hours on the drying racks. "But I can remember when my mother would dry corn and I'm telling you, it tastes different. And when I was a child I thought it was awful." Herbs are the only efficient thing to dry, only requiring one night.

In discussing whether people can less than in the past, she talked about how people tend to be too busy. Also, because there are fewer gardens, the act is not as viable. When one has to traipse to the store to purchase the tomatoes, there is no longer a cost-saving factor involved. Supermarkets, through selling strawberries in the winter and oranges in the summer, removed the need to preserve to step beyond the bounds of seasonality. They also provide a more eclectic variety of foods. She still remembers when there was a season for apples. And now in the winter, "they are still crisp and a good apple." She didn't know what an artichoke was until she was an adult. Also, she grew up believing that red and green peppers were also called mangoes. It wasn't until she went to Florida on her honeymoon that she tried a real mango. "It tasted like silk," she said.

At the same time, preserving has become a legacy. Traditions are good. She loves to can because of the pioneering spirit evoked. She values progression, such as the development of the pressure canner. Another step was switching from canning corn to an all day family corn freeze.

After the interview, we left the living room and sat at her kitchen table. She poured fresh coffee and we munched on homemade biscotti. I only became more impressed with her character. First semester, she taught reading classes for first year students at the Nazarene college. She laughed as she remembered how she was nervous about whether they would listen to such an older woman. They treated her with the utmost respect, even removing their hats in her presence. The most difficult part was remembering to have everyone pray at the beginning of each class.