

Resurgence of Community Canneries

by F. Aline Coffey and Roger Sternberg

A community cannery is a self-help facility equipped for preparing and heat processing food. People bring in produce from their gardens and through their own efforts preserve it for future use.

Community canneries began during the late 1800's in response to the desire of families to work together to preserve their food for the off-season. At the end of World War II there were over 3,800 community canneries in the United States. Most of these wartime canneries were subsidized, but after the war the monies ceased. Growth of the food industry, development of freezing techniques, and the lack of subsidy led to a decline of the canneries.

Today there is a resurgence of interest in establishing community canning centers. This has been influenced by the cost of food, a marked increase in the concern for nutrition, and gardening activities.

A community cannery promotes the preservation of seasonal garden surpluses for consumption during the nonproductive season. It encourages small farmers and nonfarm individuals to produce more food, thereby promoting self-sufficiency for families. It enables families who do not own recommended food preservation equipment to use safe and reliable equipment and techniques.

Availability of nonseasonal foods on a year-round basis can result in a better diet for families, especially if the center incorporates nutrition education classes as part of its program. People who grow their own food

may make substantial savings in their food budget. The community cannery creates a social atmosphere of friendly, cooperative work leading to tangible results, and promotes a feeling of self-reliance.

Most of the community canneries in the country have been organized by Community Action Agencies or similar community organizing groups. Individuals, food co-ops, and other groups have successfully set up canneries, but it is recommended that people wanting to establish a canning center contact a community organizing agency. Normally, these agencies have professional people who will work on such a project. They have experience in writing proposals and are aware of potential funding sources.

Support for the canning center can be enhanced by making a special effort to include a diverse membership on a board of directors for the center.

Farmers, low-income people, business people, contractors, Extension personnel, community organizers, local officials, and members of the clergy are all potential supporters and advisors for the cannery.

Although organizing a community cannery requires a lot of work, this need not be a roadblock to initiating the project. It takes many hours to plan the canning operation, draft proposals, develop community support, locate a site, and to select, purchase and install equipment. Because this can easily be a full-time job for one person, efforts should be made to hire a coordinator. In many instances, paid community organizers, Vista volunteers, and home economists have provided valuable assistance in completing the work.

Preparation for and organization of

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the cannery are the foundation of the project. At least six months should be set aside for organizing.

Points to Consider

Here are some questions to consider before starting a community center:

How many people will commit themselves to organizing a center?

How much time will they give?

How much support can be expected from the community, town officials, local growers?

How many community and family gardens are in the area?

How near are the community gardens to the cannery site?

Is the site near a well-travelled route?

Is parking available?

Can the canning center exist merely to provide a service to the community, or will the cannery have to become involved in a commercial venture?

If some food processed at the cannery is to be sold, are local farmers willing to contract with the cannery to supply it with produce? How close are these farmers to the cannery?

Is a building available for canning purposes (for example, some old creamery)?

If so, what is the size of the building? What is its condition?

Are there cement floors and walls constructed so they can be washed down daily?

Tap left, tomatoes in the canning process, at a community cannery. Bottom, sweet corn ready to have kernels removed for canning. Right, at later stage, liquid is poured over hot-packed corn. Note one advantage of a community cannery is that quantities of food can be processed in a few hours.

Is there room for storage, a walk-in cooler?

Is the sewage system adequate?

Does the building have existing equipment that could be put to use?

Is a dependable supply of potable water available?

What is the minimum water pressure and is it constant?

Is the water "hard?" If so, what is the analysis?

What type of electricity is available?

What is the cost of electricity per KWH and demand rate for 240 volt, 3 phase, 60 cycle?

What is the availability and cost of gas (natural or LP) or of fuel oil?

What is the number of families expected to participate? How many are low-income families?

What are the principal foods to be canned?

If it is anticipated that some products will be processed for sale, what will those products be?

Is there a market for the "for-sale" items?

