

KEEPING TIME

There never seems enough time to do all the things you want to, says the familiar adage. But, if you could put time in a bottle, it would surely taste like these artfully preserved treasures

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This page: The fruit of Lou and Merv's labour: baby pears in red wine, spiced plums infused with cinnamon, blueberry-and-grape compote and boozy Citrus Stingers. Opposite page: Overlooking a freshwater dam, an open farm barn provides the perfect setting for a long lunch.



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PRESERVING FRUIT HAS, ALONG WITH BAKING SOURDOUGH BREAD, MAKING CHEESE AND CURING MEAT-ALL ONCE ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR THE HOUSEWIFE

– become a dying art. Alas, those skills come from a time when living seasonally and frugally was a way of life, not a trend pursued by city foodies who think that producing five jars of something bottled renders them self sustaining. I confess to be one such city foodie.

Of course, if you look hard enough, you'll still find those folk who do their own seasonal preserving – peeling and coring and boiling in kitchens during hot summer afternoons, piling shelf upon shelf with amber, crimson and emerald-filled jars in pursuit of the hopelessly romantic notion that you can put time in a bottle.

"My gran used to make the most exceptional marmalade. I remember sitting down to warm toast and her perfect, not-too-sweet marmalade," remembers Lou Howell, the prettier half of the Feast de Renaissance fruit-preserving duo. Together with her husband Merv, Lou comes from a long line of Elgin Valley fruit farmers. At one point, the couple had more than seven varieties of pear on their farm and were well-known for their exceptional tree-ripened varieties. Then, three years ago, Lou's hobby of pickling backyard olives and making lemon cordial led to the birth of what has become a well-established preserves business. The now legendary pears steeped in red wine, raspberry and cinnamon, made from the farm's own Bon Rouge pears, were the couple's first commercial offering, then came the Citrus Stingers – a potent infusion of brandy, port spirits and oranges.

Like Lou's grandmother's marmalade, "not too sweet" has become a sort of trademark for the couple's line of preserves. "We are catering for the connoisseur, for the grown-up palate, so we add just enough sugar for preserving and texture. We also use fruit with a very high acidity," explains Lou.

When she and Merv talk about their preserves, it is with a knowledge and passion akin to that of a winemaker and, indeed, the two occupations are not that different. While Lou is the company's creative force, developing inspiring flavour combinations and recipes in the couple's home kitchen, Merv brings his technical knowledge as fruit farmer to the job, sourcing the best fruits (a science in itself) and also devising methods of preservation that retain the essence of each. Tinkering with (and debating over) the recipes until they are ready for market production is par for the course: "Lou cooking up a fantastic preserve in the kitchen at home is one thing. Turning that into a stable and consistent product that will mature well and appeal to a broad section of people is another," says Merv.



A small pool of colleagues and friends with trusted palates is enlisted, and each recipe is rigorously tested until it satisfies these discerning tastes. As Merv instructs me to lick a pinch of Maldon salt off the back of my hand before knocking back yet another spoonful of his very boozy Citrus Stingers (all this before lunch!), I can only guess at the fun had at these tasting sessions.

In fact, having fun is probably part of the pair's extraordinary success. I still remember meeting Merv for the first time some three years ago as I was browsing the Neighbourhood Goods Market in Cape Town. More specifically, I remember the twinkle in his eye as he offered me a sliver of juicy red pear topped with a hunk of creamy Gorgonzola. Resistance was futile. It was from reactions like my own that the couple realised they were onto something special. Customer feedback helped them refine their product and start a fully-fledged business. Over the following year, the pair would spend countless hours on the road, visiting food shows around the country, while also launching their plum and citrus preserves, which have recently been joined by a blueberry-and-grape offering.

Today, Merv and Lou provide year-round work for a small but dedicated

team that does everything by hand, from peeling and coring to bottling and pasteurisation, all without the crutch of artificial flavourants or preservatives. Most tricky, confides Merv, is knowing how the infusion process will evolve during maturation and influence the flavours of the fruit: what may taste like too-sweet a sauce with overly strong spices will, in the fullness of time, mellow and be absorbed by the fruit. "We now mature our pears for a whole eight weeks, although after six you could start eating them," he adds.

While Merv's passions – method and science – are obvious, Lou brings a sense of fantasy and fancifulness to the art of preservation. For her, there is something inescapably nostalgic and dreamlike about what she is doing. And what is a dream if not a vision of the future? "Yes, we're using old-fashioned methods," she admits, "but we're infusing our fruits with trendy new flavours, such as Szechwan pepper, Merlot, freshly chopped root ginger and lemon grass."

