



Summer and Fall Preserved

An avid home canner for more than 15 years, Weigl goes to great lengths to acquire a stock of ripe fruit to make preserves every summer. Figs are expensive and can be difficult to find in large quantities. Plus, fresh-picked figs beat store-bought figs any day. “In the South, fig trees are plentiful, but many people don’t know what to do with them,” she says.

“Until recently, my octogenarian neighbor and I would stalk the fig trees in our neighborhood,” she says. Each day, her late friend Ralph, a master gardener who lived across the street, would track the ripening of each neighbor’s trees—people who were obviously not picking their figs. When the branches were heavy and laden, he would text her: “Lilian’s trees are ready to be picked,” or “The Moody’s fig tree is looking good.”

Of course, their neighborhood fig watch was polite. “We always asked permission,” says Weigl. Once they had it, they’d pick figs by the pound and freeze them at peak ripeness. Later, Weigl would methodically process them in her water bath canner, turning them into lovely jars of luscious preserves.

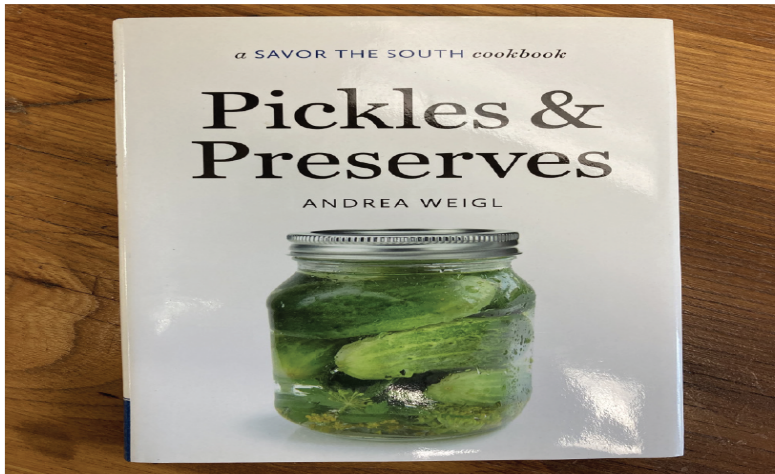
Sadly, her partner in figs passed away earlier this year. Weigl says she misses Ralph terribly, but the jars that line her shelves are full of beautiful memories.

Bittersweet Longing

Home canning is an almost-magical process that turns humble fruits and vegetables into delectable treats that far outshine mass-produced jellies and pickles. Canning, pickling, and fermenting have surged in popularity with a new generation of foodies who didn’t necessarily grow up with these



kitchen skills but delight in acquiring them. The homely acts of washing, chopping, simmering, and stocking a pantry can be a balm for the mind at a time when news reports are filled with calamities.



Pickles & Preserves by Andrea Weigl.
Photo credit to UNC Press



Nikki Evers in her kitchen



Evers's vegetable harvest

"I see, within myself and my peers, this nostalgia for the homemaking skills that our grandmothers and mothers had. We want to master these skills, not out of necessity but just out of the desire to



have them,” says Weigl. She recalls a similar resurgence of interest in food preservation as a hobby around 2008, when mass anxiety about the markets and economy spurred a desire to get back to basics—to plant gardens and make pickles from seasonal fruits and vegetables.

“I do think canning is having a moment, probably related to the pandemic when we were all stuck at home, looking for things to do, and wanting to be self-sufficient,” says Weigl.

A Healthy Connection with Food

Nikki Evers, a real estate agent in Folsom, California, makes her special salsa from jalapenos, bell peppers, and onions and gives it to her friends and family. She grows her own peppers, then enhances their goodness by fermenting them in a salt and water brine. “The natural lacto-fermentation process cultivates good bacteria,” says Evers. She puts her salsa on eggs or in salad dressing. “It’s really good for your gut health because when you eat it, you introduce healthy microorganisms into your system.”

While Evers’s mother, aunts, and grandmother all knew how to preserve food, Evers didn’t become a canning and fermenting enthusiast until she was in her 40s and faced some troubling health issues. A marathon runner who had always been a healthy eater, “I started to get sick with stomach issues, inflammation, and achy joints,” says Evers. She found it puzzling that her doctor’s prescription medications couldn’t quell her bothersome symptoms. In fact, they didn’t resolve until she committed to some major changes in her style of eating.

A self-proclaimed “food nerd,” Evers began reading everything she could find about the science of gut health and the nutrients in organic, heirloom vegetables. “I wanted to have a direct relationship with my food.”

She began to grow much of her family’s food herself on their 10 acres. The large garden she has developed is both her dream and her salvation. Learning to grow and preserve tomatoes, peppers, cabbage, and other vegetables from her own land has given her the ability to eat healthy and seasonal foods all year round.

Each year, she looks forward to starting her seedlings indoors in winter, using grow lights. By mid-March, she’ll have 320 plants in her house. “It’s very satisfying to have a little seed that I planted in a container in my house, then put it in ground when the season allows,” says Evers.

“From July to September, I’m in my garden for two hours every morning,” says Evers. “I bring in the vegetables I’ve harvested, and that determines whether I’m going to can tomatoes or do fermenting that day. I’ll can and preserve in the evenings, making sure the vegetables don’t sit too long. Even if you have a small backyard, you can still plant a garden and benefit from growing your own food.”

Getting Started

Most beginners do what’s called *water bath canning*, which is a safe method for processing foods



with high acid content. This includes most jams, jellies, pickles, and chutneys. These recipes typically include an acid, such as vinegar or lemon juice, and are brought to a boiling temperature to eliminate any potentially harmful bacteria.

Low-acid foods, like meats, poultry, or soups, require a more advanced method that uses a pressure canner to reach temperatures of 240 degrees or higher. You can find detailed information on food safety and canning methods by searching for the words *home canning* on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website.

As a general rule though it's always safest to use tested recipes from reliable sources because old-fashioned recipes aren't always up to modern food safety standards. For example, a family recipe from generations ago may call for sealing jars with paraffin, but this material can develop pinholes and let bad bacteria in, says Weigl.

Water bath canning requires some basic equipment:

- Pint- or quart-sized canning jars, such as from Ball, Anchor Hocking, or Weck
- Canning lids
- A water bath canner—essentially a large, deep pot with a lid and a rack—available at suppliers like Ace Hardware or Walmart and often packaged in a kit together with other essential tools
- A rack and dividers for holding the jars
- Tongs for placing and lifting jars
- A funnel for filling jars
- A small ruler

An easy first canning project is homemade strawberry jam. The Ball brand offers a low-sugar strawberry freezer jam recipe on its website at ballmasonjars.com, and numerous other beginner recipes are available online. "It's the perfect entry point for lots of people. Homemade strawberry jam is 10 times better than anything at the store, and it's a fleeting fruit," says Weigl.



TRUSTED HOME CANNING RESOURCES

Websites:

- Visit ballmasonjars.com for a helpful beginner video on raspberry jam, and find many tested recipes.
- Find info for beginners from the National Center for Home Food Preservation at nchfp.uga.edu.

Books:

- *Food in Jars: Preserving in Small Batches Year-Round*, by Marisa McClellan
- *Pickles and Preserves: A Savor the South Cookbook*, by Andrea Weigl
- *Put 'em Up!: A Comprehensive Home Preserving Guide for the Creative Cook*, by Sherri Brooks Vinton

Scan this QR code with your mobile device camera for a beginner's guide to canning food.



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