

Apple Butter Boiling



Andy and Ann Segedi stirring the kettle in Love

ritual. More than one romance was kindled at the helm of a wooden apple butter stirrer, and amorous males would sometimes sneak more water into the brew to make the boil time last longer.

There were several little ditties about stirring that were recited while making apple butter to remind folks of the sequence needed to keep the product from burning. Two of them went like this: “Once around the side, twice through the middle, keeps the apple butter, from stickin’ to the kettle.” This was the one Boyd and Gladys Coffey of Love used. The other one, used by John and Shirley Humphries of Stuarts Draft, was: “Three times across, and twice through the middle, steal a kiss at the apple butter kettle.”

It was at Sonny and Bunny Stein’s cabin that I first made apple butter. We drove up on a Friday afternoon from Chesterfield County, where we lived at the time, just in time

Before moving to the Blue Ridge, our family was able to participate in one of the most popular fall activities the mountains have to offer: apple butter boiling! It was a two-day event that was filled with a lot of work and the most fun I’d ever had. Plus, the end result yielded a lick-your-lips product that went perfect on biscuits, peanut butter sandwiches, and even cakes.

We soon learned that making apple butter was a family thing as well as a church function, and most folks had in their possession a huge copper kettle that had been passed down through the generations in which to make the tasty butter. There were different sized kettles, but all were made pretty much the same.

Apple butter boiling’s have been a social event in the Blue Ridge as far back as anyone can remember. Because of the time involved in stirring the kettle and the close proximity of the two people needed to stir it, courting-age young people were more than willing to be active participants in the annual autumn



The Humphries stealing a kiss



Apple butter boiling away in a copper kettle to help peel, core, and slice what felt like an endless supply of apples. Actually, for one large forty-gallon kettle, it takes anywhere from eight to twelve bushels of apples—and all have to be prepared the night before the boiling. This process is sometimes known by its German term, “apple schnitzing” night. After the fruit is peeled, cored, and sliced, it is sprinkled with a little water and put into large plastic or metal containers that can be hoisted up and dumped into the waiting kettle early the next morning. I remember the men getting up before dawn to start the fire that would keep the kettle boiling. The kettle was either hung from a tripod by a chain or set into a metal stand that is made specifically to hold the kettle. But I have seen the big iron pot set into a half-barrel that has a trap door in the bottom that opens to allow wood to be put in. Once the apple slices are in the kettle, water, apple cider, or grape juice is added to “start” the butter and keep the fruit from sticking to the bottom. Some folks use one gallon of liquid, others more. Boyd and Gladys Coffey always used homemade grape juice to start theirs, and it gave the butter a dark color and tangy taste that I found irresistible.

Two pennies are sometimes added to the mix for the same reason. As the apple butter thickens up, the constant friction from the stirrer hitting the pennies and scraping the bottom keeps the butter from scorching.

Once the apple butter is started, it must be constantly stirred until it’s ready to come off and be canned. The whole process takes most of the day, so it’s best to have a lot of help with the stirring. The Steins had a little log cabin craft shop next to their house, so they always had an abundance of visitors, many of whom had never seen apple butter being made and who were more than willing to take a turn at the stirrer.

The apple butter is ready to be taken off and canned eight to fourteen hours after it has been started, depending on its consistency. About three hours before that time, all the fire is taken out from under the kettle, and anywhere from fifty to ninety pounds of sugar is added, along with several small bottles of pure cinnamon oil, and stirred into



Les Bridge tasting the “dregs”



Carter Parr filling quart jars with hot apple butter

those dipping into the kettle for the “dregs.” When the kettle is scraped clean, hot water is poured in with a little detergent and scoured until the copper gleams. The kettle is then turned upside down and stored for its next use, along with the cleaned wooden stirrer. When I interviewed John and Shirley Humphries at their annual apple-butter-making weekend in November 1996, they told me that from the eight and a half bushels of apples they put on to boil, the yield was around 110 quarts. I remember making a huge kettle with Boyd and Gladys Coffey at their Quonset hut on Reed’s Gap one year, and our two families carried home forty-eight quarts each. Needless to say, everyone on our list got apple butter for Christmas that year!

Here are two recipes for making the delicious treat; one came from Boyd and Gladys, the other was Hazel Fitzgerald’s mother’s recipe. If you can locate a copper kettle, with a stand and stirrer, you might want to try a batch for yourself one crisp autumn day.

BOYD AND GLADYS COFFEY’S APPLE BUTTER RECIPE

6 bushels of apples
1-gallon grape juice
50 pounds of sugar

the mix. The amount of sugar to be added is a combination of personal taste and the type of apples used. The tarter the apple, the more sugar is needed.

When the cook-down is complete and the butter is thick and brown, the canning process begins. Lids and jars are kept in a large receptacle full of very hot water, and the glass canning jars are taken out and drained before the apple butter is ladled into them. Usually, it’s the men who scoop the butter out of the kettle with a saucepan into a large enamel canner or other type of container; this is then taken to the women who can the butter. Those scooping are on the lookout for those two pennies at the bottom; they will have turned bright and shiny from the acid in the apples. Once the jars are filled, the rims are wiped with a damp rag before the lids and rings are screwed on. No further processing is needed, since the hot jars seal as they cool.

Cleanup is shared by all, and, no matter how it is done, it’s the sweetest

kind. Wooden spoons are licked clean by

those dipping into the kettle for the “dregs.”

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ELIZA COFFEY CAMPBELL'S RECIPE FOR APPLE BUTTER

7½ bushels Winesap apples
7½ bushels Stayman apples
3 bottles cinnamon oil

90 pounds sugar (or more, according to taste)
1½ gallons cold water
3 small bottles oil of cloves.

Peel, core, and slice apples. This will take about one day. Wash apples as slicing is completed, which will help the next morning. Early the next morning, wash out a sixty-gallon copper kettle and dry it. Place kettle in stand, pour in the water, and add one bushel of apples. Stir these apples until cooked up, then add another bushel and cook them up. Do this until all the apples are in the pot. Don't stop stirring the mixture, or it will stick to the bottom of the kettle and burn. After all the apples are in the pot, cook for four hours at a hard boil. Pull all the fire out from under the kettle and let the mixture cool down. Add the sugar slowly, stirring all the time. Be sure to taste for sweetness; more than ninety pounds of sugar may need to be added, depending on the ripeness and variety of apples. Put the fire back under the kettle and begin stirring faster. Let it come to a boil and cook for another hour. After the hour, pull the fire out again and quickly add the oil of cloves and cinnamon oil, stirring constantly. Pack the finished apple butter in hot canning jars and let them seal.

Apple Butter Then and Now



Bradley family boiling butter in the early days



Folks in Montebello show how it's done today



Lance and Olivia Thompson: first time stirrers



Laverta Coffey: novice stirrer the fall of 1981



Apple butter boiling at the Les Bridge Farm, 1990s



**Apple butter making at Montebello's Pioneer Day Festival "Supervisors" left to right:
Felton Hendrix, Sheriff Ron Wood, Mitchael Seaman & stirrer Russell Moore**