My visit with Lou and Merv recalls to mind the summers of my childhood.

In the middle of our lawn there was a fig tree which bore plump green figs in profusion, far beyond what one would have expected from a tree twice its size. It was as if the tree, with its perfect swollen fruits, was urging us to remember: the sun, a perfect day on the lawn, legs itchy from the grass and mouths full of ripe pink fruit. When there was no-one left to give figs away to, my mother would haul out her huge preserving pot. She preserved not so much out of a love for things culinary, but as a measure to stop time, to stop the rot, the waste of figs borne in vain. You see, branches weighted down with more fruit than we could eat weighed heavy on her mind. And, while she didn't exactly sing while stirring, there was a certain calm satisfaction when it was all done. The thrifty woman's reward: an empty tree, a parlour full. Summer preserved, almost indefinitely.

So, while pragmatic Lou presses a shiny bottle to my hand and offers a few tips on what to do with the bounty from my guava tree, the words (well, kind of) of an Asian mystic run through my head. "Before enlightenment, chop fruit and boil water. After enlightenment, chop fruit and boil water." Perhaps time can be found in a bottle after all. **W**

DUCK BREAST WITH CITRUS STINGERS, CHICKEN-LIVER PATE AND BABY GREENS



Opposite page: A table dressed in the company's trademark red-and-white stripes, which also adorn its stand at produce markets.



DUCK BREAST WITH CITRUS STINGERS, CHICKEN-LIVER PATE AND BABY GREENS

Serves 2

Preparation: 25 minutes

Cooking: 20 minutes

2 duck breasts
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

10 g five-spice

jar of Citrus Stinglers

1 T sugar

1 x 70 g pillow pack baby greens, for serving

For the pâté

125 g butter

½ onion, finely sliced

250 g chicken livers

1 T apricot jam

2 T cream

sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

Preheat the oven to 180°C. Using a sharp knife, score the duck fat, then season with a little salt. Rub the five-spice over the entire breast. In a hot frying pan, sear the breast until golden brown. Transfer to a baking tray and finish off in the oven for 10 minutes until cooked through. Allow to rest before slicing. Strain the jar of Citrus Stinglers, reserving the syrup. Add the syrup to a small saucepan, along with 1 T sugar, and reduce over a medium heat until slightly thickened.

To make the pâté: In a medium-sized frying pan, fry the butter and onion until softened. Add the chicken livers, jam and cream and fry until the livers are cooked through. Allow to cool. Place in a blender and blend to a fine consistency. Chill.

To serve: Slice the Citrus Stinglers and place on top of the duck slices. Drizzle with the reduced syrup and top with a handful of baby greens. Serve a dessert spoon of pâté next to the sliced duck breast and drizzle over some more syrup.

PORK MEDALLIONS, POTATO ROSTI AND PLUMS

Serves 4

Preparation: 15 minutes

Cooking: 25 minutes

2 pork fillets (about 300 g each)

500 g streaky bacon

2 T olive oil, for rubbing

oven-roasted vegetables, for serving

sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

For the plum sauce

1 cup plum juice

1 cup beef stock

4 preserved plums, halved

For the potato rosti

3 medium potatoes

2 T oil

Preheat the oven to 180°C. Wrap the pork fillets with the bacon, lightly rub with the olive oil and place on a baking tray. Roast for 20 minutes, turning once, until golden and cooked through.

To make the sauce: Add the plum juice and beef stock to a small saucepan and reduce over a medium to low heat until slightly thickened. Add the preserved plums and leave to simmer until warmed through.

To make the potato rosti: Grate the potatoes, then heat the oil in a frying pan over a medium heat and add the potato to cover the entire base of the pan. Fry until golden in colour. Remove from the pan and, while still warm, cut into a rectangular shape.

To serve: Slice the pork fillet into medallions and serve on top of a potato rosti with oven-roasted vegetables and warm plum sauce. Season to taste.

Cooks' note: All preserved and bottled fruit is available under the Feast de Renaissance label, available from selected stores.

This page: Chefs on the Move's Craig Cormack – a long-standing business associate of Merv and Lou – and chefs Kelly Ann Darius and Joy Mavi add the final touches to a lunch that shows off the Feast de Renaissance produce to best advantage.



PORK MEDALLIONS, POTATO ROSTI AND PLUMS





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LIFESTYLE

This page: Clafoutis baked with spiced plums and blueberry-and-grape friandises.
Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Nature's bounty – the famous Bon Rouge pears; a salad of pears in red wine, Gorgonzola and spicy chorizo served with champagne with spiced baby pear quarters; enter a world where time stands still; Lou and Merv with guests at their lunchtime feast.