Will canning supplies such as jars, lids, screw bands, tin cans be available? Can they be purchased at wholesale prices?

Is at least one person who is knowledgeable in food preservation methods available to supervise the cannery?

What will be the charge for processing a pint or a quart of food?

Will low-income people be able to pay this amount?

Are funds available to subsidize the canning of food for low-income people?

It is important to obtain a site easily accessible to the public. Selectmen, property owners, realtors should be approached for potential sites. Usually the center has limited funds, and it is difficult and takes time to locate an appropriate building with low-cost rent.

In times of a strained economy

and high cost of property maintenance, the business community may be hesitant to provide low-cost housing for the site.

Establishing the facility in a publicly owned building, such as a school, is a solution in many communities. These canneries are a part of the public school's physical plant and have traditionally been operated under supervision of the vocational agriculture and home economics teachers, using school funds.

In recent years, some schools have wanted to close canneries for several reasons: Lack of operating capital, limited use, lack of interest or knowhow on the part of participants and teachers. With the resurgence of interest in canning, many new cannery ventures are located in schools but are now funded separately from school budgets.

If the cannery is the result of a community endeavor, adjoining small towns could appropriate funds sufficient to set up and man a center. Such a proposal would have to be presented to the town governing bodies. This points up the need for ample planning time. Devising means to allow the cannery to remain open year-round would favor obtaining a site other than in a public building.

Major Costs

Cost of organizing a community cannery is influenced by its size and scope of operation. Expenses can be broken down into these major areas:

- Purchase and installation of equipment
- Building renovation
- Rent
- Labor
- Utilities
- Jars or cans
- Produce
- Miscellaneous costs (office supplies, freight, postage, insurance, cleaning supplies, maintenance)

At least two companies manufac-

ture community canning equipment (Ball Corp. and Dixie Canner Equipment Co.). Prices start at \$4,300 for a single-unit operation, and go up to \$20,000 for a large center. This does not include the price of a steam boiler, which costs between \$3,000 and \$5,000. By fabricating some of its own equipment, and by buying used equipment from canning and restaurant equipment suppliers, the cannery can reduce some of its purchase costs substantially.

Installation of the canning equipment and the steam boiler needs to be done by a licensed plumber or steam fitter, or be closely supervised by such a person.

Renovation of a building and installation of the canning equipment can cost between \$4,000 and \$8,000, including labor costs. Cost can be reduced by soliciting volunteer labor from local craftsmen. The organizers can handle much of the renovation, such as painting, carpentry and cement work. Teams of vocational students may be willing to take on the site renovations as part of their school training.

Salaries for employees can be paid from the cannery's operating budget. Labor costs can be reduced if the workers are already salaried employees provided by other food-related agencies. The cannery can also be an ideal training site for participants in the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) and can be staffed successfully in this way.

Regulations

Food and Drug Administration regulations regarding food processing do not apply to community canning centers if they are not involved in interstate commerce. In June, 1976, FDA issued "Suggested Minimum Guidelines for Community Canning Operations" to protect the safety of the consumer.

Environmental regulations that apply to the centers must be carefully followed. Although these regulations are usually not hard to follow, they often mean a possibly unplanned-for expense to the cannery. It may be necessary to apply for a variance to zoning regulations. Cannery supervisory boards should have a working knowledge of all requirements of State and Federal agencies that regulate health, environment, fire, safety, plumbing, electricity, and public building codes.

Sites for the centers should have sewage and draining systems that meet demands of the centers. This would mean a septic system and leach fields, or a municipal sewage system, the latter being the easiest and least expensive method of disposal. Solid waste produced by the center is termed "clean," and effluent from the processing could be put through a strainer, piped out of the center, and then deposited into a leach field.

To maintain high standards of cleanliness and safety, at least one supervisor should be on duty whenever the cannery is in operation. The person in charge must have a thorough knowledge of every aspect of food processing.

