Making sense of mason jars: a qualitative exploration of contemporary home canning

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Making Sense of Mason Jars: A Qualitative Exploration of Contemporary Home Canning

by

P. Suzanne Pennington

A Dissertation
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ABSTRACT

The practice and popularity of home canning in the United States has dramatically fluctuated since John Mason’s 1858 invention of the ‘fruit’ jar, influenced by cultural trends and sociopolitical events such as war, economic oscillation, activist movements such as environmentalism, and the politicization of food. The contemporary social context in which popular interest in home canning has most recently revived is an era of high cultural awareness and activity regarding multiple food issues. Traditional American foodways, including food preservation techniques such as home canning, are regaining importance as many Americans look to the past for solutions to current needs. This dissertation examines how contemporary practitioners of a traditional foodway experience canning and what meanings it holds for them. Qualitative interviews were conducted with fifty home canners in southeastern Ohio to investigate respondents’ canning histories, motivations to do and perceived benefits of home canning, and the gender division of labor in canning and regular household meals. Respondents’ canning histories were found to vary by age. A wide array of motivations to do and perceived benefits of home canning broadly relating to themes of food sovereignty and personal empowerment were observed. Lastly, this dissertation argues for the expansion of routine meal preparation measures to include domestic food production activities such as home canning and other food preservation techniques in future research on the gender division of household labor. This research contributes to the sociological study of food via exploratory research on contemporary home canning viewed through the lenses of gender and family, work and leisure, culture, and community.
This project has taken several years to complete, and during this time I have received assistance and support from many people. First, I would like to thank my dissertation committee members for the time and energy they invested in me and my work. Thank you Glenna Spitze, Richard Lachmann, and Steve Scanlan for all the meetings (in person, by phone, and via Skype), emails, and feedback. You all have supported my professional as well as personal growth throughout this process. I am especially grateful for the mentorship of Glenna Spitze throughout my doctoral studies and the friendship we have created over the years. It was such a blessing to have an advisor who shared personal interest in my research topic and had several of her own canning stories to tell along the way! Thanks also to Steve Seidman for originally encouraging me when I decided to launch a dissertation in a totally as-yet-unfamiliar area of study to me, the sociology of food. Thank you to Steve Scanlan, Ann Bennett, and other members of the sociology and anthropology department at Ohio University for lending me a space (back ‘home’ in Bentley) in which to conduct interviews.

I must abundantly thank all of the home canners with whom I spoke for this project, because without these volunteers there could be no data and therefore no dissertation! I feel an enormous debt to all of the interviewees and a sense of awe and wonder at the amazing opportunities that I experienced when sitting down with each of you. Thank you for generously sharing your time and the stories of your lives with me. I am also lucky to have made or renewed relationships with many of interviewees and thereby expanded my own network of canners!
Many friends have given me so much encouragement and help throughout the writing of this dissertation and my graduate studies overall. Alison Goebel and I helped each other survive our undergraduate studies together at Miami University, and then she led the way through graduate school (in our separate programs); thank you for your cheerleading and for keeping in touch all these years. Michael Barton is a special friend who has shared lots of level-headed professional advice with me and many good times since we met at the University at Albany. Mike and I entered the doctoral program as part of a special cohort of students with whom many fond memories were made… Thank you to Rachel Caster-Sciolino for the mint tea that helped us finish statistics, and to Nicole Lamarre for trading courses with me one difficult semester and hosting my bachelorette celebration. Chris Galvan often and eagerly reminded me that there is more to life than work. Thanks also to Matt Vogel who showed me the ropes when I arrived at Albany.

My completion of the doctoral program would not have been possible without the support I received from my family. Love and deep thanks to you all! My parents passed on to me their work ethics and values of commitment and perseverance that have pushed me through grad school. The goals I have set for myself have been lifted ever higher by their expectations and support of me. My father would be very proud to know that I have followed in his footsteps; I wish he were here so that we could finally and officially call each other “Dr. Pennington”! Lastly, and with greatest gratitude, I acknowledge the love and support I have received from the person who most closely observed and endured this process with me: my husband, Nicholas Whitney. Thank you for being alongside me all the way through.
Dedication

This dissertation was inspired by,
and written in loving memory of,
my father,

Dr. James Edgar Pennington, PhD.

(1946-2010)
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Chapter One: Introduction

Amidst a wave of cultural interest in all things culinary, food preservation is currently experiencing a revival in private homes in the United States (Campoy 2009; Click and Ridberg 2010; Dickerman 2010; Lackey 2010; Moore 2009; Moskin 2009; Skaggs 2010; Sommerstein 2011). Home canning of food is the second most widely practiced food preservation technique, following behind freezing (Andress 2001). Other popular techniques of food preservation include pickling, fermenting, drying, smoking, and root cellaring. At this time, the resurgence of interest in home food production generally and canning specifically is a part of a broad cultural moment in which food has become a matter of attention. It is the heyday of the ‘foodie’ identity. Traditional American foodways, including home canning, are again relevant today as Americans look to the past for knowledge and practices to fulfill their current needs. Yet there has been very little academic study of these trends and themes. This research offers an exploratory sociological analysis of the contemporary practice of home canning.

Social Context

The contemporary social context in which popular interest in home canning has emerged in the United States is an era of great cultural consciousness of multiple food issues and political debates about food. The various food-specific issues and debates about which Americans are currently concerned (with varying degrees of acknowledgement to the primary roots of social inequalities and the implied political aspects thereof) include: ending hunger, creating access to fresh food among people in contexts such as elementary schools and urban food deserts, organic versus conventional
farming methods, local/seasonal food, farm workers’ rights and living wages, food autonomy, maintaining biodiversity (e.g., heirloom seed savers), and preserving traditional foodways (e.g., home canning, foraging wild foods). Among these issues, common concerns include environmental responsibility, food safety, and a general interest in moving away from large-scale, monoculture agribusiness and factory-produced foods toward small-scale farms and home-based food production.

Food issues have arisen alongside contemporary environmental activism and its efforts toward greater sustainability regarding the use of resources and an increased ethic of responsibility toward the planet and social justice for all its human habitants. Numerous natural and social disasters which have affected the United States and elsewhere have recently reinforced environmental concerns, especially about food production and climate change and the pollution of soils and water. Thus, many contemporary interests in food, farming, and gardening may embody environmentalist values—though not all ‘foodies’ today experience their enthusiasm for food as political (Johnston and Baumann 2010) and surely not all would identify as environmentalists. Home canners often grow their own produce or purchase fresh produce from local farmers’ markets so that they may acquire the freshest and tastiest food possible as well as to support local and sustainable food economies. Home canning is largely a seasonal endeavor, which ties the home producer to natural cycles and encourages awareness of local growing seasons.

Human health as related to food safety is also a current popular concern which has been triggered by numerous and sizeable outbreaks of food-borne illnesses and deaths, as well as increasing public awareness of the linkages between chronic disease and diet such
as heart disease, obesity, and some forms of diabetes and cancer. Home canning is pursued by some individuals as a means to providing themselves or their family members with safe, nutritious, no-additive foods especially for individuals with special health concerns requiring, for example, a low-sodium diet (Baer et al. 1992).

Alongside environmental and health concerns there is also a contemporary anti-corporate, anti-consumer ethos which promotes more active roles among citizens than that of the passive consumer. Do-It-Yourself (DIY) culture encourages individuals to do more work themselves, rather than hiring service professionals or purchasing a solution. Some DIY ‘craftivists’ (Solomon 2009) engage in creative or fixer-upper projects and feel a sense of pride and accomplishment in taking labor into their own hands. Home canning is one such project. Eager to do something creative with their hands aside from working at a computer, many well-to-do city-dwellers and suburbanites are joining the ‘movement’ of urban homesteading (see, for example, how-to books by Coyne and Knutzen [2008] 2010, Kaplan and Blume 2011) to try to combine the benefits of urban living with greater home production of basic necessities and environmentally sustainable lifestyles. These factions are nostalgic, even romantic, as they look back at the past to rekindle traditional values in manual labor, home-based production of essential needs, and thrift (recycling/reuse/repair instead of replacing via a new purchase). While some people may be motivated toward DIY-inspired activities or lifestyles by political ideas such as anti-consumerism, their actions remain largely individuals and small scale as it occurs most often solely within the private domestic sphere. And much activity within the domestic sphere remains the realm of women—a fact that many of today’s DIY and canning blogs, fail to note. On these and other themes, a sociological analysis of
contemporary home canning can connect with numerous social and cultural areas of interest that are worthy of deeper exploration.

**Contribution to the Literature: The Sociology of Food**

Many sociological issues are fundamentally issues of power, social inequalities, and human bodies; for example, the sociological subfields studying sex/gender and race/ethnicity focus on forms of social difference stratification that are organized via socially important physical characteristics. In these examples, scarce and valuable resources like power, wealth, and space are socially organized via cultural interpretations of human bodies.

Food is another valuable resource that is socially distributed and deserves greater sociological consideration. Embodying more than physical nutrition, food is an ideal arena for sociological study because all living people must eat and the specific foods we eat are defined by and understood through culture. Food is produced, prepared, and consumed in accord with social understandings about religion, nature, and human ‘nature’. Also, food is distributed among a society in accord with social distinctions—some cultural distinctions include gender and age, as well as social structural distinctions of class or other rank.

Food touches everything. Food is the foundation of every economy. It is a central pawn in political strategies of states and households. Food marks social differences, boundaries, bonds, and contradictions. Eating is an endlessly evolving enactment of gender, family, and community relationships. …Food is life, and life can be studied and understood through food.

(Counihan and Van Esterik 1997:1)

Scholars in the interdisciplinary area of food studies often explore the *foodways* of peoples within unique cultural, historical, and geographic contexts. Foodways, broadly conceived, are the social practices and cultural ideologies involved in food production, its
consumption, as well as preservation. Scholarship on foodways can be described as “…the study of what we eat, as well as how and why and under what circumstances we eat” (Taylor and Edge [1989] 2007:8). As such, the observation and scientific study of foodways can provide insight into issues of sociological interest such as household division of labor, gender, and identities based on family, community, racial/ethnic and/or regional food traditions. In this way, home canning can become a lens into many important aspect of social life. Following Phillips and Bass (1976:29), this dissertation proposes to analyze home canning as an important traditional American foodway:

Food preservation is an important aspect of foodways. Because food preservation practices influence the family’s economy, the family’s health and the homemaker’s sense of self-worth and creativity, it is important to know the methods of food preservation used and how these practices are related to the foods eaten and to the individual’s participation in the preservation process.

Food preservation has played a crucial role in the development and stabilization of human societies around the world. Numerous other methods of food preservation, such as pickling, drying, and burying, have been practiced throughout history in accord with each societies’ specific population food needs, place-based factors such as geographic and climate variations, and cultural meanings and relationships to food (e.g., religion, gender differences, farming labor). Over time, these specific practices of food preservation evolve into foodways. The ancient practice of food preservation suggests that such efforts address a common human concern, and that concern is primary: hunger. As mammals, humans are fundamentally concerned with food—a biological need which must be met with regularity. Essentially, food preservation techniques have been developed to help people deal with the most fundamental problem of food security: Where will the next meal come from? In the words of McFadden and Trang (2002:516),
many of today’s cuisines and fine foods such as French wines and cheeses exist due to early efforts to discover “[h]ow…to keep the winter at bay, survive the drought, preserve food, and so preserve life itself.”

Home canning is a food practice that directly addresses this concern. Goldblith, Joslyn, and Nickerson (1961:14) have argued that “[n]o single discovery has contributed more to modern food manufacture or to the general welfare of mankind [than the invention of canning].” In terms of food security, home canning can be seen as a form of empowerment, a form of knowledge and a practice of self-sufficiency that can offer individuals and families the ability to overcome instability by preserving a larder. Yet canning encompasses much more than physical nutrition. The practice and popularity of home canning in the United States has dramatically ebbed and waned since its invention in the late nineteenth century; interest in canning has been susceptible to sociopolitical events and cultural trends such as war, economic oscillation, environmental activism, and the politicization of food issues. As a timeworn foodway, home canning can be seen as a practical behavior weighted with tradition and authenticity claims, individual and group memory and nostalgia, and preserved by the transfer of generational knowledge passed down through family members, friends, and neighbors. Canning is both culturally ubiquitous in the United States (as in the iconic symbol of the Mason jar), and canning is socially specific in that people within certain geographic regions and ethnic origins share unique canning histories, and communities, families, and even individual family members may have unique roles (gender, age/generation) or relationships to canning.

Despite the vast amount of popular interest in all things food, sociologists have yet to examine the current revival of traditional foodways and domestic arts such as home
food preservation. The sociology of food is a young but burgeoning area of specialization, as of yet contains little literature on contemporary foodways in general and, at time of this writing, no known attention to home canning specifically. This dissertation contributes to this subfield via research on contemporary home canning as viewed through the sociological lenses of gender and family, work and leisure, culture, and social change. This dissertation investigates the current resurgence of interest in the home canning of food, and the experiences and motivations of its practitioners.

**Research Questions**

There are several research questions guiding this project. First: *Who is home canning today?* While the findings of this qualitative research cannot be generalized to any larger population, it can provide an in-depth look at a group of individuals in one region of the United States who practice home canning and offer data regarding their socioeconomic characteristics. The demographic data resulting from this research question are compared with the scant existing qualitative social science research on home canners, and contributes to discussions and discrepancies raised by such literature.

Second: *What kinds of experiences have home canners had with canning, and what are their current canning practices?* This question addresses how canners initially learned about canning and from whom, and measures if canning is experienced as a social activity involving family, friends, or significant others. For many canners, food preservation skills are learned as generational knowledge passed down from older family members; however, today many people—especially younger adults—are teaching themselves food preservation skills via the internet or learning from non-familial individuals with canning expertise. I also investigate who tends to can alone, with same-
and/or other-gendered family members or others, and what role(s) in the canning process each individual performs. Learning what foods people put up also reveals why they preserve these specific foods and food products (more on motivations below), as well as their intentions for future use such as personal consumption or as gifts.

Third: Why are people home canning now and what does canning mean to its practitioners? This question broadly addresses why individuals are home canning now and what benefits they perceive they experience from it. What are their motivations to perform this specific form of home food production? Do they believe canning is a “quasi-political act” (Moskin 2009), with “…the potential to subvert the capitalistic logic of the global agro-food industry” (Click and Ridberg 2010)? Do they also use other food preservation techniques such as freezing, and if so, what foods are chosen for one or the other form of preservation and why? This question explores why canning is relevant today, and what social meanings canning holds for its practitioners. Perhaps canning is a symbol of American independence or self-sufficiency, a family tradition that bridges generations of family members both living and deceased, or a home art that brings joy and pride at completion for a hobbyist who gives away her or his delicious creations. Is canning a form of ‘serious leisure’ as defined by Stebbins (2001), like it is for some home quilters (Stalp 2006), who experience personal and nonwage benefits from their participation?

Lastly, a fourth research question concerns food and gender more broadly: What role(s) do home canners perform in providing food and regular meal preparation for the household in which they live? As with all domestic foodwork, home canning has traditionally been considered more appropriate labor for women than men. Today, in an
era in which women are increasingly pursuing higher education and paid work outside the home, does this strict gendered division of labor remain in the realm of home food preservation? Or are some of the gender-bending or -blending trends reported among foodies by Cairns, Johnston, and Baumann (2010) hold true also among home canners? Are traditional associations of women with food somewhat changing overall?

Research Setting

This study was conducted in a multi-county region in southeastern Appalachian Ohio, an area home to a major local foods network; the setting is described in detail in Chapter Four. Appalachia is a geographic and culturally distinct area in the United States with a history of environmental and socioeconomic exploitation by exogenous people. Food is an economic, political, and social justice concern for many people in Appalachia, including many home canners. This research offers unique insights into the lives of some members of a local foods economy and the practice of home food production via canning.

Whereas much sociological attention to food has thus far utilized macro theoretical perspectives to discuss topics such as social inequalities, globalization, and hunger, the qualitative methodology for this study contributes empirical, in-depth data on the motivations and meanings of canning for its contemporary practitioners. Who is currently practicing home canning? Why are these people home canning food now when vast amounts of cheap, commercially canned foods are so widely available? This study also explores gender and the social implications of who does and does not participate in domestic canning. Existing sociological research on foodwork and the gendered division of labor in private households focuses on the preparation and planning of regular meals, at the exclusion of food preservation.
Chapter Conclusion

This introductory chapter offers a broad overview of the social phenomena and research questions pertaining to this dissertation. Chapter One has also provided an overview of the social context in which this research was conducted, and the sociological significance of the subject matter. Chapter Two presents a basic introduction to food preservation and canning, and a social history of home canning in the United States through a series of twentieth-century canning ‘revivals’. In Chapter Three, I review relevant sociological theories and empirical social science research which inform this project, as well as select citations from popular media such as newspapers and online sources. The research methods utilized to conduct this study are detailed in Chapter Four, as well as the demographic characteristics of the sample. The following three chapters present the findings of the dissertation, corresponding to the research questions that guided this project. Chapter Five overviews the experiences of the home canners in this sample with home canning and broadly describes what the canning practices of the individuals in this study look like. The motivations of home canners to do home canning and its perceived benefits are explored in-depth in Chapter Six. Issues related to gender such as the gendered division of labor in canners’ households regarding routine meal work and the conceptualization of canning as domestic food production are discussed in Chapter Seven. Lastly, Chapter Eight discusses the contributions of this study to existing scholarly literatures and concludes with the limitations of the current study and recommendations for future research. Documents relevant to recruitment and interviewing are appended at the end of the dissertation.
Chapter Two: Introduction to Food Preservation, and the Social History of Home Canning

“The irresistible appeal of canning and preserving is timeless.”
(Ball Blue Book: Guide to Preserving, Hearthmark LLC/Jarden Home Brands 2011a:2)

This chapter introduces home canning as a unique form of food preservation. The processes for home canning are briefly outlined, as well as the health risks of improper canning techniques. The international history of the invention and commercialization of canning is presented, followed by the social history of home canning in the United States. The latter takes the form of a series of home canning ‘revivals’ that occurred during the following periods of political turmoil, high social unrest, and economic change: World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, and the early 1970s. Lastly, the contemporary home canning revival of today is described. This chapter argues that the contemporary revival of canning exhibits a continuation of many themes from earlier resurgences of canning, but the context in which home canning is occurring today also features new developments which reveal how the cultural and political landscape of food has changed in the United States.

Introduction to Canning and Other Food Preservation Techniques

From a nutritional standpoint, food preservation can help provide steady and secure access to adequate foods that promote physical health. Food preservation is especially helpful in providing a year-round supply of food in geographic locations where the climate or seasonal variations limit plant growing seasons, and can help protect against hunger in case of the failure or loss of crops due to extreme weather or disease. However, the food supply for the United States today is no longer exclusively local, regional, or seasonal; it is instead largely a global supply web feeding a predominantly
urban and nonfarm civilian population. Increasingly industrialized, global food economies and the needs of growing urban populations may have fueled the development of advanced food preservation techniques (Hillman Gray 1930) such as canning. Human societies tend to develop subsistence technologies (such as methods of food preservation) as the limits of the food supply threaten to limit population growth (Lenski and Lenski 1987). Or, an alternative perspective suggests that it may be because of food preservation capabilities that such societies became possible:

The astonishing fact about food preservation is that it permeated every culture at nearly every moment in time. To survive ancient man [sic.] had to harness nature. … Food preservation enabled ancient man to make roots and live in one place and form a community. He no longer had to consume the kill or harvest immediately, but could preserve some for later use. (Nummer 2002)

Since the practice of food preservation is ancient, its practice and prevalence has most likely developed alongside humans’ increasing use of industrial technologies:

Man [sic.] has striven, even in pre-historic times, to preserve the seasonal delights of fruit, vegetables, fish, etc., for his frugal winter or drought period table. In more recent civilized times the need for food preservation has been considerably heightened by the rapid growth of conurbations of population situated without regard to and often very far away from sources of food supply. … In order to feed the highly industrialized and agriculturally lazy countries with the products of the primary producing countries, methods of preservation during transport and distribution become vital. … There is therefore an enormous need for intelligent food preservation. (Symons 1963:37)

Many methods of food preservation have been developed over time and range from traditional to industrial techniques, including drying (believed to be the oldest form of food preservation, with evidence dating to 12,000 B.C.; Nummer 2002), fermentation, canning, refrigeration and freezing, storing such as root cellaring, and preservation via the addition of condimental preservatives such as sugar or honey (jellies and jams), wood smoke (smoking), salt (curing), vinegar (pickling) and chemical preservatives such as
benzoates, sulphates and sulphites, and nitrates and nitrites (Hillman Gray 1930:518,528). Multiple techniques are commonly used in combination, such as pickling and canning, or the curing then smoking or drying of meat. The techniques of food preservation utilized by societies around the world vary by need, plant or animal type of food product, cultural and religious ideas about food, and by the specifics of geography, climate, and season.

Each form of food preservation has its unique benefits and shortcomings and the techniques vary in factors such as equipment and time required to process the preserved food, technical difficulty, energy use, success rate (against spoilage), length of time for which preserved food can be safely stored, flavor and nutrition, required storage space and storage conditions (e.g., hot, cold, dry, damp) and means of protection from pests and contamination, and time and energy required to make food edible after the food preservation process (e.g., opening a canned jar of precooked, ready-to-eat tomatoes versus cooking dried beans). In the United States, the National Center for Home Food Preservation (NCHFP) has recently found that the most common techniques of food preservation practiced in private homes are freezing and canning (Andress 2001), although specific statistics regarding contemporary domestic food preservation are sparse. Canning is the process of preserving food by heating it to sterilize the food and then sealing it in an airtight vessel. Processing can be done in boiling water canners ("water bath canning" or "boiling water method"), or in pressure canners ("pressure canning") which achieve temperatures higher than that of boiling water. Canning has been reputed to preserve food "indefinitely" (Swank 1943:69); however, the NCHFP recommends that home canned foods be consumed or discarded within one year. In addition to long storage life, other benefits of canning include flavor, nutrition, and ease
Health and Safety Considerations of Home Canning

Safety is a major concern with home canning. In light of the amount of readily available, cheap, and generally safe food products processed by commercial canning industries, it is remarkable that home canners persist in the practice despite the myriad of consumer options as well as the time, effort, and health risks associated with home canning. The consumption of improperly canned foods can cause illness or even death. The process of canning requires a heated stovetop, which may result in burns or the occasional explosion of pressure canners or hot glass jars. Therefore, information about safe canning techniques is important to public health. Knowledge about home canning was first regulated in the United States by the federal government, and was dispensed by extension agents affiliated with land-grant universities as per the establishment of the Agricultural Extension Service in 1914 (Jensen 1982). With increasing industrialization and urbanization throughout the twentieth century, government priorities and funds shifted away from farm-based extension education and science-based home canning research nearly ceased after World War II. Eventually in 2000, the United States Department of Agriculture Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (USDA-CSREES) partnered with and the University of Georgia and Alabama A&M University (and other affiliate universities) to form the National Center for Home Food Processing and Preservation. This center, now known as the National Center for Home Food Preservation (NCHFP), has updated the outdated USDA-CSREES guidelines for
safe canning and freezing and has conducted a few studies on contemporary home food preservation practices (National Center for Home Food Preservation 2011).

