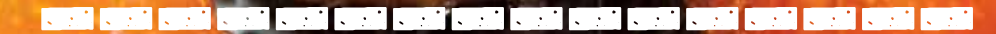




PRESERVING COMMUNITY



VIRGINIA'S COMMUNITY CANNERIES
OFFER MORE THAN A WAY TO PRESERVE
PRODUCE—THEY PROVIDE A WAY
TO GIVE BACK.

Written and Photographed by Lise Metzger

This Page: Tomatoes are washed before being blanched and peeled at the Prince Edward Cannery. Says customer Paul Rice, "I've got some really ugly tomatoes, but they still taste good."
Opposite: Manager Patty Gulick shares a laugh with customer Paul Rice as they peel and cut up his tomatoes before canning.

"In the cannery, you have the opportunity to talk at length with people at a personal level. You'll see a wide variety of people having conversations that they probably wouldn't have out in the world. It's a way of bridging the gap."

Rodney Scott



Paul Rice cuts up blanched tomatoes with a speed and confidence that lets you know he's done this countless times before. He's sitting on a stool at one of the long stainless steel work tables at the Prince Edward Cannery in Farmville, Virginia, preparing his tomatoes to be preserved in tin cans.

Born and raised in the County, Mr. Rice, as he's known, first came to the community cannery in 2010, after retiring from 37 years at Baltimore Gas and Electric and moving back to his family home. He is always the first person at the cannery when it opens each June. His garden is planted early, so he can get the harvesting and canning done before the dry summer heat settles in. Every year he cans his tomatoes, both whole and as sauce, as well as beans and whatever else he's got growing, there's more than he can eat by himself, so he gives much of it away to church friends and other community members.

Canning, or "putting up", as some people call it, is the process of preserving food in metal cans or jars by heating them to a tem-

perature that kills all bacteria and allows the food to be shelf-stable for many years. The word “canning” is derived from the tin can or wrought-iron canisters that were commonly used in commercial canneries.

Community canneries are facilities where individuals bring in their food—produce, fruit, meat—and prepare and process it using commercial-grade equipment. At a cannery, you can put up in a few hours what would take days to accomplish at home, with the added benefit of messing up someone else’s kitchen instead of your own. Most are run by counties as a public service; users pay a nominal fee that barely covers cost of materials. At Prince Edward Cannery, the user fee is one dollar, plus an additional 50 cents per can. Some canneries allow both cans and jars to be processed; others allow only cans.

Development of community canneries began in the U.S. during World War I.

Prince Edward Cannery is open for home canners three days a week, June through December. By 8 AM, when Mr. Rice is chopping his tomatoes, Alma and Filmore Scott are back at the deep stainless sinks preparing their bushel of green beans. Mr. Scott farms tobacco, and his wife is a retired elementary school teacher. Mrs. Scott says they’ve been using canneries for a long time. “We used to go to the cannery in Madisonville, but that shut down,” she explains. “There was one in Wylliesburg, in Charlotte County. That’s the one I went to with my mom. She took me and my sister and showed us how to. Mom would go to work at the garment factory in Chase City and Dad would bring us down really early, and the lady who managed the cannery would watch out for us. We were about 12 and 11 years old. The manager would ask us ‘what do you have today?’ and she’d show us what to do and help us process it. Back then it was one big family. Everybody learned how to do it.”

ished she may put up 70 or 80 quarts.”

When the cannery is at its peak, there may be as many as ten people putting up their food. Some come in groups, like church groups making apple butter for fundraising. Gulick knows all her customers and welcomes them as family. “We are very thankful for our customers. We love them. We love our job. I have a rule here: You can’t be mad in the cannery.”

Rodney Scott, the cannery assistant, uses a sealer machine to secure a pre-labeled lid onto each of Mr. Rice’s cans. He places them into a large iron basket and hoists it with a pulley into a large pressure cooker, called a retort. Scott started working here many years ago when he was 19. He works the night shift as a custodian at Longwood University, then gets to the cannery by 6 AM to start the boiler, slipping in a few hours of sleep before coming in.

wouldn’t plant such a big garden to start with.” And he wouldn’t be out delivering canned goods to church members and other folks in the community.

