



THE SUNDAY SUN

August 27, 1978

Diary of a FOOD FREAK

Family in a jam – and loving it!

By Marilyn Linton

We stopped at a greasy spoon on our way to Niagara-on-the-Lake. But the point about this highway diner is not food, but the fact that the eager waiters and waitresses were kids. Not suburban teenagers, tasting their first summer away from home slugging lunch-time chili to tourists in a Muskoka resort, but young kids putting in their time to help mom and dad who were chief cooks and bottle washers.

That particular family may have been making-do, using every hand and body available to contribute to the family money-pot. But that pulling together, the non-separation of work and home, was something quite foreign to my city children and I.

We left those kids after toast and orange juice. But further down the road, we further witnessed the family operation in full force during our next stop at Greaves old-fashioned jams and jellies on the main street of Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Niagara-on-the-Lake is a pretty place. It's filled with historic haunts, small enough so that every face (except in high tourist season) has a name and a family history, yet important enough a town to warrant big-city services such as a hospital. So if you enjoy all these things plus the Friday night sing-song at the Oban Inn, there's absolutely no reason to pack your bags and leave for the big city.

That's why Mary Ann Greaves stayed in the family business. For similar reasons her brother William and cousins David, Bobbie and Freddie also stayed.

But besides the obvious merits of living in a beautiful spot, there's also the fact that there's plenty of work to be done in the jam and jelly business started by Grandpa Greaves 51 years ago.

Grandpa Greaves uses his cane to help him around the store these days. Nearly 60 years ago he and his wife, now deceased, headed a pack of Torontonians who traded big city life for the pleasures of Niagara. They drove a team of horses to a Niagara peach farm, a property they bought by selling their grocery business. "I didn't know a thing about farming, though," says William Greaves Sr. So he did what he knew how to do best: making marmalade.

Today, at 92 years of age, William Greaves, is a happy man. His kitchen farmhouse marmalade business has expanded to include family farms and the Niagara-on-the-Lake factory and storefront. And anyone in Ontario who has not visited the family at work

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certainly has either tasted their products or seen their jars on store shelves in the area that spans west to Windsor, east to Ottawa and as far north as Sundridge, Ontario.

Plenty of help

The Greaves had plenty of help even in the early days. Five sons were born; and one of them, William Jr. is still involved in the business along with his father, his daughter and son, plus his brother's three children.

It's not too difficult to spot the Greaves store; we just followed our noses and the smell of apricot jam cooking in the factory behind the storefront led us to its location.

William Greaves 11 says there's really no secret to the jam that is bought by everybody from politician John Diefenbaker to actor Van Johnson. "It's just jam as it used to be made," he says. "It's nothing but fruit and sugar cooked the way the housewives used to make it."

Those were the good old days. Few take the time to preserve Ontario's produce these days. But, even if we would, we couldn't possibly make the range of jams, jellies, marmalades and chili sauces produced by the Greaves. Plum, strawberry, apricot raspberry jams (to name a few); plus cranberry, apple, grape jellies and relishes and chili sauce.

Plain and simple is how the Greaves still do things; and preservatives are unheard of. "Sure, we're automated," laughs Mary Ann Greaves from the warehouse across from the shop. "We now have a labeling machine. We also fill our jars by machine, a task that used to burn your hands when you had to do it. That would be the new girls' job."

Over the years the family has noticed which jams and jellies become whose favorites. Kids love grape jelly, seniors prefer black currant. Everybody loves strawberry jam and marmalade while gooseberry seems to be bought by those with eclectic palates.

Most of the fruits used in the jam preparation are bought from local growers, says Mary Ann. "Except for the oranges for marmalade; and on occasion when we run out of Ontario strawberries we import from Mexico." Some of the fruits grown on Cousin David's farm are used; but there's not nearly enough trees on one farm to grow the fruits needed for the October to November jam season.

Jams and jellies are used primarily for breakfast accompaniments, but more and more people are boiling them down to use as glazes for cakes and tarts, says Mary Ann. A few tablespoons of peach or apricot jam melt down with a little white wine or blonde vermouth makes an excellent syrup for fresh fruit salads, too. "Some people serve jellies as an accompaniment to wine and cheese." Say Mary Ann. And would you believe, she asks, that some even add jam to pot when baking chicken?

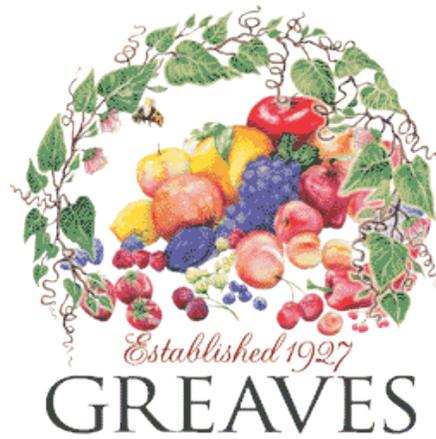
We'd believe anything; Greaves' products are too good to be wasted on breakfast alone.

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Just imagine three generations of your family at a reunion where the table is a smorgasbord of jams and jellies; it must be a delight. “Family reunion?” yells Mary Ann. “You gotta be kidding. Around here we have a family reunion every day of the year.”

AN EARLY PHOTO of the Greaves jam and jelly factory, shows a young William Greaves and cousin Fred, adding boiling water to the newest batch of delectable spread.