Though home canned foods offer a relatively long shelf life, short-duration freezing of foods preserves more nutrients than canning because many nutrients are destroyed by the heat of canning or migrate into the surrounding water which may be discarded. The nutritional profile of canned food items vary by the type of food, the manner in which it is processed and then the manner in which it is cooked before consumption. Processing times and types vary for low- and high-acid foods. The NCHFP guidelines state that low-acid foods such as green beans or meat must be processed at higher temperatures for longer periods of time in a pressure canner. High-acid foods such as tomatoes and most fruits may be processed for a shorter time period in a boiling water bath because these foods are a naturally inhospitable environment for many pathogens.

The most widely known health risk that can be caused by improper home canning is food poisoning, the most notorious form being foodborne botulism, an infection caused by *Clostridium botulinum* bacteria. This neurotoxin can thrive in acidic, anaerobic environments, and it leaves no physical trace in the contaminated food. Despite its threatening popular reputation, foodborne botulism infection is actually quite rare—about 22 cases are reported in the United States each year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2011; Date et al. 2011). According to the CDCP, “[o]utbreaks of foodborne botulism involving two or more persons occur most years and are usually caused by home-canned foods” with low-acid content, and “…by failure to follow proper canning methods” (CDCP 2011) outlined by the USDA-NCHFP. Date et al. (2011:2090) name botulism a “public health emergency” because numerous persons can be affected from a
single source. Date et al. (2001:2094) studied three outbreaks of botulism in Ohio and Washington State between 2008 to 2009, and found that “home canners did not follow canning instructions, …ignored signs of food spoilage, and were unaware of the risk of botulism from consuming improperly preserved vegetables.” The researchers call for more research on contemporary canning trends, and greater outreach and education about safe home canning procedures.

**The Invention of Canning and its Commercialization**

Nicolas Appert (b.1750, d.1841) of France invented and popularized the food preservation technique of canning, an achievement for which he earned “A Benefactor of Humanity” award (Bitting 1937:3) from the French government. Napoleon advertised a contest for the invention of a new manner of keeping food stores to feed his armies, and, after many years of experimentation, Appert—a relentless inventor and experimenter, preserver, brewer, distiller, and confectioner—received the cash award in 1809 (Collins 1924:2). In 1810, Appert published *The Book for All Households, or the Art of Preserving Animal and Vegetable Substances for Many Years* (an English translation was published in 1920 by A. W. Bitting) which outlined his preservation process. Appert did not call his process canning but rather “hermetically sealed food,” because his process utilized glass jars as storage vessels and metal canning as we know it today was developed secondarily to the utilization of glass bottles (Collins 1924:31). Appert discovered that food in air-tight packages heated to high temperatures would keep for long periods of time. The common belief at this time was that contact with air caused putrefaction of food; how canning preserved food was not understood until 1864 when
Pasteur’s theory of germs explained that food could spoil due to organisms in the food itself if these organisms were not killed off by application of heat (Nummer 2002).

In 1810 Peter Durand of England took out a patent for preserving food via Appert’s process, but for sealing food in ‘canisters’ of tin (Collins 1924:31). This is the origin of what Americans call ‘tin cans’ which today are most often made out of a sheet of steel (for strength) coated with tin or aluminum (to resist rust). The English were the first to conduct successful commercial business in canning, shipping sealed bottles and cans around the world. Yet it was in America that canning bloomed as a commercial industry (utilizing predominantly metal cans) and also, later, as a home practice (utilizing glass jars). The Civil War brought about great need for the redistribution of food over the vast terrain of what is now the United States, and thus fueled the American commercial canning industry. Before the Civil War, commercial canning was done by hand (which involved the careful soldering shut of each metal can), and thus canned food products were relatively expensive and not widely consumed (Collins 1924:15). However, after the Civil War and despite numerous labor struggles by cannery workers, complete mechanization of the industrial canning process was achieved in the United States and prices eventually dropped.

The commercial production of home canning supplies also began after the Civil War. John Landis Mason, a Philadelphia tinsmith, patented his iconic jar with a metal screw-on lid in 1858. Mason’s jars were originally called ‘fruit jars’, because that was the primary food group preserved therein; later they became known by commercial glass producer names such as ‘Ball jars’. The two-piece lid and screw band still in use today was designed in 1915 by Alexander H. Kerr. Today the Jarden Company produces the
two most popular brands of home canning equipment in the United States, Ball and Kerr, as well as a high-end Canadian brand, Bernardin (Ball Corporation ceased production of canning products in 1993) (Hearthmark LLC/Jarden Home Brands 2011b). It remains unclear why in the United States home preservation of food in glass jars has never been called ‘jarring’; the popular name ‘canning’ for this form of food preservation as practiced in the private, domestic setting reflects the technique of food preservation without reference to the vessel in which the food is contained. Domestic knowledge about and practice of canning began in the United States along the east coast where the density of commercial canneries were located, first adopted by middle-class Euro-American women and gradually spreading west across the country (Jensen 1982). As will be discussed below, by WWI “…this household art quickly emerged from obscurity to occupy a prominent place in the economy of thousands of homes” (Chenoweth 1930:21).

From the beginning of the manufacture of commercially canned foods and home canning supplies, the men running the commercial canning ventures marketed their products to women—from tin-canned pineapple, sardines, and condensed milk, to glass jars for “housewives’ use” (Collins 1924:239). Traditional gender roles allocate the duties of home-based foodwork to women, in their ‘proper’ domestic sphere and specific domain of the kitchen. “Preserving food has always been women’s work” (Bentley 1998:130). Most of the written histories of the canning industry reveal the gender roles of their era, and often pit a presumably male commercial canner against a female home canner, each located in their proper (and separate) spheres of the public and domestic. For example, a history written by Edith Elliott Swank (1943) for the H.J. Heinz Company, *The Story of Food Preservation*, describes the typical competition between the industrial
canner and the home canner as tallied by cost and quality of product: “so if he was to
succeed in this new venture [of commercial canning] the manufacturer had to find some
way of producing as fine canned foods as the housewife, at less cost” (Swank 1943:78).
The authors of this historical literature commonly proceed to praise the advancements in
technology and efficiency made by the male entrepreneurs of the canning industry, and
champion the increases in industrially preserved foods’ quality and mass-market success.
This particular text is notable because it is the only such review of the commercial
canning industry from this era of which I am aware that was authored by a woman.

There is no doubt that the male commercial canning entrepreneurs won this
gendered struggle, as past generations’ previous domestic (women) canners have mostly
morphed from producers of food products into today’s consumers of grocery store goods.
The taken-for-granted normalcy of industrially canned products today characterizes the
consumer context within which home canning is now marked as unusual—a notable
expenditure of one’s time and energy, a dying foodway and nearly-lost skill, and an art—
no longer a common domestic chore. Contemporary home canning may be a backlash
against the domination of industrial canning and factory food production more broadly.

Canning in Context: A Social History of Home Canning in the United States

A Series of Home Canning ‘Revivals’

The popularity of home canning has ebbed and flowed over time with changes in
social institutions such as the economy and politics, as well as with the tides of popular
culture and current events. “Home preservation of food is not such a bygone ploy as
movement has brought back to thousands of American households an art almost forgotten
since our grandmothers’ days” (Pack 1917:203). These historical statements could apply to numerous time periods during which popular interest in home canning and other preservation techniques has revived. Many of the written histories of canning and various canning literatures, both historical and contemporary, refer to resurgences of popularity of home canning as ‘revivals’ (and sometimes also as canning ‘movements’; Pack [1917:203] wrote of the WWI-era “…nationwide, food-producing and food-conserving movement”). For example, the 1971 edition of Kerr Glass Manufacturing Corporation’s *Home Canning Book and How to Freeze Foods* guidebook begins with an introduction “Dedicated to homemakers everywhere”: “Dear Homemaker: There has been a real revival of home canning throughout our Nation. There seems to be a genuine yearning for fresh-from-the-garden vegetables, tree-ripened fruits, and tasteful, satisfying meats, not to mention delicious jams, jellies, preserves, pickles, etc.” Today, the popular website *Canning Across America* describes its membership as “…a nationwide, ad hoc collective of cooks, gardeners and food lovers committed to the revival of the lost art of ‘putting up’ food.” Numerous newspapers, books, and online media also utilize the discourse of a home canning ‘revival’ (Baute [2009] “Canning Revival”; Hood [2011] *We Sure Can!: How Jams and Pickles Are Reviving the Lure and Lore of Local Food*; Moskin [2009] “Preserving Time in a Bottle (or Jar)”; Skaggs [2010] “Revival of Canning”; Vinton and Espuelas [2005] *The Real Food Revival*).

I identify a *canning revival* as a time period during which home canning gains public popularity and garners media attention. Popular media employ a discourse which names the home canning trend a ‘revival’ or canning ‘resurgence’ and often contains references to home canning as a traditional skill, associated with a member of a previous
generation (often a female family member such as a grandmother), but which is now ‘new’ again, chic and modern. Social institutions or groups (such as the government, book and/or website publishers, or members of a national social movement) produce and disseminate messages and information that encourage the practice of canning food at home. There have been numerous home canning revivals, occurring during periods of marked political and economic unrest: WWI, the Depression, WWII, 1970s, early 1990s, and the contemporary revival (2007 continuing through the present).

To understand the meaning(s) of home canning today to its practitioners, it is useful to situate the contemporary home canning and its revival of popularity within its historical context as one of a series of revivals, and to look at the social contexts and agents involved in the creation and distribution of messages about home canning over time. I will briefly describe these earlier canning revivals in order to compare with that of today. Each revival has had its own target group or ideal group of home canning participants, messages or ideologies that promote canning, and forms of media used to communicate messages about canning. At times, the motivating theme of food security is more prevalent, such as during war or economic downturns; at others, home canners seem motivated more so by political and aesthetic concerns such as distaste or distrust toward industrial food products and environmental impacts of the mega-farms producing their raw materials. While differences among canning revivals reveal the varying meanings associated with the practice of canning over time, the similarities are also sociologically interesting. Some similar themes include: the understanding of home canning as a gendered practice associated with women, the repeated reemergence(s) of canning as a valuable and fashionable traditional foodway in time periods of intense
political events and socioeconomic change, and the power of various social groups to continuously reframe the meanings of home canning (motivations and justifications) in ways that support the interests and agendas of those who promote it.

*Era of the World Wars*

Home canning became a widespread practice in rural areas of the United States just before the First World War. As a domestic chore involving the work of feeding a family, home canning has always been considered women’s work. Medical doctor Charles E. North (1911:138) remarked that home sanitation regarding canning was not a concern because “…most country housewives are proficient in the canning and drying of fruits and in the proper care of winter vegetables.” During the canning revivals of both world wars, the government and popular news media promoted women’s participation in home front war support via gendered messages about patriotism and ‘duty’ that both reflected and reaffirmed the gendered division of labor in the homestead.

During World War I, women were involved in a variety of war-related labor efforts, both inside and outside the home. Women participated in such organizations as the Red Cross, Emergency Aid and Navy League, and worked on farms across the country as hired workers via the Women’s Land Army. In private homes, women and men citizens grew what were first known as ‘war gardens’, which became known as ‘victory gardens’ after WWI was won (Bentley 1998:116-117).

During both world wars, food was in short supply on the United States mainland and prices were high. The housewife was held responsible for her household’s purchasing decisions and overall consumption of goods, managing the food in her household, and properly feeding her family members. The era of World War I saw the rise of home
economics in academia, which taught “housekeepers” (i.e., women) the science of proper household management (Lyford 1916). Home demonstration work and coordinated programs between state and county extension agents and local schools began in 1915, training girls in canning and gardening clubs to become the next generation of demonstrators (Creswell 1916). Women and girls canned and conserved as much food as possible so that available stores of food staples could address the needs of the troops.

The problem of getting enough food to feed the family is most serious in the eyes of housewives all over the United States. There is consternation in the minds of housewives as they look forward to the winter months. Women have responded nobly to the call to help produce and conserve food. Our abundant harvests and stores of canned and dried foods prove that. Women are doing their part in food economy so that there may be no waste in garbage pails. (Hitchcock 1917:138-139, “The Relation of the Housewife to the Food Problem”)

Women were not the only notable producers of food on the home front during WWI. Boys’ and girls’ clubs, supervised by state cooperative service offices, enlisted in “Uncle Sam’s food army” (Collins 1924:240). Children were instructed in gender-segregated agricultural skills: boys were encouraged to raise pigs and steers, while girls were taught the more domestic and culinary skills of food preservation. Girls’ Canning Clubs began in South Carolina, Virginia, and Mississippi in 1910 and rapidly grew in popularity and participation. Girls were taught how to grow one-tenth acre of tomatoes and, when ripe, how to can the produce (Knapp 1916). Girls’ clubs were also involved in growing general vegetable gardens, canning a variety of food products, raising poultry, making war bread and other food items (Benson 1917). Whereas women had canned enough to supply their families’ needs before the war, during the war many girls’ canning clubs originated with the goal of selling canned foods for the public (Collins 1924:240).

In 1915, there were 32,613 girls enrolled in girls’ clubs in 15 Southern states, who
produced over 5 million pounds of tomatoes and 1 million pounds of other vegetables and fruits, and canned more than 900,000 units (Creswell 1916:245). The fruits of their labor offered a significant economic contribution to their communities. Overall, the labors of women, men, and children during the era of WWI were immense across the nation:

The work of gardening, of canning and of drying vegetables and fruits is abroad in the whole land from Maine to California, and from the Lakes to the Gulf, and has justified all the expectations of success. …one million, one hundred and fifty thousand [sic] acres of city and town land are under cultivation this year—the largest part heretofore non-producing. Urban and suburban America today is a vast garden as the result of the impulse given to the nation by the National Emergency Food Garden Commission. …Our country-wide survey locates nearly three million food gardens… The canning and drying movement has brought back to thousands of American households an art almost forgotten since our grandmothers’ days. (Pack 1917:203)

Who or what brought about the “canning and drying movement” (Pack 1917:203) of the World War I era? A variety of factors coalesced to produce this canning revival, largely due to the social context of war: food shortages caused by the diversion of commercial resources to military troops, government messages and public discourses defining patriotism and an ethic of national duty, and the myriad of changes in everyday life which resulted from militarization and the mobilization of soldiers and citizens.

The United States government was heavily involved in the distribution and production of food, as food shortages resulted from the diversion of staple foods to the troops overseas. Greater mainland food production and conservation meant more resources which could be sent to supply the United States military and allies. Therefore, the government disseminated messages encouraging canning and gardening, often in the form of printed posters. Bernat (2010) writes in her analysis of wartime posters “When Beans Were Bullets” that “[t]he urgent circumstances of war required home front citizens to adjust their daily, peace-time routines, yet public officials understood that inducing
behavior change would not be easy.’” So the government utilized “massive publicity efforts” such as printed posters to disseminate messages to the general public (Bernat 2010). A World War I poster titled “Help Feed Yourself” (USDA 1917) emphasizes the production and preservation of food for domestic use. It features an image of glass canning jars and states that “Children canned and saved these perishables for winter use. Make every jar help feed your family.” Other posters from this canning revival promote what became known as ‘Victory Gardens’ and often reflect the prevailing gender roles and division of labor in the home and on the farm. For example, “Grow a Garden: Save Money the Easy Way” (Louisiana Agricultural Extension 1917) depicts a hardy, square man with a wide-legged stance and a shovel above a dainty and feminine-figured woman kneeled down on the ground with a packet of seeds.

Knowledge about home canning was widely available as extension education became institutionalized in state and county offices (and school systems). By the end of WWI the practice of home canning was widespread and home canning had been established as a foodway in America. The war had placed a spotlight on home canning and gardening and intensified these activities within in the wartime context of patriotic duty, service, and national pride. Home canning was situated as a gendered practice, appropriate within women’s’ domestic sphere and suitable as a hobby activity for girls.

Between wars, Americans endured many technological and socioeconomic changes. Home canning and commercial canning began to increasingly diverge between the wars, as industrial canning (and food processing in general) began to dominate the once agrarian and home-based food production system. The Great Depression encouraged another revival of home canning, as farm women upped their already high
rates of food preservation and urban, society women participated in ‘canning bees’ to
benefit the needy. Community canneries became a central locus for preserving much-
needed food supplies. Gender relations and gender-appropriate spheres during the
interwar years were maintained via the linkage of women with housework and
specifically with food work.

Hollingsworth and Tyyska (1988) argue that women made significant financial
contributions to their family’s economy during the Depression. Women engaged in
various forms of ‘making do’ and engaged in activities to sustain their family’s
socioeconomic status. Milkman (1976:82) outlines a variety of techniques that middle
class white women employed during the Depression to make ends meet, including cutting
back on family expenditures, seeking work outside the home, and generally
“…substituting their own labor for goods and services they had formerly purchased in the
marketplace.” This latter trend, which Milkman calls “a revival of domestic industry,”
actually reversed the increase in consumption that had been seen in preceding decades.
Milkman (1976:82) states that “[h]ome canning was so widespread that glass jar sales
were greater in 1931 than at any other point in the preceding 11 years. There was a
corresponding drop in sales of [commercially] canned goods, which had doubled in the
decade from 1919-29.” Women also learned how to sew and did laundry and
dressmaking, sold baked goods out of their homes, took in boarders, opened household
beauty salons, and the like.

The canning revival of the Depression era was reported to involve women across
the socioeconomic spectrum. The Pittsburgh Press (1931) proclaimed that a “Canning
Revival Hits Club Women: Preserving Foods for Charity Spreads Economic Movement
among Women of Pittsburgh Vicinity.” The article describes the popularity of home canning ("An aroma of steaming tomatoes soon to be honest-to-goodness catsup overtakes the pedestrian in almost every land and avenue") among the ‘feminine world’ composed of society women.” Another 1931 article in Missouri’s St. Joseph Gazette, “Fruit Canning Reaches New Record Here: 1,000,000 Quart Jars Sold Weekly,” describes how “…thriftty, foresighted housewives of this region are taking advantage of the crop and preparing for the winter by canning, canning, and then canning some more” causing a demand for canning jars and supplies that manufacturers and retailers struggled to meet. The article continues, stating that “…the home canning revival is not confined to this territory, but according to all reports it is nationwide, universal in every farming area.” Again, we see that this labor is the labor of women: “In their effort to be sure that nothing usable is wasted, housewives also are storing pears, grapes and other fruits, as well as tomatoes and other vegetables.”

While a home canning revival was underway during the Depression, group canning endeavors were also expanding. The community cannery came into focus; many would be built from this time throughout WWII. A community cannery is a public facility where members of the community can preserve their products using commercial-scale equipment, paying a small fee (usually per jar or can) to the cannery. During this time of economic crisis, the community cannery provided a means of survival to those who could access them. “The Great Depression of the 1930s created a desperate need among consumers to provide food for their families, and home canning of garden produce became a main source of food. The enormous quantities of vegetables and meat which needed to be canned were best handled through community canneries” (Jackson and
Mehler 1978:3). While some community canneries were set up in their own physical locations, others joined preexisting community buildings. Melvin (1932:939) describes a community cannery located within one room of a rural Tennessee high school that was staffed with home demonstration agents and was used by local “…women for canning.” Community canneries were developed in many communities at this time, especially in the rural South, and would continue to grow in number through World War II.

Another social trend which encouraged the home canning revival of the Depression era was the massive out-migration of populations from cities as people went “back to the land.” During the early 1930s, “the flow of people from farms to cities slowed and then actually reversed itself for the first time since records of internal migration had been kept. By 1935, two million people were living on farms who had not been there five years before” (Milkman 1976:82). People sought work and subsistence in agriculture. Melvin (1932:940) reported that farmers in Texas during 1931 had increased their “garden products” by 45 percent over the previous year and tripled their rate of canning. Melvin reported similarly high rates of canning among “[t]he rural women of Arkansas,” and noted that many other states showed “similar efforts” (Melvin 1932:940). Women were also involved in carding wool and created hand-sewn garments for sale, soap-making, candle-making, and the like, demonstrating the intensity of the domestic production economy at this time.

After the First World War, industrially canned food items became ever cheaper and more accessible to Americans. The interwar period is notable in the history of home canning because the ubiquity, efficiency, and affordability of commercially canned products began (after the Depression) to outmode home canning. Leevy (1940) conducted
a study contrasting trends in urban and rural family lifestyles in Illinois, including the
divergent rates of participation in ‘economic activities’ such as home gardening and
canning. Surveys of 1,000 rural and 1,000 urban Illinois families during the time period
from 1934 to 1938 showed that 61.4 percent of rural families had canned food, in contrast
to 13.2 percent of the urban families; 86.4 percent of the rural families had produced
some garden vegetables, while only 4.2 percent of the urban families studied had done so
(Leevy 1940:949). These findings led Leevy (1940:949) to ascertain that “[h]ome food
canning is no doubt growing less important in both rural and urban homes. This is due in
part to the fact that there are many more canned products such as fruits and vegetables
available to all families, regardless of their location.” His statistics show that a great
number of rural Illinois families were still doing some canning; it would have been
interesting to know if the rate and volume of home canning over the four years studied
was increasing or decreasing.

While statistical data on rates of home canning across the United States are
sparse, there is no doubt about the massive growth of the commercial canning industry
during the interwar period. The growth of the commercial canning industry during this
time period was part of broader societal trend of industrialization including the start of
advertising industry and its definition of citizens as consumers, great technological
developments and a strong belief in the achievement of ‘progress’ through science. Much
of the literature on the status and developments within the United States canning industry
touts the progress of preserved foods. Rendle (1938:488-489) wrote these congratulatory
words on industrial food and commercial canning success: “The old-time practice of the
culinary art in the home has to a large extent passed,” and in its place, “[t]he era of ready-
cooked factory-prepared foods preserved for use in a sealed can has come to stay, and it is gratifying to know that no effort is being spared, both in research and in commercial practice, to improve such products in every way.” Indeed, the mainstreaming of commercially canned food products as well as a myriad of other industrial food products and consumer technologies brought great changes, especially for household labor. But were these changes as absolute as, for example, Watson (1932:168) suggests?

The industrial revolution has caused great changes in the economic functions of the home. Production for exchange has been removed into factories. The making of clothing, the baking of bread, the canning of vegetables and other foods, and many other types of economic activity have vanished from family life. In addition, electricity has lightened the drudgery of the homemaker to as large degree, and has changed the type of work to be done in the home.