The Food and Drug Administration requires that a "certified registered canner" be in attendance only when low-acid foods are processed to be sold. An FDA-approved course is offered by the National Canners Association for commercial cannery personnel in various sections of the country. The cost would involve a registration fee of approximately \$125 plus expenses. At present, the course content is geared chiefly toward industry. A shift to a more practical approach would be of greater help to community cannery personnel.

Cannery supervisors and attendants can participate in food preservation classes and demonstrations provided by the Extension Service. When can-

neries are equipped with commercial food preservation centers, representatives of the manufacturing companies are available for technical information to the cannery staff. Manufacturers may also provide the cannery with a complete operations manual, processing charts, and recipes.

Skills Needed

Cannery supervisors will benefit by employing people to work at the cannery who can provide or learn such skills as:

Bookkeeping/accounting—to keep records of input and outflow of goods and money; to pay bills.

Management—to oversee the flow of food through the center in an efficient manner for smooth operation of the plant.

Maintenance and repair—to maintain equipment and housing in operational condition.

Purchasing/supply—to ensure a supply of materials such as jars and lids.

Sales—to manage sales of surplus retail products if these are processed at the plant.

Public relations—to advertise and promote knowledge of canning centers; to handle complaints and problems of patrons.

Technical—to provide detailed information on processing techniques, food, nutrition, and gardening.

A form of recordkeeping on all foods processed at the plant is essential. This kind of information would include such data as name of person doing the processing, the date, specific food, number of jars, method of processing, time in and time out, and an identification number for foods processed for sale by the cannery.

Canning centers may be incorporated as independent nonprofit cooperatives with a board of directors as the policymaking body. By being organized in conformity with the tra-

ditional farmers' cooperative structure, the centers receive special tax considerations. Incorporation on a nonprofit basis is a requirement of many funding sources. The cooperative structure also lends itself to a tighter knit organization, with members feeling they are part of the organization, responsible for its affairs, and willing to pitch in and help if there is some work that needs a few extra hands.

The community cannery should have general liability insurance to cover injuries sustained by the workers or persons using the canning center. Products liability insurance is unnecessary for the cannery operated solely to provide a service to the community. For the cannery that sells commercially, products liability insurance should be obtained.

Hours, Fees

A community cannery should be available to all people interested in preserving food. Ideally, canneries are open during daytime and evening hours. Weekend hours are a possibility. When canneries are limited to processing vegetables and fruits, at

Sealer in a community cannery.





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least 6 months of potential operation are lost in certain sections of the country. If at all possible, canneries should be operated to process a wider range of foods such as jams, jellies, pickles, preserves, meat, fish, poultry.

A processing fee is usually set for use of the canning equipment, ranging from 5¢ to 10¢ for pints to 10¢ to 15¢ for quarts. These prices do not include the cost of jar, lid, screw band, or any canning supplies such as salt, vinegar, sugar, spices that may be sold at wholesale prices at the cannery. An additional charge of 50¢ per hour is common for the use of a pulper-juicer and steam-jacketed kettle.

It may be a financial hardship for some low-income families to meet these costs, but they can be given the opportunity to exchange work time at the cannery for payment. Families of limited resources might leave off a percentage of their processed high-acid foods to be sold by the cannery. Sponsoring agencies may apply for grants, such as might be available from Title XX of the Social Security

Act, in an effort to subsidize canning costs for low-income families.

To date, no community canneries are completely economically self-sufficient, so far as we know. There are centers in the South which do enough community canning to pay for all their expenses except salaries. To become self-supportive, some canneries are now developing specialty products to be sold commercially. Organic-health food distributorships and food co-ops are often a good market for community cannery processed foods.

The future of community canneries depends on continued interest in home gardening and food preservation, and concern for proper nutrition. Undoubtedly, the cost of food in the marketplace will also be a contributing factor.

Tomato juice being processed at a community cannery. Since cannery is operated by State of Virginia, only charge is for cans used.