The idea of neighbors helping neighbors is at the core of the Prince Edward Cannery. “We have a lady who comes in here every fall to make potato soup,” said Gulick. “She seasons it with all these different herbs that are good for you, like for your immune system. When she’s in here cooking up that soup, it is the best smell you ever smelled! She makes it for the homeless. It’s something they can cook outside in the can. She’ll do 20 one-gallon cans. She might keep one for herself, but the rest she disperses through the homeless population in Prince Edward. She’s really helping those people.”

Prince Edward is a poor county, and the cannery is a resource in many ways. Customers will bring in any extra produce they have and put it out at the end of a



Far left: Cannery assistant, Rodney Scott, lowers cans into the retort for pressure cooking. **Center left:** Steamed beans await lids before processing. **Center of page:** Melissa Reamer

stirs jam as Jessie Hughes looks on at the commercial operation. **Center right:** Berry mixture cooking down for jam from Westmoreland Berry Farm **Far right:** Filling the jars with hot jam.

Facing food shortages, the government put out the call for citizens to plant their own “victory gardens” and preserve their harvest so that the U.S. could ship more food overseas to soldiers. The response was tremendous, and community canneries began sprouting up all over the country. Their popularity fell after the war ended, but then resurged during World War II, when women were encouraged to support the nation by canning the produce grown in their gardens.

In 1945, there were 6,000 community canneries in operation across the U.S. At one time in Virginia alone there were more than 100 open canneries and seasonal visits became a regular part of rural life. But with the rise of refrigeration and the expansion of food distribution systems in the 1950s, the cannery became less of a necessity and use diminished. Even with the recent growth of the farm-to-table movement and a resurgence of interest in canning, only a fraction of canneries still operate. In Virginia, only 11 remain operational.

“The young kids now, all they know is just to pop open a can. I put my girls in the kitchen early, like my mom did me.” she says proudly. “Canning like this is better for us—no chemicals or anything, and it’s from our own farm. There’s nothing like having your own food grown on your own farm.

Patty Gulick has been manager at the Prince Edward Cannery for the past four years. “The first time I walked through that door,” she said, “I fell in love with the kitchen, and I’ll be here until my feet can’t walk on the concrete anymore.”

Gulick explains that some people freeze their produce throughout the year and then come in once to do a great big batch of stew. “We also have some customers that will come in and do just five or six quarts at a time, as they pick it from the garden,” she said. “One of our customers—Miz Baker, she’s a widowed woman and she’s got a little garden—she’ll come in here with a little bowl of beans. She might come in here six times and only do ten quarts at a time, but by the time she’s fin-

“I enjoy the job,” Scott says. “You meet a lot of interesting people from different backgrounds. It’s an older crowd here. Canning might be similar to going to church. You might not go when you are young, but as you get older you start going more.”

Scott likes to introduce a topic and see what customers have to say about it. Today it was school shootings, and everyone weighed in on that. The conversation flowed to recipes; how people don’t slow down to cook or can; farming; how kids don’t know their roots; how well Patty’s pear trees are doing this year; the woman who used to come in and make pear butter; that you need to add vinegar to your apple butter to get the deep brown color; and more, until everyone was pretty well talked out.

That day, the Scotts put up 55 cans of beans, and Mr. Rice put up 35 cans of tomatoes. “This will last me about three or four years,” Mr. Rice said. “I give some away. If I didn’t have the cannery to go to, I wouldn’t do it at home. Well, first, I

table. People stop by to see what’s on the table for taking, and it’s all gone by the end of the day. If you’ve grown food yourself or bought it inexpensively at the local farmer’s auction, canning it is extremely economical.

Gulick thinks that if there were ever a notice of the cannery closing, “the community would have a meltdown. There’d be picket lines at the courthouse,” she says. “This community loves the cannery. Even if they don’t use it, their mamas or their grandmas used it.”

