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Making fruit, veggies taste better, longer

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When Ellen Snead of Snead's Farm has an abundance of veggies, she doesn't let them go to waste.

Just last week, she had an excess of 78 quarts of tomatoes.

Instead of giving them away or bombarding her family with tomatoes for breakfast, lunch and dinner every day, she chose a more economically friendly way to deal with them.

She canned them.

"I save myself a lot of money this way," Snead said while placing lids on her quart-size cans. "But it's not so much what you save. It tastes better, it's fresher and you know where it comes from."

So the 35 cents-per-can price at the Lloyd Boxley Cannery in Caroline County is just a bonus, she said. And those cans can last for about three years, she said.

The cannery, open from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays, is available for all residents of Caroline County and surrounding areas.

Cannery operator John Brown and his wife, Margaret, manage the place, which is located off of U.S. 301, near the Community Services Center.

He said a majority of people have brought in tomatoes and string beans, since those are in season now. But he also sees sweet potatoes, corn, squash, leafy greens and fruit on occasion.

It doesn't matter what type of fruit or vegetable is used. The process is always the same.

Step one: Wash them up in the sink.



Ellen Snead (left) and Linda Upshaw peel and chop tomatoes at the Caroline County Cannery near Bowling Green on Aug. 6.



John Brown pulls a basket of tomatoes from a steamer at the Caroline County Cannery near Bowling Green.

Step two: Blanch.

Step three: Put them in a can and steam to get the bacteria out.

Step four: Seal it so that it's airtight.

Step five: Put in pressure cooker for the required amount of time. (This is when you can leave and come back.)

Step six: Let sit and cool in water.

Canning can take up most of the day, sometimes four to five hours, Brown said, so he encourages canners to come in early.

Bowling Green resident Billy Andrews found that out when he drove up just after noon to can about 15 gallons of tomatoes he grew in his garden. Brown told him he'd have to come back another day because two hours is not enough time to can that many tomatoes.

Edwin Carter of Milford spent \$18.55 on 53 cans of tomatoes last week. He said he'll come back later to can some corn. Had he bought 53 cans at a Food Lion in Spotsylvania, he would have spent \$36.57 and gotten only half as much because a 14- to 15-ounce can costs 69 cents. That's compared to a quart-size or 32-ounce can from the cannery.

Snead said canning is an old-fashioned way of doing things, but it's something she enjoys and hopes to pass on to her 15-year-old twin girls.

"My mother did it and my mother's mother did it," she said. "It's just a nostalgic way of doing things. And you don't have to have a hot, dirty kitchen at home."

King George farmer Kenny Atwell has been growing vegetables for 40 years, and only recently found out about Caroline's cannery as he drove past the big, yellow building. He's already been back twice.

"It was a good experience," Atwell said, after canning his stewed tomatoes. "It's hot and it's busy, but the cannery folks show you what to do."

The Caroline County Board of Supervisors hopes that a recent regional peak in interest by members of the George Washington Regional Commission can help keep the canning operation alive.

The board had voted earlier this year to close the cannery because it had lost money over the years.

County Administrator Percy Ashcraft recommended the closure after financial reports showed the cannery was losing about \$14,000 a year and the number of annual customers had dwindled to 38.

Only \$458 in revenue had been generated in fiscal years 2008 and 2009 combined.

"Clearly, the operation is not paying for itself," Ashcraft said in June.

However, Ashcraft reported that an escrow account being held at Union Bank and Trust with \$17,969



Steamed and peeled tomatoes are shown during the canning process at the Caroline County Cannery.

was available to be used for the operations of the cannery. This account was created by former cannery operator Lloyd Boxley, and remained there upon his passing in 2005.

That money is enough to run the cannery for one more year, he said.

Supervisors Maxie Rozell and Bobby Popowicz mentioned the status of the cannery at a commission meeting and heard that there may be some regional support. Rozell said a member had told him that some Stafford residents were driving to Maryland to can.

He said they'll meet again in September and try to pursue some grant opportunities. As a regional effort, he said he feels like they'd have a strong case.

"If something doesn't happen regionally, I hope we can find the funds to maintain it on our own," Rozell said. "It's just a shame to see it go to waste."

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