

Rural Cannery Makes Hot Pepper Butter, Salsas And Sauces

By Dee Goerge, Contributing Editor

If you've never eaten hot pepper butter, Amber Kuemerle says you should order a jar from her website, or stop in at one of the stores around Berlin, Ohio, that carry her products.

Hot pepper butter is made with mustard, vinegar, sugar, salt and Hungarian wax peppers. The creamy condiment adds new punch to hot dogs, hamburgers, dips and egg, macaroni and potato salads.

"It was a family recipe that we canned only for ourselves, until people told us they wanted to buy it," she explains.

As she and her husband, Jason, considered how to get started, they learned Zifers, a local business, was interested in selling the rights to their spaghetti, marinara and other sauces.

"It was already something that was marketed, so this was our foot in the door," Kuemerle says.

After working with the elderly owners in 2004 to learn the process and recipe, the Kuemerles purchased the business in 2005 and started their business, Starfire Farms. Kuemerle cooks and cans in a 30 by 45-ft.

state and federally-inspected kitchen they built next to their Sugarcreek, Ohio, home.

Kuemerle tweaked the recipes and eliminated artificial thickeners and shelf stabilizers that aren't necessary if you use quality ingredients like thicker tomato varieties and follow canning temperature guidelines. After about a year, she got the process down for Zifer products, and started working with the hot pepper butter recipe.

"When you are going from a 6-quart recipe to 40 gal. you have to modify," she explains, noting that she cooks everything in two 40-gallon water-jacketed, gas-powered kettles.

For several years the couple grew the peppers themselves, growing as many as 2,000 plants. They wanted the peppers to have more heat consistency than the peppers they purchased through a wholesaler. With three active children, farm chores and Jason working full-time, growing the peppers became too time consuming. So, they contract with a local Amish grower for all their peppers, including sweet peppers they use in their salsas. They freeze enough hot



Hot pepper butter is just one of the food products made and sold by Amber and Jason Kuemerle. The creamy condiment adds new punch to hot dogs and other foods.

banana and Hungarian wax peppers to can product year-round.

"Our salsa is a recipe I combined from two recipes," Kuemerle says. "It's unique because we grind everything. It's textured, not chunky." Starting with a sweet salsa base, she has created a few varieties including spicy, mild, peach, and pineapple.

Kuemerle works fulltime canning 12 different products that she sells wholesale through distributors and directly to businesses in her region. She also opened Starfire Farms Country Store in Berlin to sell her products,

her husband's horseshoe art (Facebook: Ja-Bec Art) and other products made locally.

Retail price for all products is \$7 with the hot pepper butter in 12-oz. jars, the salsas in 16-oz. jars, and the sauces in 32-oz. jars. The online pay system includes shipping discounts to reduce the cost to customers, and products have been shipped all over the U.S.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Starfire Farms, Sugarcreek, Ohio (ph 330 591-2226; www.starfirefarms.com).



Alissa Allen says colorful dyes can be made from mushrooms. She holds workshops to teach how to find and dye local mushrooms and lichens.



Colorful Dyes Made From Mushrooms

Colorful dyes may be an untapped market for backyard and woodlot mushrooms. "Mycopigment" expert Alissa Allen suggests that any wooded area that gets plentiful rain can provide a rainbow of color options.

"In a lot of areas, you can find any color you want by going to the woods at the right time of the year," says Allen. "Even arid areas produce mushrooms, although the colors may not be as bright and vibrant."

Allen travels internationally, giving workshops on finding and dyeing with local mushrooms and lichens. While a leading expert in the field, it is such a new field that she admits she is still learning.

When invited to give a workshop in South Dakota, she was surprised to discover that local mushrooms produced a beautiful range of grays and browns she hadn't seen before. Learning what each region has to offer is part of her reason for giving the workshops.

"Throw a mushroom into a dye pot and simmer with some fabric, and it may be a total surprise what color is produced," says Allen. "It may be nothing like the visible pigment in the mushroom."

Allen describes the western jack-o'-lantern mushroom as being a bright orange that will stain skin orange for days. However, when simmered in a dye pot, no orange appears. Instead, fabric will be some shade of purple or green.