Yet there are always rumors of it closing down. Canneries are not moneymakers, and the number of users has decreased. There is always a core group of committed canners, but the general populations, even younger people interested in canning, are not even aware that the facilities exist. “It’s a dying art,” said Gulick. “It’s the kind of thing that gets passed from one generation to the next, and now kids aren’t learning it from their parents. Microwaves and fast food have made getting food too

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This page: Alma Scott washes green beans that she and her husband grew on their family farm. “We’re blessed this year because last year they dried up.” But it bothers her that she’ll never hear her grandchildren say, “My grandmother had me picking green beans.” “They’re city,” she explains.

Opposite: Customer Filmore Scott uses a funnel to place steamed beans into cans. His wife, Alma, likes to heat up the beans with a bit of ham hock to season them, but she warns not to overcook the beans.



easy. Canning is a process that takes time, and it’s rewarded over time.”

What’s lost when the facilities close down is the skill of canning, the tradition of doing things for yourself, and your own heritage of generations working together at the cannery. A community, especially a more remote rural one, loses a gathering place where neighbors come and do their work together.

As canneries struggle to stay open, one woman had a winning idea to increase the number of users and to help local farmers. Allie Hill, who—in her search for a complete local-foods diet to feed her children—wanted to help Virginia farmers preserve their produce and get it to market. She was looking for a facility where she could do the canning, and learned that the Prince Edward Cannery had received funding to upgrade its cannery to a commercial kitchen. She volunteered to help attract farmers and food entrepreneurs to the facility, which led to the start of a nonprofit contract packing (co-packing) service at the cannery, called Virginia Food Works. The cannery now divides the days of the week between home canners and commercial canners. Hill and her staff help guide clients through the arduous regulatory process, and the staff will make and can the product using the client’s produce, with or without client participation. Or clients can just rent the space by the hour and do it themselves.

The cannery is a real find for small-scale producers. The six steam kettles can hold as much as 250 gallons of product, and the retorts can fit up to 200 jars at one time. Kettles and retorts don’t exist at such a scale in a commercial rental kitchen. “They might have one kettle,” Hill said, “but usually not even, because it requires a boiler, or a lot of electricity. Plus, because we are a nonprofit, our rates are extremely cheap.”

Kathleen Gregory manages the cannery’s commercial side and makes sure everyone adheres to the strict guidelines required in commercial food preparation. Gregory always wanted to be a chef, but her training came from evenings watching the Food Network after days spent unhappily working at an auto body shop. For a diversion Gregory attended an edamame cooking class held at the cannery. After the class, she told Gulick, then the manager of the commercial side, that she could make a much better hummus than the instructor had made. She worked up a recipe and sent it to Gulick, who offered her a job. “I started taking time off from work to come work at the cannery, and soon I quit my job.” She worked on the commercial side under Gulick, where she would can all-day and then go home and can some more to learn it better. That first year

she made 600 jars of jam. “I’m really passionate about this stuff.”

Eighty-five miles away in Ashland, Virginia, not far from Richmond, the Hanover County Cannery, opened in 1980, is also looking at ways to attract more commercial users to the facility to help balance their cannery expenses. Manager Chrissy Vaughn visited Gulick and Gregory at Prince Edward to learn from their operation. “We’re trying to get the word out,” Vaughn says, “because so many people don’t know it’s even here.”

“We have families that come in. If their parents are right there with them, I let kids under 12 be here.” Vaughn says, “because that’s how they are going to learn, and it helps to pass on to the next generation. This is a dying breed. There are not many people my age doing this.”

One of the first things you notice about the Hanover Cannery, after you take in the sparkly cleanliness and cheery atmosphere, is the sound of the large fan that dominates the far wall. It’s a constant low, loud hum, as it does what it can to suck the hot air out of the building. Even with the fan’s efforts, it gets very hot when the various steam machines are put into action.

The cannery’s most frequent users are Sheree Bremner and Mary Schwartz, best friends for the past 30 years. They are known as the cannery’s resident experts.