Sociological research on household labor has shown that women’s domestic work was not eradicated by technological changes (it instead changed form, and standards rose). So despite claims from commercial canners such as H.J. Heinz Company’s Swank (1943:85) stating that “[t]he canning industry now has eliminated many of these household chores,” the Depression-era canning revival faded into history but home canning and women’s household labor continued.

World War II was experienced in the United States as a total war, involving every social institution and civilians in efforts to support military engagements. Food was engaged as a central war resource, and its production and preservation considered key to American military efforts. Home canning was again mobilized by the government as a wartime strategy—yet even more so than during the First World War. “[H]ome gardening and canning were featured as the heart of the nation’s nutrition campaign” during WWII (Bentley 1998:117) while rationing points restricted the purchase of commercially canned foods. Massive canning and gardening drives were aimed at homemakers, and wartime
canning was also taking place in community canneries (Coffey and Sternberg 2011) which were sometimes set up in local schools (National Association of Secondary-School Principals 1942) and even prisons (Cooper 1947). Home canning by civilians was promoted as “a real war job” (U.S. Office of War Information 1945); they could help the war effort and “…fighting famine…by canning food at home” (Williams 1946).

The United States government played a strong, visible role in encouraging citizens—specifically the female homemaker—to produce and preserve their own food. These messages called women to grow food, conserve its use, and ‘put up’ the extra efforts from their labors. During the Second World War, so-called ‘Victory Gardens’ became commonplace and it was expected that women would grow, harvest, prepare, and preserve produce for their families. Parker’s (1943) poster “Grow Your Own, Can Your Own,” depicts a smiling mother and daughter with blond hair in matching red aprons in front of rows of their home-canned goods. The daughter asks, “We’ll have lots to eat this winter, won’t we Mother?” During 1943, the peak year for home front food production, 20 million households (or three-fifths of the population) produced over 40 percent of all the vegetables Americans consumed, and an additional 4.1 billion jars of food were preserved at home and in community canneries (Bentley 1998:114). Women completed most of this canning. Bentley (1998:131) reports that 64 percent of American women canned food for their family’s use in 1942, and in 1943 this number rose to 75 percent. ‘Victory canning’ became a woman’s national duty as a responsible American Citizen.

Women were mobilized into a variety of nontraditional roles during wartime (e.g., see poster image by Morley [1944] “Pitch in and Help!: Join the Women’s Land Army of the U.S. Crop Corps” which features women farming in pants and overalls and a white
woman driving a tractor). However, Bentley (1998:132) argues that “when it came to the kitchen, the status quo remained firmly in place.” Despite empowering images of Rosie the Riveter and war posters likening food and gardening to a combat ‘weapon’, “food preservation remained exclusively in the domain of women. There was never a question in either society’s or the government’s view that canning was a woman’s job; it was simply one more duty in her ‘kitchen front’” (Bentley 1998:115). The massive cumulative societal changes brought about by war did not dismantle the gendered equation of women with domestic food work; the government’s widespread wartime publicity efforts may in fact have bolstered the association of women with food preservation. Bentley (1998) further argues that class and racial inequalities were fully present in World War II era home canning, which remained largely a middle- and upper-class women’s venture, as the working class had no time or means to buy canning equipment, access to land available for gardening, or extra money to buy others’ produce. Additionally, Bentley mentions that racial segregation was still practiced in the South, and women who canned at community canneries did so under de facto or de jure segregation. Thus, the call to duty emblazoned in many of the wartime posters promoting gardening and home canning offered a form of patriotic citizenship available perhaps only to a privileged portion of the American population at this time.

A final notable trend in wartime canning is the growth of government-subsidized community canneries, all over the country (with a heavier proportion located in Southern states). These facilities helped spread canning throughout American communities where canning equipment such as pressure canners were likely in short supply. They also assisted women in canning larger quantities of food without having to purchase additional
equipment. By the end of the war, there were over 3,800 community canneries in the United States (Coffey and Sternberg 2011). However, at war’s end, “interest in home canning and community canneries declined quickly, except in some rural sections such as Appalachia…With the introduction of widely available and relatively inexpensive processed and frozen foods in the markets, home and community canning because the ‘old-fashioned’ way. It was not ‘modern’ and was not appropriate to the times. The United States home canning and community canning market slipped into a gradual decline not to be reversed until 1974” (Jackson and Mehrer 1978:3).

The Canning Revival of the 1970s

Although some sources such as Jackson and Mehrer (1978) suggest that a resurgence of interest in home canning occurred in the early 1970s, there is less documentation of home canning revivals between WWII and today. Andress and Kuhn ([1983]1998) report that while interest in canning declined after World War II, it revived with the 1973 energy crisis. However, they do not offer any further descriptive information of the 1973 revival of interest in canning. Newspapers reported that “Our country is experiencing a revival in home canning” (Dikeman 1974), and that “Everyone was caught unawares [sic] by the home canning revival in the summer of 1973” which was projected to continue through 1974 and potentially beyond (Will 1974). Due to a combination of consumer demand and the shortage of the raw materials needed to make the glass jars (soda ash) and metal lids (tinplate), there was a two-year shortage of canning supplies at this time (U.S. Congress 1975; Will 1974). A U.S. House of Representatives hearing was held to identify the causes of the shortage and create a plan of action to alleviate it. The resulting report (U.S. Congress 1975:2) speculates broadly
about causes of the shortage and reasons for the high levels of interest in home canning at the time: “With today’s high cost of living, home gardens have become a necessity, rather than a hobby, for millions of Americans. For these people, home canning equipment has also become a necessity.” Similarly, MacDonald (1974) broadly suggests that “[e]cological concerns and rising food costs” motivated people to garden and preserve food, but does not fully explain individuals’ motivations to can food during this time.

The significant political and cultural changes that occurred in the 1970s may have spiked popular and academic interest in home canning. It is notable that the first USDA studies (see reviews and reports by Anderson and Mendenhall 1978; Davis and Page 1979; Kuhn and Hamilton 1977) and academic studies of home canning occurred during the 1970s (Philips and Bass 1976; see dissertations by Bender 1978, Hogue 1978, and Kolasa 1974); these studies may reflect the popularity of home canning at that time. More of this historical academic literature will be reviewed in Chapter Three.

Changing acidity levels in tomatoes and numerous outbreaks of botulism in the early 1970s related to the consumption of home canned tomato products resulted in new research by the USDA, CDC, and FDA (Andress and Kuhn [1983] 1998). This research is especially significant because the outdated safety guidelines for home canning had not been modified since the late 1940s. There was enough interest and involvement in canning—and unfortunately also related illnesses—to prompt government attention. The resulting 1977 USDA bulletin, *Canning, Freezing, Storing Garden Produce*, also incorporated the new and increasingly available technology of home freezer storage (Miller 1992). The 1970s was probably the last decade in which the home practice of canning prevailed over freezing. Phillips and Bass (1976) report that all of the women in
their study who preserved food home-canned (N=48; 96 percent of their sample of homemakers in rural Tennessee). Not all homes had freezers yet, and thus just 62 percent of their sample of homemakers reported freezing food. However, home food preservation via freezing was on the rise. Data from two USDA surveys collected in 1964 and 1976 shows that home production of food increased between the surveys due to more freezing (Hatfield 1981). Hatfield (1981) reports that the overall rate of canning at both time points stayed the same for their sample, but the socioeconomic status of the canning families shifted: In 1964, home canning was predominantly practiced by lower-income families whereas more higher-income families were canning in 1976. Belasco ([1989] 2007) explains this social class trend within the context of the historical development of the food industry and the marketing of ‘natural’ food products. He states that demographic surveys about food in 1975 revealed that individuals who were concerned about additives in foods were of higher education and income levels, between ages 25 and 40. He argues that “upscale concern about nutrition, not price” fueled the increase of home canning among individuals of higher socioeconomic status between 1964 and 1976, and this concern “was the main reason for the shortage of canning supplies in the mid-seventies” (Belasco 1989:194). Unfortunately Belasco does not provide any other information about this upsurge in home canning.

Other interesting changes were occurring with food in the United States during the 1970s, such as the start of the nation’s natural food movement and the re-politicization of food as a public issue. The food movement inspired the creation of many of the nation’s first food co-operatives and the revival of farmer’s markets (Cotler 2009:30), and encouraged a major increase in popular interest in herbal health remedies,
organic foods, thereby fostering the rise of the ‘natural’ foods industry (Belasco [1989] 2007). Natural foods lifestyles were outcroppings from the larger ‘counterculture’ movement and trends toward communal living, individual responsibility for health (in opposition to dependency on traditional industrial health treatments and medications), environmental sustainability, energy conservation, and environmental protection, and a back-to-the-land lifestyle incorporating subsistence farming. For those living on rural communes, canning may have been a useful technique for efficiently feeding a large group throughout the year (Hartman 2003). A general cultural interest at this time in ‘old-timey’ foodways and homesteading, as shown by the publication of popular Foxfire Book series (based on the original magazines) which documented rural “affairs of plain living” (Wiggington 1972) such as hog dressing and “mountain crafts and foods” like how to preserve leather britches beans and how to churn your own butter.

Food became a political issue in a new way. Whereas home gardening and canning during WWI or WWII were promoted as patriotic service to the nation, these same activities were framed as independent, counter-cultural, and even revolutionary in the cultural and political context of the turbulent 1970s. Dickerman (2010) reports that “[i]t was in the 1970s that home preserving first took on an oppositional message—it was part of that era’s homespun chic. If back-to-the-landers tried to exit the commercial food economy altogether by canning their homegrown crops, dabblers could at least put up a few jars of homemade chutney to serve as a tasty, handcrafted no-thank-you to Smuckers.” Citizens reclaimed domestic food production as a form of political dissent against the increasingly corporate control of the food supply. They may have also been motivated to control food production for health and environmental reasons. Rachel
Carson’s (1962) best-selling book, *Silent Spring*, presented startling information about the widespread use of harmful pesticides in agriculture following their development during World War II. Her book helped launch the environmental movement, and motivated the eventual ban of DDT in 1972. Canning home-grown food is one way for concerned citizens to eliminate chemical inputs from their food, and to achieve food security and know what is in their food.

Despite the radical politics of the times and the vibrant efforts of such “back-to-the-landers” Dickerman (2010), environmentalists, and the civil rights movements for equality regarding race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, traditional gender roles persisted throughout the turbulent 1970s and beyond. Middle-class white women were entering higher education and the paid workforce in great numbers, yet women were still responsible for care of their household and feeding its members. Time and efficiency regarding household labor and food work were therefore increasing concerns for many women. Canning guidebooks from this era tend to stress the ease and efficiency of the canning process and its products, such as *Gardening, Canning, Freezing: Will it Save Energy, Time, and Money?* by Francille K. Johnson (1977) of the Cooperative Extension Service of University of Arkansas.

Despite the gains women were making, and the promises of freedom and equality of the radical feminist and other social movements of the time, some of the canning literature of this era reflected the traditional sex roles of women as cooks and the keepers of food within the familial household. In Phillips and Bass’s (1976) report, the word ‘homemaker’ is synonymous with ‘woman’. The 1971 Kerr Glass Manufacturing Corporation’s *Home Canning Book and How to Freeze Foods* assumes a female audience.
as it is dedicated “to Homemakers Everywhere” and offers readers this gendered
greeting: “Dear Homemaker, / There has been a real revival of home canning throughout
our Nation. …Our men-folks are longing for and even demanding these appetizing
foods…”. An Ohio newspaper article from June 1972 also emphasizes women’s roles as
cooks, food preservers, and feeders of family: “A [canning] revival is on and the most
modern, the most sophisticated women today are enjoying the satisfaction of preserving a
part of their family’s food” and “…hundreds of homemakers everywhere…return to the
art of home food preservation practiced by their mothers and grandmothers” (Hoeflich
1972). The enthusiasm of a canning revival suggests that this traditional foodway is
“modern” and practiced by the “sophisticated,” while framing canning in the context of
familial tradition as an old skill or “art” that has passed through generations of women.

The Contemporary Canning Revival

Home canning and home food production in general have most recently re-
emerged in the context of a swirl of public interest and initiatives about food and health. I
see canning as one specific trend within many broader food movements in the United
States. This movement is concerned with food safety, environmentally sustainable food
practices such as organic farming, gardening (rural and urban home gardening,
community gardens, public school gardens), and diets based on local/seasonal foods.
Despite some continuity with the past, the specific sociopolitical and economic context in
which the current popular interest in home canning has reemerged is unique and thus
canners’ current motivations to can and the meanings of home canning may be influenced
by these changes. In her popular recipe book, Sarah B. Hood (2011:38-39) lists no less
than nine types of contemporary home canners: “Thrifty Householder,” “Crafty DIYer,”
“Foodie,” “Culinary Historian,” “Veggie Gardener,” “Homesteader,” “Urban Forager,” “Locavore,” and “Citizen of the World.” Additions to Hood’s list could include survivalist ‘preppers’, individuals observing strict diets for health reasons, and those who are motivated to preserve food by economic need.

The contemporary home canning revival has arisen within a cultural moment where there is great popular interest in a variety of food and environmental issues; as such, no single event properly defines the start of the current revival of interest in home canning. Using popular news media coverage and book publication dates as a scale, I approximate that the contemporary canning revival emerged in 2007 and continues at time of this writing. Numerous best-selling books about various food issues published around this time have fueled today’s food movements. While not specifically about home canning, many of these books deal with related topics such as food empowerment, humans’ relationships to edible plants, and local and sustainable food systems versus industrially-produced foods, and therefore may have inspired interest in home canning. A sample of these key publications includes Eric Schlosser’s (2001) *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (86 editions published between 2001 and 2009 in 16 languages); Carlo Petrini’s (2001; 2006; 2007) various publications about the Slow Food movement; Michael Pollan published *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* in 2006 (followed in 2008 by *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto* and *Food Rules* in 2011); in 2007, Barbara Kingsolver published *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*. There is even one popular book that traces the history of food preservation, Sue Shephard’s ([2000] 2006) *Pickled, Potted, and Canned: How the Art and Science of Food Preserving Changed the World*. Numerous films about industrial
food, organic farming, and the environmental and human health impacts of each have been produced during this time period. Notable films include *Super Size Me* (2004, directed by Morgan Spurlock), the best-selling book *Fast Food Nation* (2001) by Eric Schlosser became the basis for a drama film of the same name (2006, directed by Richard Linklater), followed by documentaries *King Corn* (2007, directed by Aaron Wolf) and *Food, Inc.* (2008, directed by Robert Kenner and Elise Pearlstein).

A WorldCat book search focused specifically on home canning revealed that a larger number of canning how-to books were published in 2007 than in previous years, and each year since 2007 this trend has continued. Titles of these books suggest the values and perceptions of the newest canning revival: *Canning for a New Generation: Bold, Fresh Flavors for the Modern Pantry* (Krissoff 2010), *Put 'em Up!: A Comprehensive Home Preserving Guide for the Creative Cook, from Drying and Freezing to Canning and Pickling* (Vinton 2010), *Food in Jars: Preserving in Small Batches Year-Round* (McClellan 2012), *We Sure Can!: How Jams and Pickles Are Reviving the Lure and Lore of Local Food* (Hood 2011), *Canning & Preserving For Dummies* (Jeanroy and Ward 2009), *Can It, Bottle It, Smoke It: And Other Kitchen Projects* (Solomon 2011).

The content of such popular media is often a continuation of many themes from previous canning revivals. As always, home canning is ever-flexible, contextual, and framed in the interests of its practitioners or targeted practitioners. Also ironic as always, canning is now old and traditional at the same time it is (once again) new, hip, and chic. Home canning is described as fun and yet laborious; safe and natural yet threatened by the dangers of food poisoning.
One thing that has not changed over time is the association of canning with women, although an unspecified but growing number of men seem to be involved in home canning (for example, Bob Batz [2012] wrote in his Pittsburgh Post-Gazette article on the contemporary revival of canning, “Canning is so fabulous!”) Today’s canning ‘movement’ is being led by women, including the authors of popular canning books and blogs as well as the founders of the high-profile online community Canning Across America. An article about home canning in Vegetarian Times (July/August 2012:71) is titled “Queens of Canning: When it comes to Preserving the Harvest, These Women Rule!” Its introduction attempts to replace traditional gendered images of canning with “hip” contemporary profiles:

Say good-bye to those mental images of gingham-clad grandmas wielding a wooden spoon over a giant pot of jam or preserves. Today’s hip home-canning queens—Karen Solomon, Lynn Alley, and Marisa McClellan—favor modern methods, and prefer small batches to large. They share their know-how via blogs, books, and cooking classes. And they’ve earned their crowns with signature techniques that make home canning accessible, easy, and fun.

However, the article is predictably contradictory as it goes on to describe one “hip home-canning queens”’ use of a very old inversion method of sealing jars (a method that “…has been practiced in Europe—the birthplace of home canning—for decades” [Vegetarian Times 2012:72]) that is not today approved as a safe canning technique by the USDA. This is neither a signature technique nor a modern method. Another ‘queen’ profiled in this article uses today’s kitchen technology to create actually avoid canning: she cooks small batches of preserves in an electric slow cooker, then recommends refrigerating or freezing the jars. The final canner profiled in this article uses the traditional and “dependable” (Vegetarian Times 2012:76) water bath technique and encourages potential home canners not to be “intimidate[d]” by the process. So despite
the initial framing of home canning today as “hip,” “easy,” and “fun,” and suggesting the use of “modern methods” and “signature techniques,” the women canners in this article use traditional methods to can and use personal innovation and modern technology to replace the manual labor that is necessarily part of home canning.

As in the past, food remains a political issue, but new themes emerging from the above listed works create a unique social context for the contemporary canning revival. There is now a focus on food being healthy but also delicious, place-based (i.e., local) and democratic, and therefore moving away from global industrial food distribution systems. Individuals feel politicized and empowered as consumers who are “voting with [their] forks” (Pollan 2006b), although recent research doubts the socially transformative potential of grocery shopping (Johnston and Szabo 2011). Individuals also feel empowered to take their food supply literally into their own hands by gardening and raising their own food. Thus emerges the current high levels of interest and activity in home-based food production such as cooking, gardening, animal husbandry (e.g., chickens, bees), and home food preservation such as canning. *NPR* food writer Stoller-Conrad (2012) states that “… modern home canning has taken on a new purpose, carrying the message that canning is good for your health and the environment because you can control it.” The political implications of wartime Victory gardening have reemerged (although in a very different sociopolitical context), except today many urban homesteaders have to fight politically to regain the legal right to grow gardens in their front yards and keep chickens in the back. And like the Great Depression, the 2007 recession has fueled frugality and economically-motivated interest in canning. These themes will be discussed in depth below.
Unlike the war posters of the past, today’s new online media, especially food blogs, are the colorful host of the canning revival. There has been an explosion of popular media on food preservation, including home canning, since the start of the current canning revival around 2007. New forms of popular media communications—particularly the Internet and social media—have been crucial to the development and expansion of the current canning revival. These media are likely both facilitating the free flow of information, economically and intellectually, as well as—to a certain extent—‘selling’ the culture of canning. There are many canning-related books, gadgets, and gear which are marketed to an ever-growing audience of home food preservers. Thus, it is important to note the development of popular media coverage of home canning, and the presence of canning-themed websites, online communities, and blogs.

While the University of Georgia-NCHFP (So Easy to Preserve, 5th ed., 2006), USDA (Complete Guide to Home Canning, 2009), and Hearthmark LLC/Jarden Corporation (Ball Blue Book: Guide to Preserving, 2011[a]) still produce popular canning guides in print, they also offer identical or similar information online. In addition to these official online sources of canning information, home canners now organize and share information via the Internet. The popular website Canning Across America (CAA) (http://www.canningacrossamerica.com/), which was launched in 2009 and now hosts local chapters nationwide. CAA also hosts popular monthly chats about canning via Twitter, another social media format. There are numerous popular blogs about canning, several of which have spun off into successful books and created a small group of ‘celebrity’ canners who tour the country teaching canning workshops and autographing their books, such as and Sherri Brooks Vinton, author of Put ‘em Up! (2010), Marisa
McClellan (2012) of the *Food in Jars* book and blog, and the lone man amongst the women professional canners, Kevin West (2013a, 2013b) has authored the book and blog *Saving The Season*. Many bloggers and websites like Canning Across America also have Facebook pages. Ball Canning (a brand owned by Jarden Corporation) launched a Facebook page in 2010 which acquired more than 1,500 followers in its first month (Lackey 2010); in mid-2013, the page had over 45,000 followers, and then 263,394 “likes” as of November 18, 2013 (https://www.facebook.com/BallCanning). Food preservationists are also featured on the *National Geographic* television series *Doomsday Preppers*, which highlights the unique lifestyles of survivalists who practice radical forms of preparedness to ready themselves for potential future social collapse or natural catastrophe. Alongside stockpiled weapons for self-defense and large hidden caches of cash money, many ‘preppers’ create large stores of preserved food.

Traditional news journalists, writing for both print and online media outlets, have also covered the contemporary canning revival and noted some of the current trends and debates about home canning. *National Public Radio* has been doing contemporary stories on home canning since 2007 (Morris 2007; *National Public Radio* 2007); *NPR* more recently covered the canning revival (Sommerstein 2011). Major national newspapers (print and/or online) have printed stories on the surge of interest in home canning that have become often-cited resources for other journalists and canning enthusiast writers (e.g., Dickerman 2010; Campoy 2009; Moskin 2009; see also Palmer 2011).

Alongside new forms of mass media and communication, other contemporary influences differentiate the practice of home canning today from the past. Numerous outbreaks of food contamination such as E. coli have received extensive media coverage
and put Americans on high alert regarding food safety issues (Benedict 2011). Massive food recalls of contaminated or otherwise unsafe food products, bans on common ingredients such as high fructose corn syrup, and debates about the safety of genetically modified foods are just some of the current events which contribute to a cultural moment of fear surrounding food. Home canning may be one way of taking control of one’s food safety and dispelling some fear—so long as proper canning procedures are followed to avert food poisoning via home produced food.

