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WHY I MAKE APRICOT JAM

By Helen Bailey

Every Thanksgiving and Christmas, my Southern family serves peach pickles. (My California father-in-law, a retired English professor, observes that they more rightly should be called pickled peaches.) These are whole or half peaches, peeled, which are steeped in a sugar/vinegar/clove/cinnamon syrup. They are both sweet and piquant; as such, they are an excellent accompaniment to holiday meats.

But we serve a somewhat impoverished version: we “cheat” by starting with Del Monte® canned peaches, rather than fresh fruit. We sit at the holiday table each time and, slightly sheepishly, tell ourselves that these are, really, almost as good as the ones my grandmother used to make, that you can barely tell the difference, but, we quickly add, she would be “turning over in her grave” if she knew that we took such a shortcut.

My grandmother’s process was this: she would rise before dawn, drive to an orchard of her acquaintance in order to pick the peaches herself, in the escalating August Alabama heat, when the fruit was, of course, at the height of its season. She would climb the ladder herself. I never remember her in slacks, so I firmly believe that this was accomplished in a dress, though I imagine that she relented somewhat by forgoing her nylon stockings on these rare occasions.

Once she returned to her kitchen, which was cooled only by an inadequate window air-conditioning unit in the adjacent dining room, she used her well-worn but sharp paring knife to flawlessly peel each peach. We marveled at the perfection with which she accomplished this task: the peeled fruit was smooth and free of any nicks which would have resulted from sloppy technique; it was as if the peel had slipped itself off. Then came the actual pickling, complete with the requisite clouds of steam, from the syrup itself and from the boiling water in which the hot jars were sterilizing.

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I should add that my sister, writing in a family memory book, remembers my grandmother achieving the finished product, from leaving in the pre-dawn hours to setting the jars to cool, “in time for lunch.” My sister does not “put up,” as preserving and canning are often called; if she did, she would realize that all the steps, and the quantity of the finished product which Grand turned out, were not possible before noon. But it is a delightful idealization.

Another example comes to mind of how much we cherished these specialties of my grandmother. A real treat was fig preserves, which are whole figs preserved in a very sweet syrup. The fruit came from a tree in her own backyard. Once, when I was about five years old and already a great fan of this delicacy, a handyman came to do some chores in her yard. I anxiously requested: “Please don’t cut down the fig preserve tree!” But what makes the memory bittersweet for me, upon reflection, is a practice that I was ignorant of at the time. Since this was the 1960s in Selma, Alabama, and he was a person of color, he had to go around to the back door and was expected to remove his hat as he knocked. This uniquely Southern creation, the fig preserve, is now sadly linked in my mind with another, less savory aspect of the South at that time.

My grandmother, one of nine children, was raised on a farm in rural Georgia. Her horizons may have appeared limited, but dreams or ambition motivated her: after a partial college education, cut short by the exigencies of family finances, she was equipped enough, according to the standards of the day, to teach Home Economics in high school. She ventured to Colorado, where I imagine the mores were quite different, where she knew no one, and where she was enthusiastically courted by a beau, whose marriage proposal she turned down. I still wear a quartz ring that he gave her: it is a powerful symbol to me of her independence. Her willingness to risk deviating from the very strict codes of the South in which she was raised has been inspirational. After several years of teaching, she ended up marrying at the age of thirty, which in the 1920s was practically an “old maid.” If she could be that bold for her time, then I have believed I could also find my own way, keeping, I hope, the best parts of my Southern upbringing, which I cherish, but not necessarily adhering to the tighter strictures that sometimes seem to accompany it.

So, preserving was not simply for her, as it was for so many others then, a frugal measure, expected of so many farm housewives, which she became after marrying. I persist in believing that it also served as a link to her independent past: a way of bridging her professional life as a home economics teacher with her present domestic life. But perhaps it is now I who am idealizing.

I continually think of her when I make my annual batch of apricot jam. I buy a “lug” of fruit at the height of its ripeness, which, fortunately for me, is always around the

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Fourth of July on the relatively cool Central Coast. (As a lover of precise vocabulary, I even delight in the fact that there is still such a word as “lug,” which for me, a layperson, translates to “a box of about 22 pounds.”) I think this canning ritual would make her very happy, and I even find myself pondering spiritual matters: I have family members, deeply religious, who say “Grand would be so pleased if she knew you were doing this.” Others, also spiritual, if in a different way, insist that she does know. She died before we could “put up” together in any meaningfully adult way, but I know that I am honoring her, albeit with a uniquely California product.

I cherish the fact that this whole process takes time and effort. I am striving for that homemade quality which, if not always perfect, brings with it the pride of having done it myself. It is a cliché to write of performing such an old-fashioned, and thus no longer necessary, task in such a “store-bought” age, but it is true nonetheless.

I delight further in the fact that the fruit mandates the timing of my enterprise, rather than my being able to choose. To yield the best result, there is a very narrow window in which this project can be accomplished. I like giving up control over my schedule and choosing to be at the whim of the season. And, in a state disdained by residents of other states for its lack of seasons, this apricot rush is a reminder that indeed there are seasonal rhythms to be observed here, if more subtle than in other regions of the country.

Another inspiration I think of while I work is Mike Cirone, of See Canyon Orchard, whose fruit I always must use. Mike is one of few California farmers who still grow the Blenheim, or Royal Blenheim, apricot. This is an old-fashioned variety, of English extraction, long prized by apricot purists for its intense, superior flavor, but now far less popular commercially than it once was: it is smaller and less obviously a classic apricot to the untrained eye, given its greenish tinge and less intense coloration. Additionally, it is more challenging to grow than other types, and very difficult to ship, given its fragile nature. It is also later to come into harvest; impatient fruit lovers are rewarded with earlier, but vastly inferior, varieties. Mike has also told me that it is extremely fast-ripening: rather than having a more stretched-out season, the Blenheim comes hard and fast at the grower, and is thus a most punishing variety to harvest.

Mike cultivates this variety because he appreciates its superior quality and has enough customers who do as well, though he confesses that they are an easier sell at the upscale Santa Monica Farmer’s Market than here on the Central Coast, where some shoppers remain skeptical. There is a Blenheim “underground” of sorts, almost a cult; once you’ve tasted them, it is difficult to return to any other variety, though it is always tempting to give in to those earlier ones. When I succumb to that desire, I am inevitably disappointed, so I’ve finally learned my lesson regarding patience and perfection (the fruit’s, not mine).

I am comforted and heartened that Mike is willing, as my grandmother was, to work harder for a better result. I like to believe that I'm honoring that dedication by buying his hard-won fruit and passing on the finished product to family and friends, and these efforts make me feel a bit less guilty about those canned peaches. ☺