Bremner is the Chair of the Cannery Advisory Committee and has been coming since 1997, ever since the year she had so many tomatoes in her garden she couldn’t give them away fast enough. She asked her garden neighbor, Rose Jennings, to please help her get rid of them. Instead, Jennings brought her to the cannery and showed her how to make tomato soup. “And I’ve been canning tomato soup here ever since,” she says. “On a good year, she says, I’ll can 350 cans. Total—with snaps [green beans] and everything—I’ve done as many as 750 cans of produce in a year. I give away some as gifts, to friends and my brothers.” It was she who dragged her friend Schwartz along years ago, and now the two of them “practically live here in the summer. If I have vegetables, I’m here every day they’re open.”

Bremner’s large garden is just a few minutes’ drive from the cannery. Each year her husband plants about 80 tomato plants. “I can them whole, I make juice, I make spaghetti sauce, salsa, marinara, I make a sauce we call top sauce. It’s just tomatoes, onions and peppers (that’s what top stands for). I put that in chili. I’ll eat it over noodles. You can add hot spices if you want to. I put in a little sugar and salt and McCormick seasoning.”

Bremner also grows a lot of corn, which she freezes, not cans. She and Schwartz will sit and shuck as many as 300 ears from her garden then use the blanching machine at the cannery. “I don’t have to use all my water at home! We can put 50 ears of corn in at a time.” The cannery has a machine that will cut the kernels off the

cob, and it can handle a bushel in five minutes, but Bremner and Schwartz don’t use it because they think it cuts too close to the cob. “So we cut it off by hand.”

Schwartz arrives with large tubs of cucumbers she’s been prepping at home for pickles. Everyone in the cannery jumps up to help carry in her boxes. Bremner and Schwartz get right to work draining and washing the cucumbers that have been soaking in pickling lime for the past 24 hours. The lime helps them maintain their crispness once they have been processed.

Bremner has the most fun canning beets. “You leave a little of the stem on, otherwise they’ll bleed. Then you boil them until they’re done, and the skin just pulls right off. When we get to cutting them up, that beet color is so pretty, and it gets all over your hands. So we always wear white shirts and make pictures on our shirts with our hands.”

There’s a magic sauce at a community cannery. Not the special habañoero pepper sauce that Virginia Food Works packs for one of its clients. But a more intangible one that causes first time visitors to fall in love with the place and return time and again. Everyone has their own interpretation of what that “thing” is. For Hill of Virginia Food Works, it’s the staff at a cannery—the Pattys and the Rodneys—who make the process seem easy and help to give users

that “I can do this!” feeling of accomplishment. Gulick, the manager of the Prince Edward home side, believes the real magic is the people. “When you come through that door, everybody is the same—white, black, young, old.” For Vaughn, Hanover’s manager, it’s the family feeling at a cannery. Yet ask any of the people that frequent the canneries and they tell about the gratifying feel of a community being productive and working together, and keeping in touch with ones roots and family heritage.

It’s two in the afternoon back at the Prince Edward Cannery as Mr. Rice and the Scotts pack up their cans in cardboard boxes and walk out together to load their cars. They say a friendly goodbye and drive off in different directions, the Scotts to fill their pantry and Mr. Rice to deliver some canned tomatoes to lucky recipients.

This page: Left to right: cannery assistant Jan Thomas; manager Chrissy Vaughn; Sheree Bremer; Mary Schwartz.
Opposite top left: Bremer (l.) and Schwartz (r.) are known as the “resident experts” at the Hanover Cannery.
Opposite top right: Bremer fills cans with tomato soup. “On a good year,” she says, “I’ll can 350 cans.”
Opposite top right center: Bremer’s recipe book with her recipe for Bread and Butter Pickles.
Opposite center left: Sheree and Mary’s Bread and Butter Pickles. The strong smell of apple cider vinegar lingered even after the pickles were processed.
Opposite center right: The large fan provides an essential ingredient at the cannery: cool(ish) air.
Opposite bottom left: Hot water is drained and cool water added along with air to circulate the water and cool cans down.
Opposite bottom right: Cucumbers are washed after soaking in pickling lime.



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