

Robin Cohen Makes Delicious Jam for Your Toast

“While most kids want to open a lemonade stand, I dreamed of someday selling jam,” recalls Robin Cohen, owner of Doves and Figs Kitchen of Arlington, Massachusetts. Today, Robin – as principal jam maker, fanciful flavor developer, whimsical name creator, and purveyor of the highest quality jams and preserves – does just that: she makes sparkling jewel-toned preserves and sells them from a booth at several area farmers’ markets. Gifted with a passion for local fruit and a vision for turning a hobby into a business, Robin has made her childhood dream come true.

Tiny and energetic with a clever face that is framed by a long, thick mane of dark hair, Robin is most animated when she speaks of this childhood and of learning to make jam from her father’s instruction. As a young girl, Robin relates, she and her family lived in New York City during the school year and summered on Long Island. Her eyes sparkle as she tells of days spent visiting Montauk’s u-pick farms and farmstands and foraging the area’s woods for wild fruit with her parents. “We would gather wild Concord grapes by the shopping bag,” she adds. These bags full of grapes ended up in the summer home kitchen, bound for the jam kettle.

The work of transforming pounds of grapes into jam was arduous, and the six-year-old Robin was tasked with plucking grapes from clusters of stems and with pushing the fruit pulp from firm purple skins one by one. But the tedium never drove Robin from her father’s side as he made gallons of his jam. Instead she was anxious to stay near him and learn from him how to mix the fruit with sugar, how to stir, how long to boil and thicken the mixture. She learned to watch for the exact moment when the color of the fruit and sugar purée deepened, clarified, concentrated. Before long, the close summer air of the kitchen would be full of the aromas of cooking sugar and the waft of wine from the fresh grapes. Robin remembers her first taste of the piping hot concoction, sampling before anyone else in the family.

The jam making process – the gathering, the cooking, creating the heady aromas, that very first taste – hooked Robin and stayed with her. From those early days forward, Robin continued to make jam for her home table and to give as holiday gifts. She also continued to cultivate that early passion for fresh produce and farms, taking an active role as a volunteer with the Arlington Farmers’ Market and interviewing local growers for a book about the farming life in New England. Such close work with the farms revived an interest in preserving vegetables as well as fruit that had begun years earlier when she was in college.

In those college days, Robin dabbled in making pickles, equal parts hobby and experiment. She enjoyed the endeavor so much that year after year she would stroll the grounds of the Topsfield Fair, a popular local county fair, to see other amateur canners display and take home prizes for their canned goods. In 2009 she finally entered her own batches of pickles, and that year took home several blue ribbons. Encouraged, she returned in 2010 and took home the top prize, Best of Show. It was, she notes, a proud moment in her preserving life. Pivotal, too. Prize in hand, her profile as an expert rising, the full time computer business owner soon after found herself with an equally demanding sideline as advocate for and preserver of fresh and locally grown food.

Between the canning prizes and the advocacy of the farmers’ markets, Robin felt a natural next step for her might be to sell her preserves out of her own booth in the Arlington market. She

longed to bring the products she loved best to other consumers. “I was no stranger to owning a business,” she says. “I had started the one I still own twenty years earlier.” With the encouragement of her husband and parents, she took the plunge and launched Doves and Figs Kitchen, using local farm fruits and other local ingredients such as honey and cider to make her seasonal-inspired line of jams, conserves, and fruit-based mustards.

Two years later, Robin has not once looked back, and she leaves the door open for adding a line of Doves and Figs vegetable pickles in the not-too-distant future. Just like that six-year-old girl she used to be, Robin simply loves the work. She takes inspiration from the rhythms and produce of New England’s growing season: raspberries flavor Razzle Dazzle, peaches form the base of both Peachy Keen and Peachy Mean, and apples pay homage to the county fair in Candy Apple. Robin’s active mind constantly invents new combinations but, she notes, Concord grape jam remains a favorite and the smell of it will still bring her back to her childhood, to the end of summer, to the onset of cooler fall days.

October has brought with it a bounty of local apples and the Cape Cod cranberry harvest, and summer jams make way for jams made with crisp fleshed, hardier fruits. Fall and winter specialties coming from the Doves and Figs line include Evil Apple, a devilishly spicy concoction of apples and chipotle peppers; Falling Leaves, a spread made from Cortland apples, dried Mission figs, and dried cranberries; and Winter Carnival, a conserve of pears, apples, and cranberries.

As the colder weather settles in, so has Robin, right into her autumn focused preserving kitchen. She even made a pre-emptive trip to Sandwich, Massachusetts on Sunday, keeping a few steps ahead of Hurricane Sandy, to pick up flats of recently gathered cranberries. No, not insanity, but rather evidence of her dedication to jam, to freshness, to the best of local harvests.

Jars of Doves and Figs Kitchen preserves can be found locally in Savenor’s, Cardullo’s and Jamaica Plain’s City Feed. By wintertime, Robin hopes to be selling jam online through a shop located on the Doves and Figs website. But you will still find Robin selling the preserves in person at various farmers’ markets because, for her, it is the most direct way to connect with the people who taste and buy her jam. In this way she can best learn, she says, what flavor combinations work and what people will return for time and time again. What pleases Robin most is pleasing her customers. “I love to see little children smiling when they take their first bite,” she remarks, “and hear older person tell me how much my jam tastes like what their aunt or grammy used to make.

Those accolades and smiling faces keep her excited about making preserves in the Doves and Figs kitchen. “My feet may be tired sometimes, but the joy I get from making jam has only grown.”

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