

Preservation Pedagogy

THE HUMAN CULTURE OF FOOD preservation has deep roots. But today, many of its branches seem weakened and endangered. As large-scale industries deliver a year-round, predictable, and standardized stream of calories in the form of packaged, processed, canned, bottled, dried, and frozen comestibles, “de-skilling” has occurred. Many women and increasing numbers of men know how to transform raw meats and fresh fruits and vegetables into home meals, but decreasing numbers know how to can, pickle, dry, or otherwise preserve foods at home. In the most highly urbanized societies, critiques of the modern food system have generated intermittent movements to reverse such deskillings—think of hippies, do-it-yourselfers, and slow food enthusiasts. In this short article, a food studies instructor and two students report on an experiment in “re-skilling” in a university class.

THE INSTRUCTOR: DR. DONNA GABACCIA

The instructor, history professor Donna Gabaccia, has been involved in the home canning of pickles and preserves for forty years, following in the footsteps of a mother and grandmother who passed along their knowledge of gardening and preservation. Her move to the University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC) in 2014 allowed her to imagine a pedagogy of food preservation based on the idea of “experiential learning.” Experiential learning requires reflection on student performance of practical tasks—in this case, gardening and kitchen labor. Significant UTSC investments in its recently founded Culinary Research Centre—including in a rooftop garden and a kitchen classroom lab—made experiential foodwork learning possible in a university setting.

Gabaccia sought to address the gendered process of deskillings as part of a course focused on “Gender in the Kitchen.” One of its main themes was the gendered division of labor across the food system, from producing and processing through home and commercial sites of food preparation. Through readings and in-class discussions, students considered how particular eating cultures (from religious taboos through contemporary vegan and

slow food movements) and particular food items (chocolate, meat, etc.) come to be understood in gendered (and usually also racialized) terms.

In summer 2018, Gabaccia offered the course to thirty undergraduate UTSC students. Students participated in four one-hour tutorials: “Feeling at Home in the Kitchen,” “Tasting Chocolate,” “Pickling,” and “Sweet Preserving.” Students did several hours of labor in a rooftop garden and tutorials all took place in the kitchen classroom lab. Thanks to good coordination with the manager of the rooftop garden, students were able to make pickles from cucumbers they had helped to cultivate. For the sugar preserving tutorial, they worked with serviceberries—sweet, mild berries that other students had foraged on the UTSC campus. Throughout the semester, students wrote short reflections on kitchen and garden labor and also did more traditional readings on food and gender.

Students’ reflections suggest the experiment in preservation pedagogy was successful. By the simplest measure, all students in the class are now able to make a simple pickle and a simple fruit preserve. Both garden and kitchen labor sparked wide-ranging discussions and written work. Some students reported acquiring greater respect for the domestic knowledge and labor done largely (although not exclusively) by their own mothers. This felt significant because several students had initially explained their resistance to kitchen labor as an effort to escape gendered expectations of doing work they perceived as little valued when performed by mothers. While pickling and preserving together, many students shared stories of family members who gardened or preserved fruits or vegetables using different techniques or introducing different flavors: since many UTSC students are from immigrant and refugee families, cross-cultural sharing was an unexpected outcome.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON FOOD PEDAGOGY: GILLIAN MACCULLOCH

Perhaps the most important dimension of experiential learning was the act of reflecting on labor itself; students found

highly individual meaning and significance in learning to labor. For one student, Gillian MacCulloch, kitchen and garden labor sparked new perspectives on learning itself and helped her to return to a way of learning associated with early childhood. In fact, most early childhood learning is experiential, motivated by curiosity and love of the adults whom children watch and emulate in order to develop mastery. In her reflection, MacCulloch contrasted learning through labor and observation as radically different from “going through the motions”—which presumably was how she experienced the familiar act of cooking from a written recipe. Since her own family had not taught her about food preservation, MacCulloch reported: “When we made preserves in the kitchen lab, it was a new experience for me. Even though I was not making it with my family, I still felt like I was learning a family recipe as opposed to going through the motions. Something about the experience brought me back to my childhood. Perhaps it was the excitement of waiting. I had created something that I would get to enjoy at a later date, almost like a science experiment. In any case, the process of preserving had a lasting impact on me. If you grow your own fruit for jam or your own vegetables for pickling and then go through the process of preserving them, you are slowing down the world of food that has become so fast paced. I see preserving as an art and a process that can truly help everyone appreciate food labor.”

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON FOOD PEDAGOGY: NANA FRIMPOG

Nana Frimpong found that the labor of growing and preserving food transformed her understanding of eating, imbuing it with greater spirituality and pleasure. Because her mother is a gardener, Frimpong had long viewed gardening as “an art form and act of self-care. There is something quite beautiful and spiritual about growing and harvesting in order to feed oneself, one’s family, or to just give beauty to the earth.” She

had never spoken directly with her mother about these issues but concluded, “I do think that she finds God in the garden.”

Growing up, like many students, in families where mothers did all the cooking, Frimpong described the consequences of her newly discovered—and to her, somewhat surprising—pleasure in doing kitchen labor collaboratively with other students. She reflected: “I recently shared a picture of the serviceberries preserve with my family and since that time have been on a quest to make it for them when I return to Vancouver at the end of the summer. I have spent the last week eating the serviceberries preserve for breakfast and telling my close friends about the experience as well. The other day I was having a conversation with one of my friends in the class about which fruits we would be trying next. I certainly want cooking to play a bigger role in my life. I can confidently say that this class and the experiential learning we have had so far has reintroduced me to the possibilities of pleasurable eating and labor.”

Why Bring Food Preservation into a University Classroom?

Student insights like these are important to instructors seeking to incorporate some form of preservation pedagogy (or other food-related experiential learning) into their classes. But the student reflections also should push activists to consider new approaches to their campaigns to reverse deskilling. MacCulloch and Frimpong both recognized preservation as an “art.” Their elevation of food preservation to an art transforms them, of course, into artists who can be recognized for their skill while giving pleasure to others. That transformation, too, made both students want to share their knowledge and their skills. Any movement requires passionate pedagogues who are willing to share what they know with others; certainly, these two students in “Gender in the Kitchen” have taken that first step toward activism. ©