Another contemporary trend during this moment of high cultural attentiveness to food has been the rise of the ‘foodie’ identity. Self-identified foodie women and men take great pride in home food production and may utilize public food consumption as a form of class display (Johnston and Baumann 2010). In their study of foodies, Cairns, Johnston, and Baumann (2010) found that culinary-inclined women and men are now doing gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) differently around food. While not all canners are self-identified foodies, might there be similar changes occurring in gender roles and canning? Though it is still predominantly associated with women, men are increasingly involved in home canning. When men cook regular family meals at home, it is in the role as ‘helpers’ to women at a special occasion family meal (DeVault 1991) or other festive meal occasions such as on weekends (Adler 1981); men also cook outside the home as paid chefs, and outnumber women in such paid food preparation positions. Cairns, Johnston, and Baumann (2010) employ West and Zimmerman’s (1987) notion of gender as performance to examine current ‘doings’ of gender by 30 self-identified ‘foodies’ in the United States. The women in this study reported being the person responsible for everyday food production. However, foodie culture may be opening up some gendered
change. Men are being drawn into kitchens by contemporary foodie culture. Both women and men interviewed expressed a principle of pleasure—with some tensions around women’s feminine embodiment pressures, it may signal a change that women are now able to claim physical pleasure (through, granted, just about ‘good food’). However, as would be expected by the trends reported in prior research, the women foodies were more concerned with “care responsibilities surrounding food” (Cairns, Johnston, and Baumann 2010:605) than men, particularly in contexts where women were responsible for feeding others. On the other hand, men’s performances of foodie masculinities were more often expressed through discourses on knowledge and expertise, emphasizing culinary education, success, and admiration of famous professional male chefs.

How widespread is the current practice of home canning in the United States? Unfortunately, this figure is unknown as the most recent statistical research on home canners occurred before the current revival. Garner, Andress, and Sweaney (2002) cite the most recent research as being Davis and Page (1979) and Andress’ various unpublished papers based on 2000-2001 studies at the NCHFP. Manufacturers and journalists have reported some data. Herzog (2008) reported that sales of Ball brand food preservation products used for canning increased 28 percent from 2007 to 2008. Jarden Home Brands reported that together the Ball and Kerr lines increased 30 percent in sales by mid-year 2009 over total 2008 sales (Moore 2009). Jarden Corporation’s sales increased another 10 percent in 2010 (Dickerman 2010). Parekh (2013) quoted Chris Carlisle, Jarden’s senior marketing director for Ball home canning products, asserting that “2012 was far and away our best sales year ever—we grew 20%.” Such sales figures may seem to imply that individuals are doing a lot of bulk canning, but in fact the current
trend is toward small-batch canning. In November 2013, Jarden introduced an automated canning machine that processes just five pint jars or three quart jars at a time.

In-person canning instruction courses all over the country had “skyrocketing” enrollments in 2009 (Campoy 2009). Canning classes are being offered online, at community organizations and institutions like cooperative extension services, and by private organizations and even private individuals who host classes in their own homes. The director of the NCHFP, Elizabeth Andress, said that 3,000 people registered to take the center’s online instructional course on canning; another 3,000 signed up during an 18-month period between 2009 and 2010 (Lackey 2010). Master Food Preserver programs are increasingly being taught around the nation by various states’ cooperative extension services, requiring 30 hours of in-class training, written testing, and a minimum additional 20 supervised hours of volunteer service to become certified. Some graduates have gone on to teach courses at ‘expert’ venues such as The Institute of Domestic Technology in Los Angeles. Kevin West, author of the blog and book Saving the Season (2013a, 2013b), led a food preservation course at this venue located at “the historic Greystone Mansion in Beverly Hills,” in July 2012 that cost $195 and taught participants to create the following foods: Plum Jam, Whole Fruit in Syrup, Spicy Nectarine Indian Chutney, Orgeat (Italian Almond and Apricot Kernel-Flavored Syrup) (http://instituteofdomestictechnology.com/).

One of the most significant trends associated with the current revival of home canning as well as canning revivals of the past is the accompanying upsurge of interest in home gardening. Gardens are currently being grown at both rural and urban private homes and community gardens, schools, and the White House. The 2010 National
Gardening Survey conducted by Bruce Butterfield of the National Gardening Association showed that of the 31 million households that participated in vegetable gardening in 2009, 28 percent of these households also preserved food (via canning and other techniques) in that year (as reported in Lackey 2010). Rates of gardening have increased alongside the contemporary canning revival: 25 million households (22 percent of all American households) participated in vegetable gardening in 2007; 27 million households (23 percent) in 2008; and 31 million households (27 percent) grew vegetable gardens in 2009. First Lady Michelle Obama’s fight against childhood obesity inspired the creation of an organization called ‘Let’s Move!’ to promote health education and increase physical activity among young people, and she has planted the first garden at the White House since Eleanor Roosevelt’s WWII Victory Garden. Michelle Obama (2012) also wrote a book about the organic garden and its influence on the nation, *American Grown: The Story of the White House Kitchen Garden and Gardens across America.*

Yet most Americans live in cities and are neither gardening nor home canning. Home canners may have unique motivations, ideologies, or access to traditional foodways and skill knowledge that makes canners unique. “While home food processing, including canning and pickling, is currently undergoing a revival, most Americans are unlikely either to have or to take the time to process their own foods” (McClements et al. 2011:82). Addressing this concern in May 2012, Hearthmark LLC/Jarden Home Brands (the current owner of the Ball brand line of canning products) introduced a new “FreshTECH Automatic Jam & Jelly Maker with SmartStir Technology” that “stirs jam while it cooks so you don’t have to…You get precious time back because every jam recipe can be made in 30 minutes!” (Hearthmark 2012). Nummer (2002) argues that, like
gardening, canning is no longer practiced so much out of necessity in the United States but due to cultural tradition. Now that Americans have largely moved away from rural self-sufficient lifestyles, “[i]nterests have shifted from preserve ‘because we have to’, to ‘preserve because we like to’” (Nummer 2002).

Contemporary home canning has a certain sexy appeal, now styled in recession-era frugality; a Mason jar these days seems as likely to be used as a vessel for food preservation as for wedding décor. Home canning is laden with meanings represented in the iconic glass Mason jar. The faithful Mason jar is seen as useful, aesthetically pleasing to behold, and a symbol of efficiency. Certainly the commercial canning industry capitalizes upon the claims to authenticity, taste, and purity of home-canned foods. For example, Classico brand offers consumers commercially produced pasta sauces packaged in a Mason-style jar; however, the company’s website says the jars should not be reused for home canning (International Gourmet Specialties 2012). The use value of this particular jar is entirely to sell a commercial product.

An ever-enduring symbol of a cultural moment in time that probably never actually existed, the Mason jar is now an ‘authentic’ throwback that represents some foregone era of American history in which tradition made better sense of life’s chaos. Contemporary canners are literally preserving a fading foodway, and also ideas about a past way of life. No matter when home canning revives or what generation it involves, it brings with it memories of ‘grandma’s kitchen’. Such memories may be real memories of one’s own family (such as the memories of eating Grandma’s homemade baked goods and preserves and recounted by Porter [2001]), or the collective notion of grandmother-canners may be created by capitalists selling manufactured, gendered nostalgia.
Home canning also conjures nostalgic notions of rural America and farm life. It is associated with family, farm, and food. Willits, Bealer, and Timbers (1990:575) name the American phenomenon of associating positive values with rural life the “rural mystique” because it includes “…an aura of treasured and almost sacred elements.” Certainly today the rural mystique continues to be prevalent among rural as well as suburban and urban dwellers. Most Americans today are several generations removed from the traditional farmstead, and knowledge about how to grow food and preserve it at home is no longer practical or necessary for most of urban residents in American cities. As these skills have faded from common knowledge, some individuals today interested in home canning must teach themselves or learn from paid teachers. In addition to the abovementioned canning classes which are offered by famous canners, and local organizations such as extension services, the internet has become one large forum where such domestic skills are now being regained. According to a recent report by the Hartman Group, a consumer research firm, people who are interested in learning how to cook are more likely to search online for recipes than in their mother’s recipe collection.

As consumers use social media to discover, learn, and share information about food, they quickly become more active participants in food culture. They look to bloggers and the opinions of online others to expand their culinary horizons and make purchase decisions. Today’s consumers increasingly prefer to learn about products based on the experiences of ‘people like me’, rather than directly from brands. Social media allows them to do this with ease. (Hartman Group 2012)

This is not to say, however, that canning brands have stopped trying to reach consumers directly themselves. A recent Hearthmark LLC/Jarden Home Brands advertisement markets Ball-branded Mason jars for home canning and also promotes the corporation’s website (EasyToCan.com is printed on the ad, which redirects to the web address freshpreserving.com) where proper canning procedures are outlined “every step
of the way” and encourage canners to “[c]reate your own flavorful work of art.”

Interestingly, the copy in this ad introduces one of the more significant yet little noticed controversies about home canning. Cautions from official sources of canning safety information such as the NCHFP urge home canners to follow researched and proven-to-be safe recipes, yet their advice is often drowned out by popular and corporate messages about canning such as by bloggers, popular canning recipe books, and advertisements which frequently suggest that canning embodies individual creativity and taste. It is unsafe to approach canning like cooking, where one’s personal preferences, intuitions, and judgments may alter the final product. For example, adjusting the amount of acid such as lemon juice or vinegar, or not following up-to-date processing guidelines such as time needed for boiling water processing, could result in an unsafe food product; rigorous scientific testing has been conducted on numerous recipes such as those by the USDA to establish basic known-to-be safe canning procedures. One ‘alternative’ canning product company, Tattler, is notable not only as the maker of the only reusable and BPA-free canning lids and rings in the United States but also for trying to bring some attention to this imbalance between safe canning and canning promoted as a ‘creative’ activity. In a graphic on the company’s homepage, two of the “Five Tips for a Successful Home Canning Season” remind consumers of the health concerns of freelance canning: “Start with a research-tested recipe. Just because a recipe is in print, doesn’t mean it’s safe for you and your family.” The warning continues: “Leave your creativity behind! Home canning is one area where being creative can lead to food safety disasters” (Tattler 2011, http://www.reusablecanninglids.com/).
There are other debates about home canning, among its practitioners as well as between its supporters and critics. As New York Times reporter Moskin (2009) puts it, “Like most ideologically tinged movements, preserving has its warring factions, its fault lines and its taboos.” Most relevant to this project are those that concern the meanings of home canning to its practitioners and their motivations, especially within debates about gender and home food production. The home food production movement is popular and longstanding enough to have its champions and icons such as Shannon Hayes (2010), a farmer in upstate New York with a PhD from Cornell University and author of the controversial book Radical Homemakers: Reclaiming Domesticity from a Consumer Culture. And this movement has been around long enough to receive its share of criticism, the most popularly cited online article being one by Madeline Holler (2010) titled “I am a Radical Homemaker Failure: A New Movement of Canning, Baking Moms Find Inspiration in Frugality. Me? I Just Hate It.” And the DIY homesteading revival, or ‘New Domesticity’, and the gender politics therein are the subjects of blogger and journalist Emily Matchar’s (2013) book. These discussions about gender and home food production are of central interest to this project, and thus will be detailed below.

Shannon Hayes (2010) is the self-published author of the controversial book Radical Homemakers: Reclaiming Domesticity from a Consumer Culture. Hayes traveled the United States to conduct interviews with a diverse group of 20 homemakers, both women and men. Hayes’ Preface, titled “Tomato-Canning Feminists,” alerts readers that the book is more concerned with gender than food preservation, although home food production is a vital part of the ‘radical homemaking’ she describes. Hayes provides a radical and feminist (but not radical feminist) call for individuals to exit the “extractive
economy” of capitalism, careerism, and consumerism, and to return to the home. By again transforming the home into a “unit of production” (rather than the current “unit of consumption”) via home gardening or farming, animal husbandry, and food production and preservation, Hayes argues that homemakers can promote a “life-serving economy” which serves the interests of all and the environment. According to Hayes, homemaking is a private yet political act that can bring social revolution: “Home is where the great change will begin” (Hayes 2010:18).

Questions about gender inequality are central to Hayes’ study. Her book begins with a Preface titled ‘Tomato-Canning Feminists’ in which she focuses on an interview she conducted in New Hampshire. She spoke with a young woman who, alongside her boyfriend, was canning tomatoes from the farms on which they worked. This woman, just out of college, was struggling with concerns Hayes identified as common issues among the homemaking women she interviewed: “…if we forego the success image [of the independent, successful, career woman], are we just going back to the homemaker role that we were taught to think was…a symbol of oppression for women?” (Hayes 2010:5). From the experiences of Hayes’ own life and those of her interviewees, she does believe that “[i]t is possible to be a feminist and to can tomatoes” (Hayes 2010:6, italics in original). However, Hayes herself struggles figure out how to “…advocate for a meaningful and sustainable domestic life without inadvertently condoning the further subjugation of women” (Hayes 2010:6). Part of her answer is the full inclusion of men in homemaking, and the promotion of gender equality within the home. Yet the division of household labor and sense of equality among household members varied greatly among the partnered members of sample. Thus it is unclear if contemporary home canning is a
choice that radical homemaker women make, or if this form of home food production and
the radical homemaking Hayes describes as being more widely embraced by women than
men, reflect the persistence of traditional gender roles within what is perceived as a ‘new’
lifestyle or living situation.

Scholars Click and Ridberg (2010:301) interviewed a variety of home food
preservationists (not all were home canners; this article will be further reviewed in
Chapter Three) and concluded that their “alternative food practices” encourage
“connection and relationships.” Click and Ridberg (2010:301) argue that such
connections instill the practice of food preservation with “…the potential to subvert the
capitalist logic of the global agro-food industry.” Hayes (2010) would argue that such
practices challenge the foundations of capitalism itself. This perspective, in varying
degrees, is often echoed in popular media about home food preservation:

Preserving food cannot be considered new and trendy, no matter how vigorously
it’s rubbed with organic rosemary sprigs. But the recent revival of attention to it
fits neatly into the modern renaissance of handcrafted food, heirloom
agriculture, and using food in its season. Like baking bread or making a slow-
cooked tomato sauce, preserving offers primal satisfactions and practical results.
And in today’s swirl of food issues (local, seasonal, organic, industrial), home
preserving can also be viewed as a quasi-political act. (Moskin 2009)

However, critics assert that the political aspirations and even healthfulness of
home canned foods may be “overwrought” (Dickerman 2010). Journalist Sara Dickerman
(2010) argues that canning is not a successful political act, at least not today and not for
urban practitioners who buy most of the produce they can. Despite its recession-era chic,
she argues canning does not usually save money. Rather she suggests that the most
significant aspect of canning may be the emotional:

If you’re not a die-hard, you’ll likely only can high-sugar, high-acid foods like
jellies, jams, chutneys, or pickles—in other words, condiments. / And that’s OK.
There’s nothing blameworthy about the pickling and preserving fervor, but let’s be honest: It’s not about producing serious food for the future, and it’s not about shaking a fist at industrial food. (Dickerman 2010)

Similarly, a Slate news article by Britt Peterson (2012) argues that today’s food preservationists and DIY homesteaders are ‘play-acting’ under a “false nostalgia for an imagined self-sufficient rural life.” Peterson argues that jam-canning and bee-keeping are “…pleasurable games played by deracinated urbanites who desire some contact with authentic crafts and skills now nearly lost to time,” and that this delusion may mask the very real problems faced by people who are (still) living a self-sufficient life such as some small farmers and the rural poor. Holler (2010) queries if women are moving back in time rather than forward with gender roles, by sending women back into the domestic sphere rather than out into the public sphere of paid work. Writer Peggy Orenstein (2010) calls highly educated, stay-at-home mothers who have embraced the DIY and homesteading revival ‘femivores’. She also wonders if women’s home productivity is another way to stifle women’s true productivity, like the 1950s era of the ‘gilded cage’ where wealthy women were stifled in the sphere of domesticity.

Emily Matchar (2012a) calls the contemporary revival of homesteading a “social movement” which she names “‘New Domesticity’—the fascination with reviving ‘lost’ domestic arts like canning, bread-baking, knitting, chicken-raising, etc.” In her recent book on this subject, Matchar explores the gendered implications of “the daughters of post-Betty Friedan feminists, embracing the domestic tasks that our mothers and grandmothers so eagerly shrugged off” and seeks to understand “Where does this movement come from? What does it mean for women?” (Matchar 2012a).
Like Hayes (2010), Matchar has been traveling the country interviewing women and men ‘radical’, ‘new’, and/or ‘hipster’ homemakers. Most are women. She states that most of the women “…consider themselves part of a “re-skilling” movement, learning or reclaiming “lost” domestic arts like knitting, jam-canning, quilting, grinding flour from scratch, and so on. Some are motivated by environmentalism, others by frugality, others by a sense that there’s some inherent value in the handmade over the commercially produced” (Matchar 2011). Matchar (2012b) observes that “A lot of New Domesticity has an explicitly political, feminist agenda of ‘reclaiming’ what was traditionally considered ‘women’s work’ from the dustbin of history,” and legitimating it via social recognition or even paid wages. Thus, while there may be great variations among women involved in home food production today, some may be oriented toward a feminist political understanding of activities such as canning.

**Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced home canning as a technique of food preservation, traced a historical chronology of home canning ‘revivals’ up through the time of writing, and noted the continuation of several themes associated with home canning (e.g., always old and new, associated with a grandmother figure, politicization of food and canning). A traditional American foodway, canning perseveres as a meaningful form of home food preservation. While this chapter has focused mostly on home canning in a historical context, the rest of this dissertation explores contemporary canning among a sample of individuals in one geographic region of the United States. It is useful, however, to keep this social history in mind to provide context to today’s trends. The current popularity of home canning is sociologically interesting in light of contemporary paid work and
household labor patterns with regard to gender and the predominant consumerist ethos in capitalist America. Thirty years ago, historian Muriel Nazzari (1980:72-73) argued that home food production like canning, curing meat, and baking bread were no longer “necessary labor” and should instead be considered “conspicuous consumption of the housewife’s time.” Is canning today therefore still a gendered form of work? Is it household labor, a hobby or form of serious leisure (Stebbins 2001) like quilting (Stalp 2006), or a form of art? Is canning a way of expressing families’ or individuals’ values about food, sustainable living, and health? If so, what does it mean if only female labor is used to carry it out? The next chapter will take a closer look at the sociological themes and interdisciplinary literature applicable to this study of contemporary home canning.
Chapter Three:  

Literature Review: Toward a Sociology of Home Food Production  

The sociology of food is a relatively new specialty area within the larger discipline, and has drawn its foundations from previous anthropological research on food and the larger interdisciplinary field of Food Studies. Very limited scholarly research has been conducted on food preservationists and specifically on the practice of home canning; at this time there are no known sociological studies on the latter subject. However, extensive sociological attention has been paid to the gendered division of household food labor including measurements of domestic food preparation and other aspects of provisioning such as grocery shopping and meal planning. This dissertation contributes to this literature by analyzing another aspect of food provisioning, specifically, home food production via canning. Do the same gendered trends apply to the production of foods to be consumed in the future as with the everyday work of regular meals? Lastly, a few studies of home canning are reviewed below to provide a base about what is known about this form of food preservation; these studies have been undertaken by an array of scholars who have approached the subject of canning using perspectives from fields such as history, anthropology, nutrition, and environmental studies. Chapter Three concludes with an overview of the research questions that guide this dissertation.  

The Sociology of Food and Interdisciplinary Food Studies  

In comparison to other social science disciplines such as anthropology, history, and psychology, the sociological study of food is a relatively new specialty area within the discipline. Introducing a recent book review, Kasinitz (2011:451) states that the topic
of food “…is about as fundamental an aspect of social life as one can imagine, but that has only recently emerged as a distinct field of social scientific inquiry.” Classical sociological theorists such as Weber and Marx allude to food in their work without specifically focusing on it; the production and consumption of food is taken for granted as part of the production and reproduction of society (McIntosh 1996). Exceptions to this are a few classic sociological works on consumption that address food and eating. Veblen ([1899] 1973) wrote briefly about food consumption in his work on the leisure class, arguing that such consumption is governed by social means more so than physical needs. In a short piece explicitly about food and is credited as the first foray into a ‘gastronomic’ sociology, Simmel ([1910] 1997) also wrote about food consumption in the context of proper dining. Elias’s ([1937] 1978) work on socialization and civility and the historical development of table dining manners has been claimed as a classic by food studies scholars. The theme of food consumption has been more recently continued in Bourdieu’s (1984) widely cited research on taste and class distinction.

Despite the scarcity of attention to food in many classic sociological studies, sociology is now one discipline that contributes to the highly interdisciplinary and rapidly expanding field of Food Studies. The subject of food is meaningfully approached by a variety of academic traditions which, together, contribute to this field; it is impossible to list all the potential contributions here. All, however, are indebted to the work of early anthropologists whose studies have provided the foundations for social scientific study of food (see reviews of this literature by Goody 1982; also Mennell, Murcott, and Van Otterloo 1992). Social anthropologists Douglas (1966; 1975; 1984), Levi-Strauss (1966; [1969] 1983), and Malinowski (1935) led ethnographic attempts toward understanding
what a society defines as edible/inedible, cataloguing and describing patterns of food behaviors (*foodways*), and developing social theories on food and society. They have applied existing theories such as functionalism (e.g., Malinowski’s [1935] classic ethnography of Trobriand Islanders) to examine the uses of food and its patterns of distribution within particular societies, and structuralism (e.g., Levi-Strauss; Douglas) to understand social relations via the discovery of deep, underlying structures present in discourses about food. Most famously, Levi-Strauss ([1969] 1983) examined binary oppositions such as raw and cooked to analyze food as a system of signs or symbols (similar to French semiotician Barthes 1972); Douglas (1975) deciphered the ‘codes’ or rules of meals to reveal the social relationships and meanings present therein.

As with the interdisciplinary character of Food Studies and the diversity of theories which form its anthropological foundation, sociologists also approach the study of food from a variety of different perspectives and utilize various research methods. Beardsworth and Keil (1993) describe two different ways that food has emerged in contemporary sociological studies, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Some sociologists utilize food as a lens—not a primary area of inquiry in itself—to advance discussions within other areas of sociological inquiry. Examples of this approach are Whyte’s (1949) analysis of restaurants as a form of social organization and context for social interaction, and Ritzer’s (1998) ‘McDonaldization’ theory on rationalization and postmodern consumerism. Other sociological studies now explore food via the perspectives and tools of more well-established subfields within the discipline, such as the sociologies of gender or families; these studies use existing sociological theories to further our understanding of food. An example of this type of approach is Cairns,
Johnston, and Baumann’s (2010) study on foodies and new ways they are ‘doing gender’ (West and Zimmerman 1987) in domestic kitchens and online blogs. A short sampling of other recent areas of focus for sociologies of food that have emerged from more developed sociological themes include cuisine, taste, and gastronomy (e.g., Ferguson 2004) and concomitant issues of social class distinction (e.g., Warde 1997), restaurants and stratification within work organizations (e.g., Fine 1996), globalization and networks (DeSoucey 2010; Finkelstein 2003), and social inequality, food justice, and food sovereignty hunger (Alkon and Agyeman 2011).