"Different combinations of mineral salts, such as alum or iron, and a pH modifier, such as vinegar or ammonia, will produce different colors with the same mushroom," says Allen.

When Allen started exploring the world of mushrooms more than 20 years ago, she knew nothing about mushroom dyes or dyes in general. Only one author had ever written on the subject and then only about mushrooms local to her area of California in the 1970's.

"Mushrooms have been used for food and medicine for thousands of years, but there is no record of them being used for dyeing fabrics," says Allen. "Mushroom-dye dyes are sort of a new field, unlike plant-based dyes that have been used forever."

In addition to giving workshops, Allen has started several Facebook pages devoted to the craft, as well as a website. The Mushroom and Lichen Dyers United Facebook page created by Allen only a few years ago already boasts 5,000 members. Mushroom Dyers Trading Post Facebook page is a place for foragers and dyers to meet and share.

"You can't order mushrooms for dye anywhere," says Allen. "You have to find them yourself or have someone find them for you. The Trading Post brings people together from outside their area. A dyer from California may trade a mushroom only found in their area with a dyer in another part of the country, either for another mushroom or some other item such as jam or soap."

One advantage mushrooms offer is they can be dried for future use. Allen uses a dehydrator to dry down mushrooms as she finds them. This also makes it easy to trade with others.

She notes that mushroom dyes only work with animal-based fabrics like wool, alpaca and angora. "Cellulose fibers like cotton and linen don't take the dye," says Allen. "It has

Winter Building Pampers & Protects Bees

"Beekeepers are starting to listen to what bee-hives are telling us. Bees want it quiet, dark, no vibrations, a small entrance like in a tree, always organized," says John Miller, owner of Miller Honey Farms in Gackle, N. Dak.

To comply, beekeepers are creating new indoor wintering spaces for their hives. Miller spent years visiting Canadian and U.S. facilities, and implementing the best ideas to carefully plan a new 20,000 sq. ft. building completed in time to house his bees this past winter.

"The difference is my priority with hygiene and a different approach to air-handling," says Miller about his facility compared to others. "If the space can be weaponized against the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad Varroa destructor, it is a win for everyone."

Research indicates that keeping the CO2 level at 8 percent for at least 63 days kills the deadly mite. Miller incorporated sensors to monitor the CO2 level in the tightly controlled environment of his new building.

Other design features include:

- A quiet air-handling system with ventilation tucked within overhead rafters where they won't be hit by equipment, hives or humans and that effectively flows air throughout the building. It also allows for flexible hive layout.

- Refrigeration unit with a set point for chilling capability. The goal is 40 degrees for the bees, but heat from the hives must be factored in and it takes experience to set the temperature correctly.



John Miller designed and built this new 20,000 sq. ft. building to create an ideal indoor wintering space for his bees.

- "We use red LED lights (when working in the building). Bees don't see red; it's like a darkroom," Miller says.
- A grain vacuum to vacuum up the dead bees that hives shed every day.

In January, workers start shipping bee hives out at the rate of two loads a day to set up near California almond orchards to be ready for release when trees bloom from mid-February to mid-March.

Though he believes it will take at least 5 years to create a standard to have a predictable survival rate, he was pleased with his first-year survival rate of 85 percent rentable hives for almond orchards.

By paying attention to details and making adjustments, Miller says he hopes that in the future the survival rates are 90 percent.

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to do with the microscopic nature of protein-based fibers."

While lichen can also be used for dyes, she stresses that they should never be harvested from the living lichen. The slow growing organism may be hundreds of years old and unable to reproduce in today's conditions. Only lichen that has fallen away from the base plant should be harvested.

To learn more about mushroom-based dyeing, attend one of Allen's workshops listed on her website. Prices vary from \$120 to \$250, depending on the location and

resources included. She provides the local mushrooms, wool to be dyed, and handouts, including recipes.

Allen suggests visiting one of her Facebook pages as well as her website for more information. She also recommends joining a local mycological society to learn how to identify mushrooms in your area.

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