

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Yes, We Can!

Annie Sheppard · Sunday, August 11th, 2024

Summer is ending. The plants have been partially bleached in the sun. It is a sunny August day in Orange County, Virginia. At this point in the summer, there are many fresh fruits and vegetables to be had. My mama and I have been canning tomatoes together for several years. She has been doing this for longer. She used to can with her mom and her sister, now we do it together. I put on my black Patsy Cline T-shirt, the one my granddad got me at Patsy's house (even though I have never been there); my mom wears her Loretta Lynn shirt. We wear these shirts to can every year.

Canning has always made me feel connected to my roots. My mom and grandma canned together. My great-grandmothers canned anything and everything—green beans, homemade preserves, even chicken occasionally. They would keep the canned goods much longer than recommended now. We use Ball mason jars like they did. We work and talk and bond like women have other the centuries (although those women did not have Dolly Parton to listen to while working). We talk over the sink as we peel the tomatoes. “When I was a kid, my grandma Annie would can green beans and we’d eat on them for, like, two years,” my mother told me. I love to hear stories about my namesake. My family still talks about what a great cook she was, even though she died long before I was born. She had four sons to feed on a budget, and she did it well. My mama and I talk about the music we listen to, the memories we have of cooking together, she tells me about fights she has had with her cousins, the apple tree that grew in her grandparents’ backyard. This work keeps us talking about this shared history, this family culture.

Canning tomatoes is a simple but time-consuming process. You sterilize the jars, make the sauce, put the sauce in the jars, and seal the lids. Almost all these steps involve boiling water. The boiling water sterilizes the jars and seals the lids. The seal on a lid melts and bonds to rim of the jar when exposed to the heat of boiling water. Without a good seal, it is not canning, it is just putting sauce in a jar. We use several pounds of tomatoes to make pizza sauce, pasta sauce, chili base, and plain tomato sauce. These are canning tomatoes we use, ugly tomatoes with unsightly bumps and asymmetrical shapes. They are used for canning, because fewer people want them for salads and such. They are the tomatoes left over at the end of the day, unsold. They will soon be blended into delicious sauces. Tomatoes are a little easier to can, because they are acidic and help deter bacteria growth. Canning can be tricky, because you risk food poisoning if you are not careful. If a lid does not seal or a jar is not sterile, you have a great breeding ground for bacteria. Having the proper hardware is essential. We just got a new glass stove top a few months ago. Glass stove tops have a bad reputation in the world of canning—the jars tend to not seal completely. We will not be daunted, however. We keep food born illnesses at bay with our attitudes and a little bit of propane. We use a camping stove set up outside to create the seal. It is August in Virginia. No one wants to

be outside if they have air conditioning. The jars are sterilized and eventually sealed in a gigantic pot, with gallons of water inside.

We put on some Patsy, Dolly, and Loretta, a women of country music playlist, using an old iPod set up in the kitchen. We set to work. While the jars sterilize in boiling water, we immerse the tomatoes in hot water then ice water to loosen the skin and then peel the tomatoes. These tomatoes can be painful on our bare fingers at first, but they cool quickly. The house smells like hot tomatoes—it is a familiar smell. It is the smell of hard work in the summer heat, a humid kitchen. Tomato cores and skins pile up—they will be composted very soon. Sauce simmers on the stove; water boils in pots. Outside, the propane burner heats up. “That’ll take a while to get that water boiling” we say to each other. The hours are filled with a cheerful monotony. We prepare the sauce while the jars are being sterilized, load the jars, take them outside to seal them on the camp stove, repeat. Each time we step outside, it feels like a wet slap in the face. The air is thick with humidity and heat, but that will not stop the canning. It takes both of to move the jars outside. I hold the door and take the lid off the pot, while my mother carries the steaming hot jars of tomato sauce. The day wears on and we add dozens of jars of tomato sauce to our collection. We let the jars cool wrapped in dishtowels overnight, to be put away tomorrow. Our hands are prune-y after gutting so many fruits. The whole house smells like humid air and tomato guts.



After the author’s family has finished canning.

We work until evening. We have so many finished cans of tomato sauce cooling in the fresh air. They will sit in the bottom of our pantry for up to a year, though all of them will likely be used up by them. As we work, we notice that the water is no longer boiling. The thing about canning is that it involved huge pots of water...water that can take an hour or more to start boiling once it stops. The water cools as we continue to work. We find that the outdoor stove has gone out. We must rush to the store to get more propane. Once it is all back on, it takes what feels like forever to boil

again. We cannot seal these jars until the water boils. The sun sets and here we are sitting outside in the dark waiting to put all our canning equipment. My mama and I enjoy each other's company as we wait. The water is cold, but the love in this outdoor kitchen is warm. Finally, way too late, the water boils and we seal the jars.

Several months later, it is chili season. Fall weather and chili are two of my favorite things. We hope to use the chili base we canned as the base of this fall staple—my favorite meal. We use a can opener to pop off these lids. It is the moment of truth for all canners. We can hear the seal break and the influx of air, filling up the vacuum formed in the jar of tomato sauce. The sauce smells like chili, it is tomato-y and spicy and a little sweet. There is no sour or unexpected aspect to this smell—it is the sweet smell of a job well done. My dad has made chili for as long as I remember. It is my Mamaw's recipe, tweaked and suited to our tastes. My dad teaches me this "recipe:" however many cans of tomato sauce and chili base, a nondescript amount of seasoned ground beef, salt, garlic powder, onion powder, chili powder until it tastes right, simmer until everyone is ready to eat. We eat it with Frito's, cheese, and sour cream. My baby brother wants his chili full of the meat; my younger sister wants the liquid to scoop with her chips; my dad uses Saltines instead of Frito's; my mom scoops her chili up; I mix it all together. We all have our own ways of eating this warm comforting food we all love. The joy and love that went into this meal are apparent.

We set up little tables in the living room and watch football. The chili is warm and just a little spicy. We cheer for our chosen team—the West Virginia Mountaineers. We do not live in West Virginia, neither of parents went to West Virginia University, but they were both born in West Virginia, in different sides of the state. My grandparents all lived in West Virginia and are invested in this team. If they score, we cheer; if they are scored upon, we boo. We enjoy getting invested in this game together, decked out in blue and gold. This scene has been affected by so many factors and so much history. My family history and tradition are the reason we have this chili, support this team, eat the way we eat. This meal is my family history.

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