Much of this sociological literature, as with much of the work in Food Studies and also early anthropological studies of food, approaches food from macro perspectives and tends to focus on public realms of food and eating, such as the latent meanings or codes in linguistic structures about food, public food production and consumption (as in restaurants). This focus on public acts of food consumption and its (paid) production has occurred at expense of attention to private realm of food preparation or preservation. Food is a central, and essential, aspect of every person’s life; it is often an interactional bridge among members of a shared household, family, and friends.

Yet there is also very little sociological research that details individuals’ understandings of the food they produce and the qualitative meanings of food within private contexts. Sociological writing about food has tended to emphasize theoretical advancements, whereas comparably less limited empirical research has examined food in the private or domestic realm and the production (or preservation) of food therein; there has been far more sociological work on the consumption of food than its production, even when the context is a private home (e.g., Valentine 1999 on eating in and home food
consumption). A limited number of contemporary empirical studies about food by social scientists use qualitative methods to probe into the meanings of food to individuals and the everyday practices through which they build and sustain relationships with food. One recent notable study about food consumption by Johnston and Baumann (2010) examines the meanings of ‘foodie’ identities to those who identify with the term. However, Johnston and Baumann (2010) frame their study as an extension of Bourdieu’s (1984) theories of taste and class distinction, and the tensions contemporary foodies face between the notions that ‘good’ food is democratic and accessible to all, and a contrary tendency for foodie experiences to be framed as expensive, exotic, and therefore exclusive to members of privileged social classes.

Important exceptions to these general trends in the sociological literature on food are gendered analyses of meal preparation. There is a body of sociological research, both qualitative and quantitative, which examines aspects of domestic foodwork such as meal planning, preparation, and cleanup. This long-established area of feminist research has studied women’s domestic labor and the persistent ‘gender gap’ in household division of labor. DeVault’s (1991) pioneering qualitative study on gender, families, and the work of feeding also explores the meaning of such work at an individual level and the construction of gender itself within familial relationships.

Since home food preservation is not usually included in measures of meal preparation, this study seeks to determine if home canning is today a gendered form of labor which contributes to the construction of proper feminine/female and masculine/male roles within families. Or, as the previous chapter has suggested, since most people today no longer live on farms or produce most of their own food, has the
practice of this traditional foodway become a hobby or entertainment to which women and men may equally elect? Are the traditional gendered rules of food changing, as Cairns, Johnston, and Baumann’s (2010) study of foodies suggests? These and other research questions guiding this study will be outlined further below.

**Sociological Research on Gender and Home Food Preparation**

Much of the sociological literature that examines food and eating in a domestic context utilizes feminist perspectives to analyze the gendered division of household labor. This research has frequently sampled married couple households and cohabitating women and men, and measures time spent on meal planning, preparation, and consumption. Two widely cited early studies of home food preparation, both conducted in the UK during the 1980s, examine the perpetuation of gender inequality and the control of women via the regular provision of a cooked dinner for her family (Murcott 1983), which Charles and Kerr (1988) call the ‘proper meal’. These studies argue that by making women/wives responsible for family wellbeing and food preparation, the domestic division of labor sustains gender roles that embed women in the domestic sphere in service of her family. Charles and Kerr (1988) also found that men, women, and children ate different types and amounts of certain foods such as meat or sweets in accord with a gendered status structure of foods which ranked some foods higher than others (and thus more likely to be consumed by men than others).

In the United States, a vast sociological literature has examined the gendered division of domestic meal planning, cooking, and kitchen cleanup. Numerous quantitative studies show that women do more cooking and cleaning than men in the private household setting; a few select studies from this large body of research will be reviewed.
here to demonstrate current trends and some changes occurring over time in gender and home food preparation.

Much of the housework literature studies the differentiation between the kinds and amounts of work that women and men do, and thus often focuses on married and cohabiting women and men. South and Spitze (1994) expand this focus and offer an examination of gender and housework in a variety of household situations, including married couples, individuals never married (living in a parental household or living independently), cohabiting couples, and divorced and widowed individuals living alone. They utilize data from the 1987 to 1988 National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) study, a national probability sample from which South and Spitze (1994) utilize the data obtained from 11,016 respondents. The NSFH respondents self-reported average hours per week spent performing the following household tasks: preparing meals, washing dishes after meals, cleaning house, outdoor and maintenance tasks, shopping for groceries and other household goods, laundry, paying bills, car maintenance, and driving.

South and Spitze (1994) report that women do more housework than men across all types of household compositions. Overall, women report spending almost 33 hours per week on household tasks; men report spending slightly more than 18 hours. The researchers make the interesting observation that this gender gap in housework was found to be largest within married couples; they explain this finding via the ‘gender perspective’ which suggest that married women and men are “doing gender” with each other (West and Zimmerman 1987). In addition, women and men also report doing different gender-typed household tasks. Women reported doing more of both the female-typed and gender-neutral household tasks. Looking specifically at women’s and men’s
time spent on meal preparation, the reported mean hours per week by marital status and
gender: married (women 10.14; men 2.69), divorced (women 8.15; men 5.50), cohabiting
(women 7.99; men 3.71), widowed (women 7.96; men 6.48), never married/living
independently (women 6.74; men 5.06), never married/living in parental home (women
3.64; men 2.23) (South and Spitze 1994:341). Women spend more time than men
preparing meals regardless of marital status, though the gap between women’s hours and
men’s hours is greatest for the married. The gender perspective suggests that heterosexual
couples are performing, and, thereby, creating gender by differentiating meal preparation
as a female-typed task.

Looking for patterns of gendered labor across time, Bianchi et al. (2000) present
changes in the division of household labor from the 1960s to the 1990s. This study uses
time diary data as well as NSFH data to examine how the gendered gap or division of
household labor has changed over time. This study did not find as much support as South
and Spitze (1994) for the gender perspective on housework, but instead found more
evidence for time-availability and relative-resource explanations. Housework tasks
continue to be gender segregated across the time period studied, with wives performing
more daily ‘core’ and traditionally feminine tasks and men’s work concentrated in “more
episodic or discretionary tasks” (Bianchi et al. 2000:219). Overall, the researchers found
that both women and men are doing much less housework in the 1990s than in the 1960s.
Bianchi et al. (2000:219) report that women’s housework hours per week decreased by
more than half over this time period, while men’s housework hours per week increased.
The researchers conclude that “propensity” or self-motivation toward doing housework
explains more of this change than demographic changes or working hours.
Bianchi et al.’s (2000:219) notion of “propensity to do housework” creates several questions about women’s and men’s levels of housework. Why are men, especially single men, doing more housework than men in the past? Men’s increasing propensity to do more housework than men in the past may be due to time restraints of their working wives, attitudinal changes in what is expected of men at home by their wives, and single men living alone in larger homes. Bianchi et al. (2000) also acknowledge men’s increasing participation in ‘core’ tasks like cooking meals. The authors suggest it is “more [socially] acceptable for men to cook and clean” now and for men “to show competence at making a home-cooked meal” (Bianchi et al. 2000:219). Overall, these authors conclude that their findings show a certain degree of change regarding ideas about what kinds of housework are acceptable for women and for men.

These trends are interesting in light of the current do-it-yourself (DIY) trend that may foster some of the resurgence of interest in home canning today. While women overall may be less inclined to do housework now than in the past, some women (and men) are taking on ‘extra’ work in the kitchen. Bianchi et al. (2000) use the NSFH data categories to distinguish ‘core’ household tasks that happen daily (predominantly performed by women) from the more discretionary, occasional, and seasonal tasks (predominantly performed by men). If canning is no longer a core task occurring with seasonal regularity at farming and gardening households, is it then discretionary and occasional labor? If so, it is interesting that more women than men are doing home canning—but if canning is seen as ‘core’ and necessary food work, then women’s higher rate of participation can be explained by traditional gender roles.
In another study similar to Bianchi et al. (2000), Sayer (2005) examines changing housework trends between women and men from the 1960s to the 1990s and finds that women’s and men’s time use patterns have become more similar over time. Her data set was composed of approximately 1,000 women and men, ages 18 to 64, from each of three nationally representative studies that were conducted by the University of Michigan in 1965 and 1975, and the University of Maryland in 1998. All three studies collected time diaries wherein respondents recorded their activities for a 24-hour period; Sayer (2005) coded this data into categories of paid work, unpaid work, self-care time, and free time.

Sayer (2005) reports that the amount of time women spent cooking and cleaning decreased over the three time periods studied, while men’s increased. “What appears to be happening is a gradual evolution toward symmetry in women’s and men’s time” (Sayer 2005:297). Whereas women did 9.3 times as much cooking and 15.8 times as much cleaning as men in 1965, by 1998, women were doing only 2.2 times as much cooking and cleaning as men (Sayer 2005:291). Average minutes spent per day on “Meals” by women were measured at each time point: 74 minutes in 1965, 65 minutes in 1975, and 41 minutes in 1998. Men’s minutes on ‘meals’ at each time point were reported, respectively, as 8, 10, and 18 minutes per day.

Sayer’s research contributes to the literature on household labor and ‘time use,’ which includes housework as well as a focus on free time used for the pursuit of leisure. Despite women doing more housework than men in all time periods measured, equal amounts of time were reportedly spent by women and men in leisure activities in 1965 and 1975. However, with more women now working in the paid labor force, and women doing more housework than men, women in 1998 had a ‘leisure gap’ of just over 30
minutes per day in comparison to men. So even though women are doing less housework and meal preparation in 1998 than their counterparts in 1965, and men today are doing more than men in the past, women in 1998 reported less free time than in both time periods prior—a new form of gender inequality?

A cross-national comparison study by Warde et al. (2007) provides another look at the convergence of food preparation and consumption patterns in five Western nations. The researchers compare time-use diary data from France, the United Kingdom, the United States, Norway and the Netherlands to analyze eating practices and trends toward homogenization between the early 1970s and the end of the 1990s. This Multinational Time Use Survey reports on the working-age population ages 20 to 59. The researchers examined the following activities: cooking, ‘washing-up’, eating at home, and eating and drinking away from home from the. All five countries show considerable national variation in patterns of food preparation, eating at home and eating out. However, a common finding is the significant decline in the amount of time spent on food preparation in all five countries, as well as time spent eating at home (in all countries except France). Time devoted to cooking declined in all five countries, most markedly in Norway and France (32 and 22 minutes, respectively).

The pattern overall suggests that eating and food preparation takes up considerably less time in the USA than in Europe. The authors report that, in the United States, “time devoted to domestic food preparation and consumption is minimal” (Warde et al. 2007:363). Time spent eating at home has decreased between 1975 and 2000, whereas time spent eating and drinking out has increased (by just two minutes on average per day for respondents aged 20-59). Mean minutes for all respondents in USA spent on
cooking and “washing-up” has decreased: from 48 mean minutes in 1975 to 39 minutes in 2000, as measured within the 24-hour day. Less time is now spent on eating at home and more time is being spent eating out: 52 minutes in 1975 spent eating at home per day and 28 minutes eating out, versus and 42 minutes spent eating at home per day in 2000 and 30 minutes eating out.

One of the main findings of Warde et al.’s (2007:379) study is that socio-demographic characteristics, such as social class, have less influence on time spent on “domestic food practice” than in the past. However, the researchers report that gender remains a salient variable. Warde et al. (2007:379) broadly observed “…the ubiquity and persistence of gender divisions in the area of food preparation and consumption,” including “…the universal habit of allocating most cooking to women” (Warde et al. 2007:373), but found similarly with Sayer (2005) and Bianchi et al. (2000) “…that while everywhere hugely disproportionate amounts of time are invested by women everywhere, the magnitude of the difference is gradually reducing” (Warde et al. 2007:373).

The findings of these quantitative studies are enriched by qualitative studies of housework. As Warde et al. (2007:365) note, one limitation of time diary data is that they cannot “…account for experiences of time nor the meanings attributed to the activities that they measure.” Qualitative research on gender and food preparation fills this gap. Most famously, DeVault’s (1991) qualitative study of gendered household labor highlights the ‘feeding work’ and the emotional labor involved therein. Between 1982 and 1983, DeVault interviewed the primary provisioner within 30 households in the city and suburbs of Chicago. The ‘primary provisioner’ is the person who conducted the majority of the ‘feeding work’ and the ‘everyday work of caring’ (emotional labor)
involved in feeding her or his family. All households interviewed contained children, and comprised an economically and ethnically/racially diverse sample. While not all of the individuals in charge of feeding and caring work were women, women/wives generally performed most of the ‘provisioning’ and cooking for their families. In most of the households, husbands never or only occasionally shared the work of cooking and provisioning; wives took primary responsibility for these tasks. Thus, via women’s physical and emotional labor in the roles of ‘wife’ and ‘mother’, “women quite literally produce family life from day to day, through their joint activities with others.” Thereby “‘doing family’ in traditional ways, household members sustain and reproduce the ‘naturalness’ of prevailing [gender] arrangements” (DeVault 1991:13).

DeVault’s work is quite similar to that of Murcott (1983) and Charles and Kerr (1988) in the feminist approach to foodwork and the multiple layers of labor that a woman performs to create and sustain a familial household and the health and relationships of its members. However, DeVault makes unique inquiries into the invisible labor, the emotional side of the feeding performed by women. She examines caring as another form of work at which women predominantly labor and that also, like the physical labor of chopping vegetables for cooking, “caring is typically done in ways that reinforce men’s entitlement and women’s subservience” (DeVault 1991:18). West and Zimmerman’s (1987) concept of gender ‘as a doing’ is invoked to explain how gendered processes of food provisioning, including the mental labor of planning meals as well as executing the labor that produces them, reinforces women’s and men’s identities and how the accomplishment of gender produces a ‘properly’ gendered family.
In sum, these selected sociological studies on the gendered division of household labor have shown that women do more domestic meal planning, grocery shopping, meal preparation, and cleaning than men. Women’s and men’s patterns of time use in household labor are becoming more similar over time, with women spending less time cooking and cleaning at home than women did in the past, and men now doing more cooking and housework than men in the past. However, while we know who cooks most meals at home, the literature does not reveal much about other gendered aspects of home food provisioning such as preservation. While food preservation in the form of canning or other preservation techniques may be practiced in some of the families studied, it is not directly addressed or measured. This study seeks to extend the literature on gender and housework to consider food preservation, and distinguish meal preparation from food production.

Home food preparation is distinct from home food production, though the housework literature does not distinguish the two. Unlike daily processes involved in meal preparation, canning is a form of future food production via the process of preservation: it is the production of a food item intended to be consumed at another time in the future. It is extra labor that occurs in addition to the daily household tasks of meal planning, grocery list writing, shopping for food, cooking, and cleaning up the kitchen after meals. Food preservation is invisible in social science research on home food preparation. Who is doing the home canning? How much time and labor does it consume, and when does it occur? What do home canners think about canning—what does it mean to them, and why do they do it? Some of these questions have been briefly addressed by
disparate academic studies from disciplines such as anthropology, cultural studies, and nutrition; select studies will be reviewed in the following section.

**Scholarly Research on Home Food Preservation and Canning**

Before reviewing the few more recent studies on home canning, it is important to briefly note that there are numerous historical investigations of canning in the United States that have been conducted by a variety of scholars. Due to the traditional gendered division of housework and the association of women with foodwork generally and canning specifically, these histories are as much about gender as they are about home canning. Engelhardt (2011) presents an historical review of early twentieth-century canning in the American South in her examination of girls’ tomato clubs. These clubs were designed to financially benefit the girls who participated, and encouraged racial integration and regional socializing via their programs and competitions. Bentley (1998; reviewed in Chapter Two) continues this history in her book on gender politics and food rationing during World War II America, exploring the gendered division of labor in households and governmental messages about war, gender, and home food preservation initiatives. Other historical studies on gender and food preservation focus on domestic reform in the American South (Hoffschwelle 2001), and race/ethnicity in home demonstration and agricultural extension services (Harris 2009; Jensen 1982; Jensen 1986). While these works contribute to our historical knowledge of home canning, there has been very little scholarly research on canning since WWII and the meanings, motivations, and interests surrounding home canning today are different than in the past. A sociological analysis of contemporary canning is needed to fill this gap in knowledge.
Limited quantitative demographic data on today’s home canners is available on the website of the National Center for Home Food Preservation. In an unpublished conference presentation available on this website, Garner, Andress and Sweaney (2002) compare quantitative data from three surveys of home canners to examine changes in the practice of home canning from two time points, 1975 and 2000 to 2001. The earlier study, published by Davis and Page (1979), was a national survey conducted by the USDA in 1975. The authors of the report claim that the study sample represents all households in the United States; however, it is unclear whether this is a methodologically sound statement. They obtained 901 usable questionnaires from home canners. The other two unpublished studies were conducted by researchers at the National Center for Home Food Preservation and Survey Research Center at the University of Georgia. Interviews were conducted with 135 home canners between the years 2000 to 2001. Also, a telephone survey was conducted in 2001 with 179 respondents composing what the researchers claim to be a representative, random sample of adults in the state of Georgia, although their research methodology is not explained. These studies were devised to survey the demographics of home canners, rates of home canning, learn where canners get information about canning procedures, and assess the safety of methods used. Garner et al. (2002) review this data to make health safety recommendations regarding home canning practices. The studies are methodologically weak, the summary reports are poorly written, and sociological areas of interest such as gender and canners’ motivations are left untouched. Due to the focus of these studies on fruit and vegetable canning and the exclusion of home canned meat products, the involvement of men especially as game hunters and their food preservation practices are undocumented.
These studies provide a limited sketch of the demographic characteristics of home canners and participants’ most utilized sources of canning information. Just over half of the home canners in all three surveys combined were aged 35-64 years old, 28-33 percent were age 35-49, and 20-25 percent age 50-64 years. The number of home canners with a high school education and beyond was higher in the more recent two studies than in 1975. Unfortunately the income data of home canners is not comparable among these studies due to differences in measurement and high levels of missing information. The most commonly reported source of canning information and instruction for all three surveys was friends or relatives (1975 USDA survey, 60.4 percent of canners; 2000-2001 NCHFP survey 43.5 percent; GaPoll 2001 55.1 percent). The percentage of canners in 1975 referencing USDA and extension service publications was small (20 percent), and decreased in the NCHFP (4 percent) and GaPoll (5 percent) surveys. Thus, Garner et al. (2002) see cause for concern regarding home canners’ limited use of scientifically researched canning procedures and recipes. Unfortunately, these large-scale quantitative studies of canners such as this have been conducted primarily for the purposes of public safety and health and do not report on many other interesting aspects of the practice of home canning, such as the gender of canners or their motivations to home preserve food. As written, these research reports have many weaknesses and are confusing to understand.

A limited number of qualitative studies on select populations of canners have sought to explore the social and cultural contexts wherein canning is embedded as a meaningful foodway. The lack of cultural or theoretical significance of these studies is striking, including even several anthropological studies that will be reviewed below.
Keeping this void in mind, the major findings of these limited studies are summarized here to provide a baseline of what our most current knowledge about home canners and home canning practices look like.

An anthropology team (Baer et al. 1992) was commissioned to discover the reasons why residents of a south-central county in Florida were not readily using the county-operated community cannery and what could be done to encourage greater use of the facility. When beginning their literature review on community canneries, Baer et al. (1992) report that there was no anthropological literature on the subject of community cannery use prior to their study and almost no other academic literature helpful to the development of their exploratory research.

Baer’s team conducted 60 telephone interviews with cannery users, a sample consisting of all but two of the patrons in the past one and a half years that the county operated the cannery. They report on a variety of demographic characteristics of the sample, divided into two income groups: low (a family of four with less than $1,146 income per month), and high. The cannery utilized a tiered pay scale for facility use, with high income users paying five cents per pint canned and 10 cents per quart, and low income users without fee. One quarter of the sample consisted of retired persons. One third reported “special diet” concerns, such as health conditions or diseases, interest in losing weight, or eating a more “natural” diet. Reported motivations to use the cannery varied by income group, with the most often reported motivation for low income cannery users being to save money (88 percent of low income users, compared to 35 percent of all high income users), and the most frequently reported motivated for high income users were recreational reasons (40 percent of all high income users, 12 percent of low income
The other reported motivation was ‘convenience’ which was not explained in Baer et al.’s (1992) report. Respondents did not report health benefits of canning as a primary motivation; however, many agreed that canning has health advantages when they were directly asked about health impacts. The study concluded that the primary problem solved by the community cannery for low-income users was stretching income, whereas the primary problem resolved for high income users was “how to spend leisure time.”

Without knowing what answers were coded as ‘recreational’ motivations for using the community cannery, it is not clear if Baer et al.’s conclusions are accurate. Because this study was designed to measure and promote use of a community cannery, it did not inquire of respondents what canning meant to them or how they learned about canning in general (the study did inquire about how respondents learned about the community cannery). It also focuses only on users of a community cannery facility, who may be different than individuals who can at home. One possible difference is that 82 percent of all community cannery users reported that they had gone to the cannery with friends, family members, or with other members of organizations that went to the cannery as a group; home canners may be more likely to do canning alone, and perhaps less likely to report being motivated by ‘recreational’ reasons (if canning is not a shared social event). Also, this study does not report if any of the food being canned at the cannery were produced in the user’s gardens; rather, the users reported that the food they canned came from you-pick fields (57 percent), supermarket purchases (17 percent), or gifts of food from various sources (13 percent). The Floridian climate and urban location of the cannery under study may have affected the sources, or perhaps the interviewers did not inquire about home gardens.
Quandt, Popyach, and DeWalt (1994), a team of two anthropologists and one nutritionist, studied the practices of home gardening and food preservation among elderly women and men in two rural counties in Kentucky. ‘Mountain County’ is a part of Appalachia, where the economy is primarily based on mineral and forest products. ‘Central County’ has a population double the size of Mountain County, and is also double in geographic size, but shares a similar population density (33 person per square mile; Mountain County, 35 per square mile); Central County has more agricultural and manufacturing employment. This study was conducted in multiple phases over two years.

During the first year of research, qualitative data was collected on variations in “environmental factors and nutritional strategies in the two counties” (Quandt et al. 1994:186). Twenty elderly informants were interviewed and their life histories were collected. Participant observation was also conducted “such as direct observation of places and events” (Quandt et al. 1994:187). In the second year, a two-wave survey collected quantitative data. The first survey collected demographic data and information about gardening activities via face-to-face interviews with residents in both counties in the summer of 1990 (during garden harvest) and the winter of 1990 to 1991. These individuals were selected via a random sample of 639 persons aged 55 to 96 years, gathered from a random sample of enumeration districts. Researcher visited the selected households and identified persons age 55 or older. Five hundred fifty-six of the original 639 respondents were retained for the second wave. The second survey, conducted late in the winter of 1991, asked questions about the prior season’s gardening and food preservation, such as what foods were produced and/or preserved, if any. Most of the sample had household incomes less than $10,000 per year.
Within this sample, 56 percent had raised a produce garden the previous summer. Gardeners tended to be younger than non-gardeners, in better functional status, more likely to be living with someone, married, and living in a single family residence.

