Elderberry Jelly

By Robert W. Earley

As a young boy in the early '50s, I enjoyed going to my grandmother's house. Gramme Price was an outstanding cook and baker. Helping her became a favorite activity of mine.

The immediate rewards were well worth the effort. The aroma of freshly baked bread and the anticipation of tasting a pie just out of the oven were special treats, even at my young age.

But it was Gramme's elderberry jelly that I really looked forward to. Fortunately, when Gramme had gone on to her reward, I was able to resurrect the process of making it.

This was no ordinary jelly made with Sure-Jell or any of those commercially prepared products. She used the naturally occurring pectin in apples to make her jelly.

My grandfather would start the process by bringing home elderberries he found when he was out in the woods and meadows around the middle of August. The date could vary some, of course, depending on the variety and weather conditions.

Next came the most labor-intensive part of the process. In the field, the elderberry clusters were broken off the bushes at their stems and then carried home in paper sacks or bags. Gramme and I would sit on the glider on the back porch and painstakingly remove the berries from the clusters.

Some people ask why we didn't cook the stems and clusters with the berries. But we thought that the stems and clusters would adversely affect the taste. We didn't want to risk ruining the batch. Besides, I enjoyed being with my grandparents, and I didn't mind the cleaning.

The berries were washed, strained, measured and put in a pot. A half-cup of water was added for each quart of berries. In addition, one small apple was cut up and cooked with each quart of berries. This is what enabled the jelly to gel.

The berries and apples were stirred often and cooked until soft. Then the mixture was placed in the colander and mashed with a wooden masher. The liquid was collected in a large pot and strained again through cheesecloth placed inside the colander to catch any seeds and pulp that got through the holes in the colander the first time.

This filtering could also be accomplished using a cloth filter bag. The bag was filled with juice, then hung from a rafter in the basement and allowed to drip into a pan beneath.

The juice was measured. Five cups of juice were heated in a pot. (We found this to be a good, manageable amount.) One cup of white granulated sugar was added for each cup of juice. The mixture was stirred until the sugar was completely dissolved, then heated to a boil and cooked until the juice started to froth.

At this point, it was ready to test. A sample placed on a saucer was put in the refrigerator to cool. When the right consistency was reached, the heat was turned off. That is a question of individual taste and requires some experimentation. We preferred a consistency like stiff molasses. Just be careful; if it gets too stiff, the jelly will be unspreadable.

The boiled juice was then put in jars and sealed. Gramme always used paraffin wax to seal her jars. The paraffin was melted and then poured over the jelly to form a preservative coating.

Making elderberry jelly is a rather lengthy process. You may want to break it up into two or three parts. There are two points for breaking up the job:

1) After the berries have been removed from the clusters, you can put them in a pot, cover them and refrigerate them until you are ready to continue.

2) After the berries have been mashed and the juice filtered, you can put the juice into containers and refrigerate them until you're ready to continue; or, freeze the juice for long-term storage. Half-gallon canning jars are good for this purpose.

If you are brave enough to embark on this endeavor, you will find that the rewards are certainly worth the efforts. ❖

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