

I Say Jam, You Say Jelly

Making tasty fruit spreads in the kitchen at Vie.

by Jennifer Wennig
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Mmm, taste that homemade jam.

I never thought I'd begin a column like this, but here we go: According to Jelly.org (yes, even jelly has its own website, run by the International Jelly and Preserve Association), approximately one billion pounds of fruit spread are produced annually in the United States.

The fruit spread category includes jams, jellies, preserves, marmalades and fruit & honey butters. To me it's all jelly, but since so many of us are apparently devouring these jarred goodies, I thought we should be able to make the distinction. Next time you're having a communal breakfast at a quaint B&B, you'll thank me.

As detailed on Waldoward.com, jam and preserve are basically the same. Each contains chunks of fruit or pureed fruit. Jelly is made from the juice of the fruit, and marmalade is a jelly with suspended citrus rind. Huh? Well, maybe someone else at breakfast will jump in on the citrus rind thing.

When I made my first journey to visit John's family in Alabama I wanted to bring a small gift to convey my thanks for their hospitality. (Gotta show the Southerners that Northerners are equally as charming.) True to form, John offered little in the way of creative suggestions.

It was May 2003 and I had become slightly obsessed with making homemade, you guessed it, jam. Never a stickler for recipes, I improvised. Before heading to the market, I did come up with a few flavors I thought would be pleasing to the palate, settling on blueberry with a hint of lemon.

Three years removed, the memory of my jam-making process isn't ripe with details. Although I must fess up that my attention to making the jam was slightly diverted by imagining what type of fabric I would select to dress the jelly jars. Should the jam and fabric hues match? No, matchy-matchy is too contrived. Stripes, polka dots? Too preppy. A creature of habit, I relied on my tried and true: toile. Black with a creamy white background. Love it and had it on hand.

Pretty dressing aside, the consistency was off. Thinking quickly on my feet, I decided to present it as a dessert topping. Brilliant, right? Who wouldn't delight in a bowl of refreshing vanilla ice cream with a drizzle of my fresh, lovingly made, exquisitely purple-rich what? Dessert topping sounded so Applebee's. But it was a question I didn't have to answer: John's mother recited the dessert menu, which included vanilla bean ice cream with blueberry Yankee Sauce. Regional insult aside, my Yankee Sauce was a hit.

Determined to once again try my hand at jamming, I was luckily introduced to one of Chicago's most creative, successful and lively restaurateurs, chef Paul Virant. Before expanding the culinary breadth of Western Springs with his highly praised Vie, Virant sliced, diced and sauteed in some of Chicago's premier eateries including Charlie Trotter's, Everest and Blackbird.

Much to my pleasure and intrigue, I learned that Virant is an avid pickler (and I don't mean a fan of that high-pitched yammering Idol wanna-be) and jammer. He likes to pickle and preserve all kinds of stuff for the enhanced culinary experience of his patrons. He's been making jam since he was a kid and tells me his favorite flavor of the moment is strawberry preserves in pinot noir served with fresh ice cream or aged chevre. Yum.

He graciously invited me to spend a morning in his kitchen at Vie to learn a bit about the art of pickling and making jam. I quickly learned that my blueberry-lemon jam required pouring rather than spreading because of my impatience. Don't rush the fruit.

Chef Virant chose a rhubarb jam recipe that included sugar, fresh lemon juice, honey and fresh thyme. While he quickly, easily and precisely chopped, stirred and tested, I could only imagine how fast and furious a night in a successful restaurant kitchen would be. I did some of my own chopping, with a real chef's knife, thank you very much (the handle was etched with "from the crew at Blackbird").

Things were happening at a quick pace, so I won't begin to explain the maceration process. While a plethora of resources for making your own jam can be found online, Virant highly recommended "Mes Confitures: The Jams and Jellies of Christine Ferber."

I've added it to my growing collection of cookbooks. To date, I've only made one small batch (Ms. Ferber prefers cooking in small quantities) of her blueberry jam. I had to give the blueberry one more shot. Thanks to my time with Chef Virant, my result was jam, not Yankee Sauce. Unfortunately, it's not nearly as tasty or lovely as the jar of rhubarb/thyme jam I brought home with me from Vie: That jam is the prettiest color of pink. I've enjoyed it spread on toasted bread along with a cup of tea as an afternoon snack...perfectly British.

I couldn't close without mentioning the ramps. Virant schooled me in pickling ramps. What? I'd never heard of such a thing before but soon discovered I had pickled one trendy leek. Nearly everywhere I dined this spring, including a restaurant in New York's Soho neighborhood, something was served with or on ramps. So, thanks, Chef Virant, for making me look like one hip foodie.

Traffic Jammed:

Oh, have the fruits aligned for us. The aforementioned Christine Ferber, Master Pastry Chef & Master Jam Maker (I wonder if that's on her business card?) hosts "James, Jellies & Tarts" from July 25-27 at The French Pastry School. Ferber will advance your creative jamming skills far beyond my blueberry-lemon jam with recipes that include apple, carrot and ginger jam, spiced bell pepper chutney and pumpkin jam. For more information or to register, visit Frenchpastryschool.com. If you'd rather be served than taught, head to Vie to taste some of the summer's freshest bounty.

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