Interestingly, in this sample of rural, elderly Kentuckians, individuals at the lowest income level were less likely to be gardeners than those with higher incomes. Among the gardeners, canning was the most popular method of food preservation, practiced by 84 percent of gardeners (followed by freezing [80 percent], storing [72 percent], and drying [9 percent]). Most canners canned only three produce items; most gardeners raised 11 types of produce (the maximum number of types grown was 22). The most commonly grown plants were tomatoes (raised by 97 percent of gardeners), followed by green beans, sweet corn, onions, potatoes, cucumbers, and cabbage. Methods of preservation used for each of these seven crops varied; the authors report that “it is clear that there is a preservation method of choice for each food preserved” (Quandt et al. 1994:196).

Tomatoes, green beans, cucumbers and cabbages were most commonly canned (this study’s definition of canning includes pickling and fermentation of sauerkraut).

Despite the availability of electricity in rural Kentucky since the 1950s, this sample of individuals continues to primarily utilize “traditional methods of preservation” such as canning and drying. Noting the time-consuming and labor-intensive processes required by these methods in comparison to freezing, Quandt et al. (1994:196) suggest that “…patterns of preference in preservation methods probably lie outside the domain of convenience…” and instead may be determined by how central the food item is to the daily diet, the effects of preservation on taste, color, and texture, and lastly, convenience of use at the time of meal preparation. They use interview excerpts on green beans as an
example of such preferences. They describe a traditional dish of green beans involving a 
pot of beans that is simmered all day, often with a piece of pork, producing a staple meal consumed daily. Home-canned beans approximate the taste and texture of beans cooked 
the traditional way, and thus many respondents voiced their dislike for frozen beans. So 
while canning beans is a time-consuming, labor-intensive endeavor, the product is seen as 
superior to frozen beans because canned beans are easier to use at mealtime (a jar of 
canned beans does not require much or any additional cooking) and corresponds with 
respondents’ taste and texture preferences for beans. In this way, the convenience offered 
by new technologies of food preservation (such as freezing) has not yet supplanted 
traditional tastes and preferences and the corresponding mode of food preservation.

As such, this article presents data that is rich for cultural analysis but the authors 
only briefly touch the surface of such an endeavor. In the most promising section, titled 
“Gardening, Preserving and Food Ideology,” the researchers detail the preservation 
preferences mentioned above regarding green beans. However, they do not press into 
cultural aspects of taste or the meanings or sentiments attached to certain methods of food 
preservation. Quandt et al. (1994:195) state that “[p]reservation of garden produce is the 
norm among these rural elderly,” but do not explore what is normative about it (e.g., 
custom? Or heritage?). This claim may also over-represent the rate of food preservation 
practiced by their sample, since they focused on the 56 percent of their sample of elderly 
individuals who had raised a garden in the previous year. They only briefly explore food 
preservation among non-gardeners, and the preservation of food received as gifts, or 
purchased at a market or store.
A more recent and detailed study of home canning was conducted by Click and Ridberg (2010). Their article, titled “Saving Food: Food Preservation as Alternative Food Activism,” focuses on the contemporary canning revival within the context of current food movements and the trends of ‘alternative food practitioners’, individuals who “…seek to change the food system by buying organic, shopping at farmers markets, aspiring to be locavores, counting food miles, eating Slow Food, joining CSAs, and planting community gardens” (Click and Ridberg 2010:302). This mixed-methods study combines online survey data from 902 respondents with follow-up telephone interviews that were conducted with 30 members of the original sample. Respondents for the online survey were volunteers recruited from several food-related national listservs, university extension offices, Master Gardener groups, Slow Food groups, and food-preservation groups from Yahoo Groups and Facebook. The surveys asked 47 closed- and open-ended questions about respondents’ sources of food, techniques of food preservation and frequency of use, how they learned about food preservation, with whom, how much and why they preserve, motivation(s) for preserving food, and participation in what the authors generically call “food movements” (Click and Ridberg 2010:306). They also collected demographic information from individuals willing to be phone interviewed. Of 322 survey participants who volunteered to be interviewed, 30 were interviewed by phone; the authors do not indicate upon what criteria they selected the 30 phone interviewees, but state that they stopped at 30 interviews because they had reached saturation. The group of telephone interviewees mirror the larger sample’s demographic trends; a summary of these characteristics is provided below for the survey sample (N=902). The telephone interviews were composed of 15 open-ended questions on four
areas: food values and habits, attitudes about food preservation, participation in food movements, and views on the future of food in the United States. The online surveys were collected during February and March 2009, and the interviews were conducted in May and June 2009.

The survey sample is most composed of women: 759 of 902 respondents, representing 84.1 percent of the total sample. Most people in this sample were white (837 women and men, or 92.8 percent of the sample). Just over 85 percent of the sample falls within various age brackets between 18 and 59 years (approximately 20 percent in brackets 18-29, 30-39, 40-49, and 50-59). A household income of $25,000 or less was reported by 14 percent of the sample, while just over 21 percent reported income above $100,000; the rest were fairly evenly distributed in between. The largest percentage of respondents in this study reported having graduate or professional degrees (35.3 percent), followed by a bachelor’s degree (25.8 percent) and some college (19.5 percent). Most were living with a partner or spouse (71.5 percent); 97 respondents (10.8 percent) lived alone. And most households contained no children (64.6 percent) (Click and Ridberg 2010:307). Because the sample was recruited online and is composed of self-motivated volunteers, it is not representative of all food preservationists or members of ‘food movements’ generally. Home canners are included in the sample, and the analyses and discussion presented in this article focus on home canning; however, the sample is not composed exclusively of food preservationists nor therefore of home canners.

Click and Ridberg (2010:310) report that most of their respondents had preserved food. Freezing was the most widely practiced food preservation technique, reported by 806 individuals or 89.4 percent of the total sample; 52 percent (N=469) had canned food.
The motivations for food preservation were reported in the following categories: to know and control what is in food, taste, and interests in eating locally and sustainably. Other aspects of food preservation, themed “The Impact and Experience of Preserving Food,” coded responses into the following categories and were most relevant to respondents’ experiences with home canning: memories, relationships, mental and physical labor, sensory experiences, pride and accomplishment, and deep connections. The article explores the sentiments of food preservation, noting the powerful memories of food preservation (often learning from a family member) were commonly reported with great nostalgia. Connections were also made between respondents and those with whom they shared food preservation, such as learning how to can from a neighbor, or feeling a connection to the Earth and women worldwide engaged in preserving and preparing foods for their loved ones. While inherently exploring gendered themes, Click and Ridberg (2010) note that future research could more closely attend to home canners’ socioeconomic statuses, gender, and racial/ethnic identities.

Most of the respondents perceived themselves as members of an alternative food network, and reported behaviors that the authors felt reflected food activism values such as shopping for local foods at farmer’s markets. In response to a survey question about how respondents’ views on food influence the way they spend money on food, respondents “…consistently demonstrated that [they] believe that the way they spend their money is a political act” (Click and Ridberg 2010:308). Click and Ridberg (2010) perceive that the “Voting with Your Fork” (Pollan 2006b) consumer ethos promoted by ‘food movements’ has been correctly critiqued as an ineffective strategy for large-scale social change. So, the authors counter this argument, appealing to the potential of food
preservation practitioners (with a primary emphasis on home canners) to make connections to people in the present, past, as well as future. They argue that, despite a limiting and individualistic discourse promoted by the food movement(s), food preservation practices such as canning can instead create and sustain social connections and community:

The deep level at which they experience the activities of food preservation (involving relationships, the senses, and feelings of self-empowerment), suggests food-preservation practices have the capability to move food activists beyond a consumer-oriented approach to politics and to develop a relationship to food more in line with the environmental beliefs of alternative food movements. (Click and Ridberg 2010:310)

The authors attempt to link respondents’ interest in sustainable agriculture to ‘food movements’ and also to associate food preservation practices with political or activist potential. With the data presented here, it seems a far reach for the authors to suggest that home food preservation such as canning “…has the potential to subvert the capitalistic logic of the global agro-food industry” (Click and Ridberg 2010:301). It is unclear if any or how many respondents voiced this belief, or if the authors created this conclusion after analyzing their data more generally. Unlike any other previous studies of home canning, this study describes the current social context of debate about food politics and the rise of ‘alternative’ food lifestyles within which the contemporary canning revival is occurring. While Click and Ridberg do not focus exclusively on home canners, their study suggests that some canners today may have political motivations for preserving food. Also, this study presents the practice of home food preservation in the realm of the social as opposed to the individual. Some may preserve food as a solo leisure activity or hobby, but it can also foster social connections; this feature makes home canning ripe for sociological analysis.
Some questions untouched by Click and Ridberg (2010) and other studies reviewed here are questions of gender, social class, and political activism. The canning-focused studies such as those produced by nutritionists and researchers at the NCHFP offer limited demographic data about contemporary home canners. They do not report gender or achieve reliable rates of response about the socioeconomic status of canners. Much of this research has been conducted to survey the actual procedures used by home canners and their sources of information about canning in order to make public health recommendations regarding safe home canning practices; therefore, this research lacks any significant components of cultural analysis. The more deeply sociological studies reviewed above that focus on concerns related to home canning practitioners such as the motivations of canners to use the community cannery facility studied by Baer et al. (1992), or the political/activist ideologies of food preservers interviewed by Click and Ridberg (2010), could be furthered by deeper examination of study participants on demographics such as gender and social class. For example, what are the implications of the fact that most of the canners/activists in Click and Ridberg’s (2010) study are women? Are women heading up a social revolution? Are only economically privileged women involved, such as the high income users of the community cannery studied by Baer et al. (1992) who reported that their canning was primarily recreational? These studies would also benefit from analysis of the meanings and implications of the contexts (e.g., private home, public facility) in which the canning under study is conducted.

**Research Questions**

This sociological inquiry into contemporary home canning provides a lens into how people relate to food in a private, domestic context. Home canning is a unique
foodway that is not meal preparation but food production—the creation of preserved foodstuffs to be eaten at a later time. The insights offered by this study have not previously been captured by research on everyday meal planning, cooking, consumption, and cleaning. The current study is also designed to measure not only the behaviors people do or roles they perform, but also to explore the qualitative meanings of home canning.

This study is guided by four research questions that examine who today’s practitioners of home canning are and what kinds of experiences they have had with canning, why they do it, and how social constructions of gender influence canners’ roles in canning. First: Who is home canning now? This question addresses the demographic characteristics of canners while recognizing that this qualitative sample is necessarily unique and not representative of a broader population of home canners. Previous studies have not always measured and reported the gender of food preservers and the specific activities they are involved with therein. How do women and men canners differ from each other in motivations to can, and what characteristics or values do they share? Are there differences between younger and older canners, or those who live in more rural or urban areas? Do they self-identify as a ‘home canner’? This question also seeks to assess the frequency of gardening among home canners.

Related to the notion of demographic characteristics of home canners, the second question asks: What kinds of experiences have home canners had with canning? For example, some aspects of home canning this question addresses include: What does the practice of home canning look like? What foods are canned and why? What do home canners do with the fruits of their labor? Are individuals canning at home alone, or do they share the work with others? Regardless of with whom they may or may not share the
actual process of canning, do canners share their canning experiences with anyone else, for example, by word of mouth or via an online blog? Home canners’ experiences with canning show variation across many of the demographic characteristics gathered from the first question, such as age, gender, socioeconomic status and quality of health. This question also assesses the sources of information (e.g., family, friends, books, internet) from which home canners have learned about the process of canning and how they negotiate food safety and risk.

Third: Why are people home canning now and what does canning mean to its practitioners? What are their motivations? A variety of home canners were interviewed, ranging from those with little experience to those who have canned for a lifetime. Like Click and Ridberg’s (2010) study on the political implications of food preservation, this question assesses how canners think about food and if their food preservation practices are motivated by a particular food ideology (e.g., local, seasonal, organic, slow) or if canning is related to the contemporary food movements in the United States. Beyond this, southeastern Ohio canners may be motivated by other sociopolitical ideologies about food and health, such as ‘readiness’ or ‘survivalist’ practices that may relate to religion or fears of societal collapse. As with the second research question, how do the meanings and motivations to do home canning measured here vary by demographic characteristics? Quandt et al. (1994) studied only the rural elderly; do the motivations of younger people to can differ from older home canners? How are women’s motivations to can, and the meanings they ascribe to canning, similar to and dissimilar from those of men?

The fourth and final research question guiding this research is: What role(s) do home canners perform in providing food and regular meal preparation for the household
in which they live? How is gender relevant? This question examines both the gendered division of labor within home canning as well as the overall gendered division of household labor and foodwork among the canners in this study. Previous sociological research has extensively shown that domestic foodwork is heavily gendered, and is primarily the responsibility of women. Is the same true for household food production, such as with home canning? How are men involved in canning? Do women and men conduct their canning for similar or dissimilar reasons?

Chapter Conclusion

Chapter Three has critically reviewed relevant sociological and other scholarly literature relevant to this exploratory research on the contemporary practice of home canning. This dissertation contributes to the existing literature on domestic foodwork and gender by analyzing another aspect of food provisioning, specifically, food preservation via canning. This chapter has oriented the project within the broader disciplines of sociology and Food Studies, and presented the research questions that guide the dissertation. The following chapter outlines the research methodology employed to address these questions.
Chapter Four: Research Methodology

Chapter Three has explored the diversity of scholarship and research methods that have been used to study home canning. Most of these previous studies have utilized qualitative interviewing techniques; this approach will be continued here. Qualitative interviewing is the best way to gain depth of understanding about an understudied practice such as home food preservation; the use of qualitative methods therefore best suits the goals of this research. A nationally representative sample of home canners is beyond the scope of this study. This chapter describes the research methodology employed for this dissertation.

Methods

The primary sources of data for this study are 50 in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted one-on-one by the author with individual home canners. The interviews provide data on how the practice of the traditional foodway of home canning fits into contemporary understandings of food by the people who produce and consume it. A limited amount of preliminary ethnographic data was collected via participant observation during my attendance at various classes and workshops offering canning instruction, food activist events, food organization gatherings, and my observation of online communities. Observations noted during such field work helped to initially orient the researcher to the research topic and social context and thereby provided a foundation to the interview data; however, such ethnographic data is not used in the formal analysis presented in this dissertation. The findings presented within this
study, and any direct quotations from participants included in the discussion of data, are
drawn exclusively from the in-depth interviews with home cannners.

Due to the exploratory nature of this research and the goal of examining the
cultural meanings of the practice of home canning, qualitative methodologies provide the
richest data and deepest understanding to address the research questions under study
(Lofland and Lofland 1995; Weiss 1994). Participants were able to guide interview topics
toward issues relevant to them via the flexibility offered by the semi-structured, one-on-
one interview format. The emergent themes from this study have been interpreted via
grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Grounded theory is appropriate for this study
because it is exploratory, qualitative research that intends to provide an in-depth look at
individuals’ experiences and ideologies toward home canning.

Setting

This study was conducted in southeastern Ohio, a region defined as part of
Appalachia according to the Appalachian Regional Commission (2012). There are
currently 32 Appalachian counties in Ohio that together form a portion of the
northernmost boundary of the region. The Appalachian region of the United States, one
of the world’s most biologically and agriculturally diverse (Veteto et al. 2011), has a
strong agricultural history of farming, gardening, and canning. After World War II,
general interest in home canning waned and the number of community canneries quickly
decreased—except in Appalachia, where the practice continued. The largest number of
community canneries remained in Virginia, with 87 still operative in 1962 (Jackson and
Athens County, Ohio, is the home hub of a regional local food system within Appalachian Ohio. As a research site, Athens and its neighboring counties provide a unique and rich context in which to study home canners. A popular local eating program, “The 30 Mile Meal,” encourages participants to eat foods grown and raised within a 30-mile radius of the city of Athens; it is a “super-local” spin off 100-mile locavore diets (Athens County Convention and Visitor’s Bureau, http://www.athensohio.com/30mile/). The region is home to numerous farms practicing conventional, organic, and biodynamic agriculture and that raise a variety of animals from heirloom turkey and chicken breeds to grass-fed beef. The Athens Farmer’s Market, which is held year-round (twice a week during the summer and once a week during winter) and has a permanent wait-list for applications from new prospective vendors, has received national acclaim and claims to be “Ohio’s largest open-air market” (Athens Farmer’s Market, http://athensfarmersmarket.org). Numerous market vendors sell an array of home-canned products. Athens is also home to a business incubator, The Appalachian Center for Economic Networks, which offers a food manufacturing and commercial kitchen facility that it utilized by numerous businesses who process and preserve (in glass jars) salsas, pickles, assorted condiments and dressings, and spaghetti sauce. Numerous organizations in the Athens County region work toward reducing hunger. Community Food Initiatives is one notable organization that offers a variety of education-based programs to the public alone and in partnership with local organizations such as the Athens Farmer’s Market and local schools. In summary, many citizens in southeastern Ohio are interested in and involved with local, sustainable, and healthy food initiatives as consumers, business owners, and food educators and activists.
As such, these characteristics make the geographic region in which this study was conducted a promising locale for food-related research and a likely site in which to locate home canners. However, these and other characteristics also make Athens County, Ohio, and neighboring counties unique; the findings of this small-scale, qualitative research are therefore also unique to the area and the volunteers that compose the sample. Lastly, southeastern Ohio is geographically part of Appalachia, but there are many demographic and economic factors that make, particularly, Athens County atypical of other Appalachian counties. This research has been conducted within Appalachia but does not attempt to offer an analysis of home canning specifically Appalachian in focus.

**The Sample**

Interviews were conducted with a nonrandom, volunteer sample of home canners (N=50) with various backgrounds and levels of experience with home canning. Saturation of knowledge was achieved via this number of cases (Bertaux 1981; Small 2009). Because there has not been any previous sociological research on home canning, this study attempted to interview as wide a variety of canners as possible. Multiple recruitment procedures were utilized, as describe in detail below. Home canning can comprise a variety of activities, from jam- and jelly-making to the preservation of staple foods such as beans and tomatoes, as well as processes of preservation including and beyond the USDA-approved boiling water and pressure canning techniques such as freezer jamming and fermentation. The operational definition of ‘home canner’ for this study includes any individual who reports having experience with “canning” or “putting up” food, as they define the process. Allowing volunteers to self-identify as ‘home
canners’ (recruitment materials included this exact phrase) allowed this study to locate a wide range of practitioners of home canning and learn how they define home canning.

As interviews progressed and as themes emerged from initial analyses of the data, specific types of interviewees were sought to encourage diversity and greater representation of certain groups of people, specifically by gender and age group. Due to this study’s interests regarding gender, I made special efforts to obtain interviews with men canners. A specific quota for men canners could not be predetermined as representative since there is no other research to guide an estimation of the proportion of home canners who are men in southeastern Ohio. A snowball technique was employed by asking interviewees at the end of the interview if they know anyone—specifically any men—who do home canning. I gave my contact information to all interviewees and asked them to refer my information to any other home canners with whom they are acquainted.

Reruitment of Participants

This study employed multiple sampling methods to achieve as diverse a sample of participants as possible. Participants were recruited via convenience and snowball sampling, as well as the following forms of advertisement: (1) word of mouth, (2) printed fliers posted in strategic public places, (3) promotion of the project in person at food-related events I attended in Athens County, Ohio, (4) online via the researcher’s Facebook page. I discuss each of these in greater detail below.

Word of mouth advertising was conducted among the researcher’s personal networks in Athens County, Ohio, including acquaintances at several local-foods-based restaurants in Athens, farmer’s market vendors and shoppers, and the local Master Gardener association. Printed fliers describing the study and call for participants (see
Appendix B, Printed Recruitment Flier) were posted in and near the city of Athens, Ohio, where permission was granted at locales including the Athens Farmer’s Market, natural foods stores, restaurants and bars, chain grocery stores and department stores, local gyms, gardening supply centers, and approved locations on the campus of the local university. I also directly emailed or telephoned numerous local farm managers and other local contacts who practice canning to request interviews.

There are numerous food-related organizations in the Athens area that hold a variety of public events. I advertised the study to other attendees at such events. I emailed requests for electronic advertisement (see Appendix B, Electronic Advertisement Text) to several other local institutions and organizations. Lastly, I also advertised the study on my personal Facebook page and encouraged my contacts to share my electronic recruitment ad with others by re-posting my ad onto their own personal pages.

While volunteer recruitment always leaves the possibility that some key informants might be missed, I took all known opportunities to advertise the study in a strategically wide variety of locales using multiple modes of correspondence and feel that the sample is diverse and robust for the purposes of this study.

**Sample Characteristics**

Fifty interviews were conducted with home canner volunteers. The sample obtained consists of 34 women and 16 men who do home canning. Respondents’ ages range from 22 to 93 years old, though the sample overall is more heavily weighted to older generations: nearly two-thirds of the sample were age 50 years or older at the time of interview. The dispersion by age group in years is as follows: ages 18-25 (2 respondents), ages 26-35 (9), ages 36-45 (5), ages 46-55 (9), ages 56-65 (17), ages 66-75
(5), ages 76-85 (1), and ages 86-95 (2). Most of the sample identified their racial/ethnic identity as Caucasian. Two respondents specified their racial/ethnic identity as Caucasian/Italian American, two more as Caucasian/Native American, one Caucasian/Celt, and one identified as Native American.

More than half of the respondents (29 respondents) were residing in a household at the time of interview with just one other person, usually a spouse. Five more respondents lived alone; seven lived in a household composed of three members, four respondents lived in a household of four total members, and five respondents lived in a household sized five. Most households did not contain young children: just 11 respondents lived in households with their children under age 18 years. Thirty-eight respondents were married (all female-male couples). Legally single respondents were: single (four respondents), widowed (one woman), divorced and currently living alone (two women), and five more respondents were cohabitating.

Half of the respondents work outside the home for pay full- or part-time, 15 are retired, five do not work outside the home for pay (including one graduate student), and five more were self-employed. Except among couples where both partners are retired, respondents’ live-in partners or spouses usually work outside the home for pay. Forty members of the sample own the homes in which they reside.

**Qualitative Interviewing, Data, and Analysis**

Data collection was conducted via qualitative interviewing with volunteer participants. Interviews lasted approximately one to two hours and took place at a variety of locations such as cafés, public libraries, and at the homes of interviewees. Interviews were semi-structured and conducted one-on-one with the researcher so as to allow
interviewees to guide the conversation toward topics meaningful to them. The interview
guide (see Appendix A) provided a map for the conversations, though additional
questions and probes were asked when needed. The interview guide will be briefly
reviewed here.

The interview guide contains four thematic sections that address the research
questions that guide this study. Each section of the interview guide includes the primary
questions asked of most respondents, as well as additional prompts. The *Introduction*
section of the interview introduces myself as the researcher, describes the goals of the
study, and informs the respondent about the voluntary basis of their participation in the
study and the procedures utilized to protect the confidentiality of the interview
conversations. *Part 1: Canning Experience, Canning Stories* contains questions that
address the kinds and extent of experiences interviewees have had with home canning.
This section of the interview focused the conversation on canning, and broadly invited
interviewees to tell their stories about how they began to can and their current canning
practices. *Part 2: Motivations and Meanings of Home Canning* addresses my research
question about why people are interested in canning now, what makes it relevant to their
lives, and what meanings canners hold about this traditional foodway. *Part 3: Household
Context* expands the conversation into foodwork in the interviewee’s household more
generally. Data was gathered about who does what sort(s) of work related to regular meal
preparation and cleanup in canners’ households, and whether anyone in the household
grows a vegetable and/or fruit garden. Lastly, in *Part 4: Demographic and Background
Information* I asked any as yet remaining questions as necessary to determine or clarify
participants’ demographic characteristics such as age or occupation. The *Conclusion*
portion of the interview guide invited any needed clarifications, and offered respondents an opportunity to revisit a topic more deeply, or add something new to the conversation.

The interviews were conducted between December 2012 and March 2013. All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed except one respondent who declined to be audio recorded (so I wrote detailed notes from which a transcript was constructed). The set of interview transcripts serve as the primary body of data for this study. The transcripts were analyzed utilizing the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. In the first round of analysis of the transcripts, during open coding, I identified initial themes or conceptual categories. During a second round of coding, I focused on the initial emergent themes and began to locate linkages among them. Lastly, an overview of the relationships of similarity and dissimilarity among codes was formed and analytic conclusions produced. Throughout the entire process, research memos were kept regarding the formation and descriptions of each code during all stages of analysis as well as my general understanding of the themes identified in the data.

The presentation of data is in the form of direct quotations taken from the interviews. These interview excerpts are credited to the individual respondent who is quoted, identified by a pseudonym. I use SP to indicate myself speaking in interview quotations. To preserve the authenticity of respondents’ quotations, I have done little to no editing of their styles of speech; examples of editing include the deletion of repeated words or unsubstantial, rhythmic repetitions of words such as ‘like’ or ‘you know’. I mark the places where words or entire sentences have been deleted from a quotation with “…”. The aim of cutting material has been to increase succinctness and readability, and I have painstakingly attempted to achieve these aims while preserving the original meaning
and rich detail of the original transcript text. Grammatical errors and the occasional expletive usage remain unchanged as originally spoken to show the communication style and attitude of the speaker. Rather than interrupt the flow of quotations with the notation [sic], I will state here that all forthcoming quotations are acknowledged to contain informal and, at times, improper styles of language use of which have been intentionally left unchanged. I have also made attempts to capture the intended meaning of respondents’ statements that may be difficult to convey (or even completely lost, such as with sarcasm) in a verbatim transcript. Where relevant and necessary, physical gestures and body language are noted in brackets such as [Laughs]. These efforts have been made in order to preserve the authenticity and depth of the interviews.

*Ethical Issues with Human Subjects Research*

This study proceeded upon its approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University at Albany in November 2012. At the time of interview, participants were made aware of their rights as human subjects participating in this IRB-approved study. Interviewees were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix C) indicating their informed consent to participate in this study and for their permission to be audio-recorded and the recording transcribed. To preserve the confidentiality of participants’ identities, interviewees were assigned a pseudonym at the time of interview and all subsequent written records (transcripts, memos, and research reports) have been labeled with this pseudonym. Transcripts were edited to remove any personally identifying information.

Due to the socially accepted nature of canning and the straightforwardness of this research subject matter and methodological approach, there are no anticipated risks to participants in this research. The researcher cannot be held liable for any physical harm.
sustained due to participants’ activities involving home canning. Participants may experience positive benefits from their involvement in this study because it identifies home canners as special persons of interest who may enjoy sharing their unique experiences about canning with others and reliving the memories this process may evoke.

Validity, Generalizability, and Reliability

The goal of reliability can be achieved with quantitative research where a representative sample of the target population can be constructed; this is not the case with most individual case study-based qualitative research. As there is no national listing of home canners from which a representative survey sample could be obtained, this study required the use of volunteers. Individuals who were willing to volunteer to participate in this research study may be different from individuals who were unwilling to do so. Therefore, the results of this interview-based study are specific to the individuals who compose the study sample and are therefore not generalizable to any broader population. As Small (2009) argues, the aim of such research should be saturation, not generalizability, of findings. However, the results of this study may suggest some connections between canners in southeastern Ohio and canners elsewhere.

A major strength of qualitative interview research is the ability to promote validity. If a participant’s responses are unclear, the interviewer is able to ask questions to achieve clarity and rectify any seeming contradictions (Reinharz 1992). The study of home canning is subject matter that was not anticipated to bring forth many concerns of truthfulness and honesty, although in qualitative interviewing it is possible that interviewees’ responses may be framed by the individual’s interest in promoting a positive view of themselves or cooperating with what they perceive to be the goals of the
research (e.g., providing the ‘right’ answer to a question). These factors may predispose interviewees to respond in a certain manner. A potential limitation of qualitative interviewing is that respondents may not accurately or completely remember events from the past which they may attempt to recall and describe; probing questions were asked to promote greater detail and accuracy of distant memories.

**Chapter Conclusion**

The selection of qualitative research design fits with the existing literature on home canning and addresses the research questions that guide this study by intending to elaborate understanding of why people can, what their motivations are, and how they do it. In addition, this study addresses several conflicts in the existing literature by closely examining the motivations of home canners to can. This qualitative inquiry into home canning adds depth and meaning to the existing, predominantly survey-based research on canning. Also, this research is unique in its exclusive recruitment of home canners rather than individuals who practice various forms of food preservation (such as freezing), and its recruitment of a demographically varied sample of home canners (e.g., age, household composition). This study is designed to deepen sociological insight into a traditional American foodway, and further sociological understanding of the broader social trends that affect home canning and have sustained its practice.
Chapter Five: Overview of Contemporary Home Canning Lifestyles,  
the Sensory Experience of Canning, and Community Connections

“Jars are a way of life. Those Mason jars are around for a while.” (Linda)

Chapter Five addresses the research question: What kinds of experiences have home canners had with canning, and what are their current canning practices? This chapter will review the how, when, what and where of contemporary home canning practices in southeastern Ohio, including sources of knowledge about canning, common elements of the lifestyles of home canners, and other observations regarding the physical practice of home canning. The reasons why home canners are motivated to do home canning today will be the subject matter of the following chapter, Chapter Six.

Chapter Five begins with the basics of home canning as experienced by the home canners in this study, starting with how they learned about canning and how to do it. Most of the sample had their first exposure to canning by witnessing some member(s) of their family can, and most learned how to can from a family member. Most canners in this sample are also home gardeners, and tend to put up foods that they grow themselves and they eat it themselves or give it away to close family, friends, and/or neighbors. Next, this chapter brings attention to the various material and immaterial investments that home canners make in the regular practice of canning. Canning requires equipment, workspace, and large blocks of time devoted to its completion.

Looking more closely at canners’ experiences of the process of canning, this chapter explores home canning as a fully embodied process that engages all the physical senses. Oscillating between pleasure and danger, the activity of canning is material and
elemental. Yet the actual substance of canning, the physical foodstuffs produced, can promote profoundly immaterial experiences: the creation and reinforcement of social relationships through the informal distribution of canned goods. The gifting and exchange of canned foodstuffs and information about canning can foster relationships between the canner and the people with whom she or he shares the work of canning, the family members, friends, and neighbors with whom canned foods are shared, as well as with local farmers or other food producers from whom canners source the food items they do not grow or harvest themselves. In these ways the private, domestic production of food encourages social ties between the home canner and her or his community.

Learning How to Can

Whereas many Americans in generations past were raised in rural households where canning was taking place, home canning is no longer normative or necessary. Home canning today is a notable practice, a distinct way of producing and relating to food, and requires a body of knowledge that is no longer common. So how do people learn about canning now? How did today’s home canners first learn about canning? Younger adults today are less likely to have grown up in a household where any canning took place, whereas older generations are much more likely to have experience with home canning or at least observed canning happening in their family of origin.

Most respondents grew up in families wherein at least some members canned, and thereby first exposure to canning was often as a child in their parents’ or grandparents’ kitchens. The quotations just below and in the rest of this subsection on learning how to can are all responses to the question: *When did you learn about home canning?*

Mark (age 58): At a very young age, my mother and grandmother. We always raised very large gardens and part of the process of was it pick beans, snap the
beans, can the beans and I did the first part. They, my mother and grandmother, did most of the actual, did most of it with pressure canners or just hot water baths.

Sue (age 49): Well I guess I’ve known about canning most of my life because my dad’s mom, my paternal grandmother canned so I was aware of it. I don’t know that I actually ever saw it happening, but there were summers when I was very little when we would shell peas, and unstring string beans, and things like that, but I don’t know if it’s that we were too little to participate in the boiling water part or what. I’m not even sure what method of canning she used. So I was aware of it as a young child.

Ruth’s (age 69) account (“I was born with it [canning] in my mother and father’s home”) and similar responses are quite typical for canners of her generation. This demographic was likely the last generation of Americans who grew up in families where home canning was being conducted as a means of survival, providing basic nutrition or supplementing the family’s diet in a major way. For these individuals, canning was and still remains an everyday fact of life even if no longer a necessity.

Joanne (age 64): Well, [I learned about canning] as a kid, really. I was raised on a farm and in order to survive the winter we canned everything. My mother canned meat, vegetables out of the garden, fruit from the orchard. So we spent the summer canning stuff that we ate all winter long.

John (age 59): Well I was raised poor. No daddy in the household. And I sat upstairs, supposedly sleeping upstairs many nights as a child listening to my mother, and my aunt and a pressure canner rattling off canning beans. Never, you know, getting the opportunity really to learn what they was doing, or why they was doing it; that’s just the way that things were back then. We always had a big garden. Me being in the fifth or sixth grade I didn’t know anything about ‘X’ amount of dollars needing to come into the home for other financial responsibilities. They was worried about putting the lump in my tummy when times were hard. So I was raised around canning all my life.

Many respondents who grew up with canning learned how to can from family members. Some learned about canning in childhood and then continued into adulthood practicing the canning techniques they had learned from family. Others were present in their childhood home while canning was carried out by family members, but did fully
participate at that time; some such respondents later requested canning instruction from a family member and so had learned how to can as adults. For example, Jenni (age 38) had observed canning during her childhood but did not practice home canning until leaving her parents’ home: “My mom canned when I was younger, so I grew up with her canning. I didn’t become, I wasn’t an active participant per se until I became an adult and then went back and asked her how to do it.” Only nine individuals in the sample reported no family history of home canning and had self-taught about canning techniques. A few others (six respondents) learned how to can from friends or other non-familial individuals such as neighbors or co-workers. These respondents tended to be of younger ages.

Audrey (age 25): I first learned about it about three years ago. I was doing an internship on a farm, and the woman who was there would start, you know throwing things in jars and putting them on the stove and I didn’t really – I never had heard about it before, and she had been doing it her whole life. So that was like my first introduction to it even being a possibility, as something to do.

Michael (age 22): The first time I learned about it was probably a year ago. …I mean when you say, about, I'm thinking about oh, you can put things in a can and put them in a hot place and then preserve them. I mean, I remember the first time I actually canned was in my house I'm living in right now. …this [past] summer. It was probably July or August, when the bounty runs over. I mean I first learned about canning, I think, from my girlfriend, who had canned tomato sauce, last August, she had gotten a good recipe from Animal, Vegetable, Miracle [by Barbara Kingsolver (2007)], which is a pretty good book on the topic. Then I think when we were first getting together it was last winter and she made me some of that pasta sauce and popped the can and everything and I had never experienced that before; it was tomatoes from August, it's crazy. I knew that people did it, but it was a visceral experience.

Summer (age 32): …I’m kind of self-taught. Like, I don’t remember anyone in my family canning, particularly that I know of, but I’m sure that they did, probably my granny, not my mom, that I know of.
SP: But you were never around them canning?
Summer: No, no, I figured out canning from probably reading a book.

Home canning is a traditional foodway because it has been practiced by, and passed down through, multiple generations of Americans. However, social changes
occurring especially after World War II such as the increasing industrialization of retail foodstuffs and the relocation of much of the population from rural farms to urban centers has made home canning less relevant to survival and is no longer so widely practiced. Hence, younger generations today are less likely than former generations to have grown up with canning in their homes of origin. This study has observed that age, or generation membership, is a strong determinant of the canning experiences of the members of this sample. Differences between age groups among the canners in this study will be further explored in Chapter Six, with a special emphasis on generation and individuals’ current motivations to can.

Overview of Contemporary Home Canning Practices and Other Home Food Production and Preservation Techniques

This section presents a basic overview of what the contemporary practice of home canning looks like for the respondents in this sample. Some questions that are addressed here include: What foods are canned, and why? How is canning conducted? What do home canners do with the fruits of their labor?

The types of foods individuals reported canning were recorded in the following categories: Protein only (i.e., beans and meat) (1 respondent); Fruit only (1); Vegetables only, including tomatoes (7); Vegetables and fruit (8); Vegetables, fruit, and jelly/jam (25); Vegetables, fruit, jelly/jam, and meat (8). The most commonly canned items include tomatoes and tomato products such as salsa and tomato puree, pickled food products such as cucumber pickles, pickled beets, and dilly beans, green beans, applesauce, and jams made from various fruits. Canning typically occurs during late spring and summer months through harvest time of the year, though some respondents would freeze berries
and then can them into jam or jelly at a later date such as during the winter when they had more time for canning. All respondents except one (Summer) had canned at least one food item in 2012. Summer last canned in 2010 but said she hoped to do some canning in the 2013 season; she had been doing more home fermentation than canning after moving off the farm where she had previously worked, the farm from which she formerly sourced all her canning produce.

Quantities of food canned during 2012 varied from just nine quarts of tomato juice (by Sam, who shares a household with just his wife) to approximately 500 quarts (by Chris, who lives cooperatively with five other people). Nearly all respondents canned food that they and/or their families enjoyed eating, and they canned what they had at hand such as garden produce or what they could access through local sellers and venues. The canned foods primarily supplemented the canner and their family’s diets, as opposed to providing a primary source of nutrition. This was the case for all respondents except two, although many older members of the sample recalled growing up in households where poverty had motivated subsistence canning. Respondents’ motivations to do home canning will be reviewed in greater detail in the following chapter.

Respondents reported greater use of the boiling water bath technique for processing jars. Despite technological advancements in the safety of home pressure canner units, many respondents felt pressure canning was dangerous and said they were less afraid of water bath processing. Twenty-one respondents exclusively use the boiling water processing technique (“water bath”), seven exclusively pressure can, and another 21 alternate between both water bath and pressure canning depending upon the nature of the specific food product to be processed. One respondent (Jenni) uses neither water bath
nor pressure canning, and instead utilizes a process she learned from her mother in which filled jars are heated in her conventional oven until the lids seal. A few others reported occasionally using what is known as the inversion method of canning, where jars are filled with hot food, topped with lids, and then the jars are inverted to stand on the lids until the heat causes the lids to seal—a method considered unsafe according to the USDA. In general, canners are aware of the health risks of home canning and try to follow the rules of food safety to produce healthy foodstuffs.

Most canners consume the foods they produce themselves, or share it with family members or friends near and far. “Eat it!” was the enthusiastic and most common answer to the question: What do you do with most of the foods that you can? Additionally, most canners give their canned items as gifts to family, friends, and neighbors though just a few have reservations about doing so for varied reasons, below.

Ruth: We give it away and everything, yeah. Family. We got a large family, so the kids come home get it, the grandkids has learned to do the same. SP: Do you eat some of it yourself? Ruth: Oh yeah, we ate, that’s what we eat out of.

Megan: I probably consume like 90 percent of everything that I can and then a portion of it turns into like gifts for people.

Vicki: Well I use some, but I give a lot of them away. Share them with the family. I live alone now so, you know, I don’t go through that much, but, you know, I use some, for the most part I would say at Christmas I give half of what I canned away every year.

Rita: We eat it (chuckle). SP: Do you give any of it away? Rita: Yes, and I actually – yes, but I’m selective about what I give away. And I love my sister mostly, but she’s made several comments, “Oh, those can be great Christmas presents!” And I’m like, “Maybe.” So I’m kind of stingy.

SP: What do you do with most of the food that you can? Morgan: We eat it. I really don’t give it away as gifts. I don’t trust it enough to do that to somebody, but we eat it.
Where do canners obtain the foodstuffs that they can? Most home canners in this study grow a garden for food and can some of the food that they grow. Just two respondents had never raised gardens, and two more had gardened in the past but no longer do so due to aging and health concerns. Most of the foods canned were sourced from relatively close to home, if not from one’s own garden, then a nearby farm, orchard, or farmer’s market. Very little cash money would be exchanged for foodstuffs that a gardener canner would utilize for canning, except for spices or seasonings like “[s]pecialty items for a specialty recipe like a chutney or a relish or something” (Deb). The produce canners would be most willing to purchase were crops they were unable to grow themselves (e.g., not enough land on which to grow certain crops or raise livestock; lack productive fruit trees such as peaches or berry bushes) or to grow enough of (e.g., one’s own garden failed to produce a bounty of tomatoes in a given year).

Thomas: I make a lot of canned fruit, I love doing things like, if I have a peach crop I, because you know, it’s all based upon what I’m growing, so I don’t buy stuff to can, it’s all stuff that I grow myself.

SP: Where do you get the food that you can?
Audrey: The majority of it I grow, or if I know somebody who has something in particular that I want and I know what they’re doing – I’m really picky about it, so you know. I had a neighbor who had all these grapes that they didn’t want, so I got the grapes [for free]…But sometimes, like if I know that someone is organic I’ll go to the farmers’ market and buy something from them that I couldn’t grow myself, or couldn’t grow enough of myself.

SP: So do you sometimes buy the food that you can?
Audrey: Sometimes, but never from like a grocery store or anything like that. Only from, like a farm – just because freshness is such a huge factor, you know – you would only want to can stuff that you know has been picked in the last day or so.

SP: Do you buy the food that you can?
Taylor: Yeah. Which is another weird thing—I’m not a gardener. [Laughs] I’m like the one person who cans who doesn’t garden.
[Note: Taylor works in the local foods economy and thereby has access to purchase fresh produce, which she also sometimes receives as free gifts.]

SP: Whenever someone calls you and says “I’ve got this tree loaded with this fruit” would they just give you the produce for free? Vicki: Oh yeah, yeah. And, you know, once in a while, you know, like a friend of a friend will say like, for instance one of my old employees his brother had grown a ton of tomatoes and asked me I wanted to buy some of them, you know, so of course I bought them; he wanted a dollar a pound so of I course I took them. So it’s word of mouth, you know. ...So, you know, like Mark would call me, even though I haven’t seen him for eight years, he’ll call me and say “Hey, my brother’s got a ton of tomatoes, do you want to buy some?” You know, so it kind of happens like that. Or he’ll say, you know, “Hey, my cherry tree’s full, do you guys want to come over and pick?” Stuff like that.

So, concerns about the state of ripeness the food, as Audrey said, “freshness is such a huge factor,” and quality control generally motivate most canners to keep their produce acquisition close to home. The community networking and exchange of free food described by Vicki will be more fully explored in another section, below.

In addition to gardening, canners tend to engage in other forms of food preservation at home. Except for two respondents who did not use freezers, the rest froze foods in addition to canning and most practiced two or three further forms of food preservation at their homes such as storage/cellaring, drying, and fermentation. Some common items preserved via means other than canning include dried tomatoes (by sun, conventional oven, or electric dehydrator), cellaring or storage of root crops such as potatoes and onions as well as winter squash, and fermentation of cabbage into sauerkraut.

The home canners in this study also tend to engage in some or all of a variety of additional forms of domestic food production. The above mentioned techniques of food preservation might be utilized in any season to craft specialty products, more in the interest of taste or creation than preservation, such as yogurt making (fermentation) and
smoking meat (drying). Some make baked goods at home such as breads, pies, and the like. Some raise animals for food; others hunt for meat and process their own meat cuts and meat products such as sausages. And several are fond of foraging for “wild crafted” (Janet) foods like berries, persimmons, pawpaws, and mushrooms. Respondents’ interests in sourcing local foods for canning, and the knowledge and abilities they draw upon to preserve food via canning, likely support their procurement, production, and preservation of a variety of foods utilizing multiple means and techniques.

**Investments in Canning Materials, Workspace, and Time Investments in Future Food**

Becoming and being a home canner requires investments, both material and nonmaterial: investments of time, energy, money, and space in the household. In these ways we can begin to see how canners’ lives are organized around canning and the priorities and values present in or represented by their food preservation behaviors. For example, a canner’s world is significantly attuned to the growing seasons, as a significant amount of time is generally required to be scheduled into one’s usual calendar of activities for canning what is in season at the moment. The annual, seasonal cycles of canning what foods are at peak ripeness and freshness becomes a basic routine of life for many canners in ways that might not be as significant for less avid home food preservers.

Home canning also requires significant material investments in obtaining, first, the required equipment necessary to conduct canning, and second, the physical space and setup in which to can and also space to store canning equipment. While some dimensions of the latter are more or less ‘necessary’ for ease and convenience of home canning, many respondents talked about how much space canning requires (from counter space for
canning preparations such as coring tomatoes to building storage spaces such as cellars in which to store canned goods in glass jars). The importance of home canning in the lives of some of the canners interviewed for this study is proven by the fact that they designed and built their home kitchens (both indoor and outdoor kitchens), storage spaces, and in a few cases, entire homes around canning and food production and preservation practices.

A third investment is also made into a regular canning practice, an immaterial investment, which is that of time. Issues of time management, home canning, and the organization of canners’ schedules around its completion will lastly be explored in this section on material and immaterial personal investments in canning.

“Canning Is an Investment”: Equipment for the Long Haul

Canning requires equipment, some that is absolutely necessary and there are also some optional but very helpful tools. At the minimum, canning requires jars, lids and rings, a vessel in which to process jars, tools such as a knife for preparing raw foods, water, and a heat source. Other common tools utilized for canning include tongs or a jar lifter, measuring cups and spoons, hot mitts, funnels, strainers, bowls, cutting boards, additional pots or pans in which to sterilize jars and/or heat lids before processing, and utensils such as spoons and ladles. Specialty items in which some canners may invest include pressure canners, magnetic lid wands, power strainers, food mills (hand crank or electric), food processors, and crock pots. Investing in at least a minimum of the “right equipment” is very helpful to canners:

Joanne: Not that I want to, but I could can more stuff if, you know, you have to have the right equipment. It’s like any job, you have to have the right equipment; you have to have the right tool.

Phyllis: Yeah, it’s, the most important thing is to just, you know, have the right equipment. I mean, trying to do it without the right equipment is, it cannot be
fun for you. People may shy away from it, “Oh, how am I going to deal with this?” But if you have the right equipment, you know, a way to sterilize your jars efficiently and easily, and plenty of room.

Unfortunately, the initial investment in necessary canning equipment can be expensive. Many respondents noted that one drawback of home canning is the costs upfront when first starting to can, particularly the investment in a collection of glass jars and then maintaining that collection over time. Margaret was especially familiar with this, as she lost her former equipment in a house fire and had to replace everything.

Margaret: Yes, there are drawbacks to canning. There is an initial expense that is not insignificant. If you are going to invest in jars, you know – I had to replace all my jars [after the house fire]; when I added it up I thought, “My god! That’s a hunk of change!” And you know, I had had those jars for 20 years or 30 years, and they were all gone. You know, wow. And I had to buy all new equipment. And then it was hundreds of dollars by the time I got done with it all. But now it will last until I am dead and gone, but you know. Yeah, that’s a drawback. To get started is costly.

A few respondents described scouring yard sales for second-hand canning gear to avoid retail prices, and a lucky few had inherited pieces of canning equipment from family members and thereby altogether avoided purchasing some items themselves. Over time, though, most canners would agree that their financial investment in canning equipment is worth it and may even eventually help the canner save money.

Barbara: I think you save money by canning if you can every year. I don’t think, if you just have this whim that you want to can, to go out and can for the first time would be extremely expensive. Because canners are expensive, jars are expensive, the little things that you lift them up with, the funnels, you know, I mean it’s all expensive if you’ve never done it before. If you have that stuff, you know, if you have a canner, and you have jars, you know, and you just have to buy lids, then, you know, but even lids aren’t cheap anymore. …But if you were to just start off doing that you wouldn’t [save money] because it would cost you a fortune to get all that equipment. So it’s kind of an investment; canning is an investment.

Once a home canner has obtained the necessary tools with which to begin
canning, there is then the continual cost of non-reusable lids; most canners accept this cost as a necessary fact of canning. (There is one U.S.-based company that makes reusable canning lids, yet to be USDA approved as safe for home canning; only one respondent utilized this product.) Other than a few lifelong canners lamenting the gradual increases in the price of canning lids over time, very little comment was made about the ongoing necessary cost of lids. Only a few respondents said that they reused lids. Most respondents followed the recommended procedure outlined by Jack: “Lids are only one time. Rings: lifetime. Lids: one time.”

However, glass canning jars are another matter. The perpetual concern of jar loss and replacement often involves other individuals—the recipients of gifts of canned goods—who may or may not appreciate the canner’s basic need for, and continual cost investment in, canning jars. As Mark put it, “When you tend to give away, when you give somebody a canned jar, you usually don’t get your jar back.” And so many canners are frustrated by the lack of understanding of gift recipients—non-canners who do not share the canners’ lifestyle and norms—and lack of acknowledgement of the basic “rule” of home canning:

Vicki: Oh yeah, that’s the rule: you don’t get a jar next year if you don’t give me back the jar from this year.

John: The only thing we do is we tell you, if we don’t get the jars back you don’t get no more stuff. …That’s where the expense is, the jars.

It is not the case that home canners are reluctant to share their home canned foodstuffs; in fact, most are extremely generous with sharing the food they produce and are thrilled to receive empty jars back so that the cycle of creation, giving, and returning can continue:

Linda: Yeah, the benefits of canning I think are to share something that you made. …[W]hen you give it away it’s a personal thing that you’ve made. You
can go to the store and buy a jar of jelly pretty cheap, but [when you gift a home canned item to someone] they get the jar, they get the lid. I just picked up two jars from a neighbor yesterday; I walked over to [my neighbor’s] and I’d given her two things in canned jars and I come back, she had the jars empty. She wanted, of course she wants me to fill them up again, and I will with something else. Jars are a way of life. Those Mason jars are around for awhile.

In this way, it is not just the jars that last, but such cycles of giving, receiving, and returning can foster familial and, in Linda’s account, neighborly and community relationships—if the recipients understand and respect the “rule” of returning the jars to the canner! Otherwise, the loss of unreturned jars through gifting creates a continual expense, as noted by John above.

John: …[W]e’ve got friends that constantly want some of our goodies and you’ll never see that damn jar again, I don’t care how many times you ask them, you ain’t going to see that jar again. So we learned to give them the jars that are nonreturnable. …That way I don’t care.

He and his wife were not the only canners who improvised to reduce this financial loss by canning occasionally in re-purposed jars that had, for example, been originally purchased as store-bought spaghetti sauce or jars of mushrooms; but John’s account is notable in that he and his wife specifically canned items intended to become gifts in these jars of lower value and investment in anticipation of not having these jars be returned. But this deficit in the canners’ pockets is a measurement of a deep magnitude of love: the cost of unreturned jars might not be as significant a concern to home canners such as John if they were not so very generous with giving away their products and trying to help keep their community and extended families well fed.

As mentioned above, canning requires some basic equipment such as jars and a heat source, and beyond this there are additional specialty tools that have been developed to ease the labor of home canners and increase efficiency, such as jar lifters, electric
strainers and juicers, and even automatic jam making machines. Accomplishing canning without the aid of many tools, as well as canning with the assistance of the fanciest and most costly specialty tools, reveals the dedication to canning and passion for it experienced by the home canners in this study.

Seth: My least favorite parts of canning? …I don’t have the ideal tools. So like getting the boiling jars out of the water can sometimes be difficult. I’ll have like two things and I’m trying to scoop them out and it’s hot.

SP: Dangerous!

Seth: Dangerous, yes, so I don’t like that. We used to have great tongs that made it really easy but I misplaced them. Yes, but just all, you know, all the heat and the spurting, bubbling liquids everywhere.

SP: Well what are your favorite parts of the actual process of canning?

Maria: I love putting them in the jars. I love putting the stuff in the jar I guess. Because you get to see it and it’s – I mean, it’s just a fun process. I like the little funnel thing and my – and maybe you’ll ask me this – but I do have a very favorite tool [laughs] and that’s the little magnet thing that gets the lid. I just love that tool because I didn’t discover it for many, many years. And so when I finally discovered it, it was just like, ‘Oh, wow, I love this tool!’ …[It’s] just a fun thing to have, and you know, it just sort of makes you feel like it’s all very hygienic and you pick it up with that and you’re not futzing around with a hot lid, you know.

Maria is referring to a magnetic lid lifter, a small plastic wand with a magnet fitted to one end used to lift hot lids from simmering water; it is designed to prevent burns and protect sanitation during the canning process. (Lids must be heated to soften the rubber on their bottom side that adheres to and creates a seal on a glass jar.)

Not everyone experiences such pleasure in dealing with their canning equipment.

It takes a lot of effort to assemble one’s workspace and prepare equipment for canning:

Chrysta: It is, all my canning supplies are in our basement, so, you know, you have to bring up all these big kettles and all this stuff, and bring it, it’s exciting but, you know, you have to bring it all upstairs, and all the jars have to come upstairs, and we put up other tables, get everybody over and do, and then usually in the slow cooker then I make food, or make something else so that we’re not using the stove to cook or do, like to eat lunch or dinner, so I try to prepare as much as I can [in order to free up space and time for canning].
Sam: ...I just do it one time a year because you have to drag out the pressure cooker, wash, we have a dishwasher and we throw the jars in the dishwasher, get them like sterilized. It’s a big operation and it takes both of us...[to] drag all that stuff out. It’s just a hassle.

**Investments in Space and Setup**

In addition to acquiring the necessary (and sometimes, supplemental) equipment and tools, home canners also deal with numerous issues of space and setup for home canning. First are issues of space in relation to the process of canning. Even small-batch canning (one canner full or less at a time) can take over all available counter space in an average kitchen, as well as any available sink(s). Canners often expressed interest in having a more ideal setup for canning, especially in having a larger amount of physical space. Additional considerations are the architectural issues related to canning storage and the overall function of the home in relation to food preservation and production in general. Specialized storage features of homes, such as cellars and large closets, were highly valued by canners in this study. Also, specialized spaces within or outside the home wherein canning can conveniently be conducted, such as summer kitchens, were considered ideal.

The importance of having an efficient workspace was most often mentioned in tales of those who had canned with noted difficulty in less than ideal situations or locations. At the most basic level, access to running water and electricity assist in home canning:

Teresa: [Canning] is work, yes. And especially, you know, early in my career when I had a gas stove with no walls in my kitchen, we were building a house, and I would can tomatoes, and I canned peaches with no running water, you know, and then at that point, you know, you had to boil the jars to make sure that they were safe. So I had to carry, you know, get water from somewhere, because we had no running water at that time. Fortunately there were springs
and wells around where we carried our water. But that’s how important it was to me to can, is that I even did it when it was very, very hard to do. Now I have an air conditioned house, you know, with fans running, so when you put the hot pots on the stove it’s not as bad as, you know, it used to be.

Chris: We don’t have a great setup because we usually can in the workshop and our jars are in the basement. So we have to transfer everything over and we want to use the filtered water from the house even though we’re working on a stove in the workshop. So we’re transferring filtered water from the house out there. So it’s partially a setup problem.

When canning indoors in a conventional kitchen, counter space as well as stove size and number of burners are important considerations for home canners who have canned in cramped quarters.

Michael: …[M]y kitchen is tiny and everything in our kitchen is miniature. We have one of those small stoves and a small fridge, so we’ve done like a remarkable amount of food projects in such a small space.

SP: Can you tell me a story about some canning that you did—something that sticks out in your mind, good or bad?

Megan: …[M]y first thing I think about is like the location that we were trying to can in, like what’s the right setup. Not this summer but last summer we canned twice, one earlier in the year at our house at the time which was a pretty funky basement apartment with a ridiculously tiny kitchen. And we’re like, ‘OK, we’re going to can all these tomatoes in this tiny little space.’ There was no counter space whatsoever. So everything was like makeshift on the floor and it was really, really hot that day, probably in the 90’s or something. And, and then we have everything going on the stove and so it’s just like sweltering and kind of miserable.

With canning requiring so much equipment, space is required not only to do the canning itself but the equipment requires its own amount of space in which to store it either while not in use or the finished jars awaiting consumption. It is notable that respondents often noted the need for storage space when asked: Are there any drawbacks to canning? The following quotations are two examples of answers to this question:

Brenda: But in canning, the only thing I can tell you is there’s a lot of jars, there’s a lot of rings, there’s a lot of this, you’ve got to have a place for that, and what have you. A lot of people don’t want to deal with having all of that stuff
around.

Vicki: Well, you know, it’s hard to, you have to have room to store all the stuff, especially when you accumulate jars as you go. I mean we’ve had as many as, oh I think at one point I had, when I first moved into my house…I bet we had 20 boxes of canning jars. And this year I think was, I mean jelly jars we usually have to buy because those you give away the most, but for the most part we get almost all our jars from yard sales. So you got to have somewhere to keep all that stuff. And so I think that’s a challenge to canning.

Moving household locations thereby presents unique challenges for home canners, who must then “schlep” (Maria) their canned goods and canning gear between locations. For a period of time in her life, Charlene moved frequently and felt weighted down by her canning gear: “…[Y]ou have to have equipment that becomes a drag to move.” Several canners including Charlene noted that once they felt they were living in a more permanent housing situation they could expand their canning endeavors. After buying a house, Charlene “got seriously into it” when she then felt like “‘I’m gonna stay here, I got a place to put this stuff.’” Home ownership also expands canners’ abilities and interests in gardening, as that activity also benefits from one being rooted in the same physical place for extended periods of time. Summer, who recently moved from a farm into a small city, said she “…definitely hope[s] to can more when maybe we have, you know, more land, and a giant, enormous garden.” So a canning lifestyle is ideally place-based and low-mobility. Rural home ownership also tends to offer land ownership and the opportunity to create larger gardening spaces.

Pursuing issues of space a bit further and deeper, Phyllis shared some revealing insights regarding the importance of home architecture and how changes over time reflect changing patterns of home food production.

SP: So, are there any drawbacks to canning?
Phyllis: Oh, sure. It doesn’t fit well with a lot of the modern lifestyle because there really isn’t much to throw away. [Laughs] I mean, it’s like, you’re reusing your containers, largely, and you’ve got to have somewhere to store them and houses aren’t built for storing jars. And people aren’t used to washing something and reusing it. They’re very used to just winging it in the trash and down to the landfill. So the drawbacks are kind of a retooling of houses and mostly how people think. …Like I was saying earlier, we built our house centered around food. All parts of it, except for probably where we’re sitting right now, have to do with food in some way. …So yeah, I think there are drawbacks. And then of course you’ve got to have somewhere to store it after you’ve canned it, you know? Houses aren’t built with cellars anymore, per se. They might have a basement, and you can do something with that, but you’ve got to have some know-how or hire someone to do it for you, and it used to be every house had a cellar. You couldn’t live without it.

Phyllis: I mean, you do need some room [to do canning] …I’m so used to be able to make a huge mess and cover every counter. We built our kitchen specifically knowing that we were going to be doing a lot of canning, so we made it on purpose, giant with lots of counters because we knew we were going to need it. And most people think a small kitchen is good because it’s hogging up your living room or bathroom or whatever else you need. Well, since we didn’t really need those things; we really needed the kitchen.

While Phyllis’s account is more unique than representative of home canners in this study—she gardens extensively and grows and preserves nearly all of the food she and her husband eat all year round—Phyllis is not alone in her interest in building a space conducive to canning, both for the processing and the storage of finished canned goods. I heard about several kitchen remodeling projects that took into account the demands of a canning lifestyle. Margaret cans in her utility room located off her garage, and stores filled jars there in “cupboards made just for them.”

Margaret: …Now I have a triple sink; I didn’t before the [house] fire. But I always did can out there. When I first started canning and we lived on Grosvenor Street, I canned in the kitchen until the wallpaper came off the wall, and I decided that was not terribly smart. So I got a very small gas range put in in the basement and we used to store all the jars down there, we would boil them and put them in the cupboard down there. When we built the house that we had, we included a facility for canning now in the utility room. Because it gets in your way in the kitchen.
When Joanne “redid” her kitchen, she said that “…wanting to use my hot bath canner on my stove influenced what kind of stove I bought. Because some of them, you couldn’t use that canner on, I thought, ‘Hmm, then I can’t have that kind of stove,’ so I just bought the old regular coil kind, which I can still use.” Other canners mentioned smaller home renovations intended to increase, especially, storage space for canning.

Summer: Well we turned a closet into a pantry I guess, because especially where we live now, yeah, there’s not a lot of cabinet space, and canning does take up a lot of that. So there’s kind of like this over the stairs closet that wasn’t very useful but [my partner] put a bunch of shelves in so that I can hold lots of cans and jars and things.

Similarly, Stephanie has plans to revamp her existing kitchen storage area, and redo her family’s mudroom area for more canning storage. A handful of canners [June, Thomas, and Danny] had built outdoor kitchens or work areas in which to do their canning in other buildings outside, thereby keeping the extra moisture and heat out of the main house. Canning occurs most often occurs during the very hottest time of the summer and the extra heat can be particularly unpleasant to cope with. Others expressed interest in creating their own outdoor kitchens to do their canning, and some had modified their workstations to do canning outside, like the above quoted Chris who cans in the workshop in a separate building from the main house. Both Eric and Brenda use turkey fryers outside the house to do their canning.

Thomas: I don’t do it in the house, I do it my barn, and that way I’m not heating up the house and humidifying the house, when you’re fighting against this humidity.

Brenda: And I’ve started canning, I’ve used my turkey cooker and I’ll set my pressure canner out in the garage and canned out in the garage because it keeps the kitchen a little cooler. Don’t have to run the air conditioner as hard.

Summer: …I dream about outdoor kitchens with like, yeah like the summer kitchen where you can can out of your house. That would be awesome.
The spatial requirements of the work of canning and the effects of the process of canning—namely, the production of much heat and steam—instill an interest in some home canners to devise the most comfortable workstation possible within their means. For some, this means moving canning outside of the main dwelling’s kitchen and into another existing building on their property such as a barn or garage. Others may only “dream,” like Summer, about an outdoor canning kitchen or they may actually be able to invest in construction of such a space or in a home kitchen remodel to better suit the needs of their canning practice.

*Time and “Mental Investment” in Home Canning*

There are multiple aspects of home canning that are connected to issues of time. Home canners bank on time: canning and food preservation in generally is essentially an investment in time, as most canners do not eat the foods that they can right away but instead store them for future use—sometimes several years ahead. An extremely important time-related aspect of home canning is the importance of harvesting food at its peak moment of ripeness and then quickly preserving it in that state before it has time to begin to deteriorate or spoil. Time is a concern relevant to the actual process of canning itself—a primary fact of preservation is that performing home canning takes time to do. Especially among canners who work outside the home, and among them, especially those who work full-time outside the home, often experience a time crunch when harvest season calls the canner to revise her or his already full schedule to make time to do canning. But the choice to make and spend time canning is, for the most part, optional and reflects a lifestyle choice on the part of many canners whose lives and routines cycle with the changing seasons.
To preserve a moment of time in a jar, one must invest time in the efforts required to do so. Most canners in this study would call canning “time consuming,” or, in the words of Stacey, “it’s a little bit of a time suck.”

Stacey: I think that it, the biggest drawback is that it’s time consuming and this is not, you know, you have to really have to set aside a chunk of time out of a day and for some people every day or every other day, you know, to, you know, and I think that that’s hard for people to take that kind of a slice out of their day and devote it totally, this is what I’m doing for the next five hours. And it’s hard to get that kind of time to yourself to be able to do that.

Audrey: It’s a lot of time, you know, you’re blocking off a whole day if you are doing tomatoes.

SP: Well how do you experience canning? For example, do you find it to be work? Is it fun?

Eric: It depends. It can be both. It depends on what else I have going on at the time with my job or, you know, I have two jobs. …if the other job is real busy and there’s a lot of tomatoes to do, then it can be a hassle. But if I have the time, it’s enjoyable and I don’t have to, and I don’t feel stressed and don’t feel like, you know, I’ve got to get this done right away and it’s pretty enjoyable.

In addition to the time spent actually preparing food to be preserved by washing and chopping, and then the time of processing food in the canner, one must also have the time and “mental investment” to be able to plan and prepare a canning project:

Sally: Drawbacks to canning? Well it’s time consuming. So for somebody who is used to microwaving everything, and going to the store and having everything instantly there, which is part of our culture, it’s not like, you know, a computer, it’s not fast. So some people would find that as a drawback. You have to plan, it’s not, it’s hard to do it on the spur of the moment, because you really have to gather your materials, and you have to have that window of time. So there’s some coordinated effort to it, which again, I think if you’re not used to that it could be a drawback.

Megan: …I love canning but it does take a lot of planning and preparation time. And having that mental investment to actually prepare to do the project was something I didn’t choose to prioritize until more recently. So I feel like I have to justify myself.
From what we know so far about home canners, clearly they are a highly self-motivated group who take on the work of home food production despite the availability of numerous, cheap convenience foods. Yet even those canners who truly prize the results of their labor live busy lives that involve numerous other responsibilities and pursuits such as paid work outside the home, caretaking for family members, and leisure and rest. As Megan said, canning requires a “mental investment” in the planning and preparation required for canning, and this form of investment in canning must be prioritized into canners’ busy schedules; canning does not usually occur at the spur of the moment. It requires a prearranged investment of time. As Joanne said, “It’s going to be a mess for half a day at least, so I’m trying to fit it into my schedule.” Many other respondents also reported that it is challenging to schedule canning into their already full lives:

Taylor: So my boyfriend, he goes to the [market] pretty regularly and he bought a huge amount of green beans. It was like a big enormous thing… and so I canned those, and luckily it was good timing, because the timing has to be right. It has to be just an enormous amount of food shows up and then I’ll have the next two days off, okay, without anything planned, for hours, yep.

Anna: It’s work because it takes some time and you have to figure out, OK, I can’t, you know, I’ve got a half an hour. That’s not enough time. You really have to put in chunks of time. So to figure out how to make sure that happens [is difficult], especially in the fall because I teach. So it, you know, sometimes means staying up late to get it done. So it feels like work in that way.

Home canners who also work outside the home have very limited time at home with which to do their canning. Megan had just taken a job leading a local nonprofit organization, and she said that though she would like to can more, “time is my biggest constraint.” In order to complete a canning project, some canners will break up the project into multiple days. “You know we put up so much stuff you learn the corners to
cut, and how to save time,” said John. Here are some ways that they and other canners find time to can:

SP: Is it difficult for you to find the time to can?
Morgan: It is; it is. I have it down where I can do some things one evening, and then when I come back the next evening I can pick it up and, you know, say one night I’ll just blanch all the tomatoes, and make the juice, then the next night I’ll actually can it.

Taylor: And that project took several days because you know, I had to go to work or I had some sort of thing and so then I would roast them and then I would put them in the refrigerator and at certain times I had some canning and some roasting all at once and then all the chopping.

Thomas: …[W]hen I can I use a lot of crock pots. …And so what I did was I, you know, I’ll put my stuff in crock pots and then I’ll get the pressure canner going the next morning, and then finish up the next morning. And then I will repeat the process, right. And so I’ll do the same the next night and I’ll keep going. …[A]gain, just being busy and having a lot of stuff going on, because you do have to do [other] things…

John: We do it in stages, I’ll call it stages. …[W]e don’t say ‘We’re going to can 14 quarts of tomatoes today.’ …So one day I’ll go downstairs and I’ll get 14 jars, and I always clean my jars. …So we’ve got our jars ready one day, maybe the next day we’ll get them all diced up, maybe that evening we’ll fill them. My God, you put them on a boiling bath for 20 minutes and turn it off and go to bed. …The next morning you get them out, set them there, they’re all sealed. You label them, month and year, and take them downstairs. If you just learn to do things little stage at a time it’s really not that much work.

They may even postpone canning into another season altogether—specifically, winter.

James: And this is just the spare, when I’ve got time because I [work outside the home] all summer, seven days a week, so my blackberries I put them in gallon Ziplocs and freeze them and in the winter time, I’ve got more time, then I get them out and make jam.

John: But a lot of the fruits, peaches will come on, somebody will call us and say ‘Man, we got apples out the butt. Come get some of these apples.’ Well I’m real good with a knife so I’ll sit around here and whittle up a bunch of apples, we don’t peel the damn things, we just slice them up, core them, put in zip lock bags, or freezer bags, or the vacuum seal bags. In fact, those apples right there in that jelly, that was made of apples that we had over two years ago, but they were vacuum sealed so they didn’t go bad. We put cinnamon and nutmeg on them when we vacuum seal ‘em to keep them from discoloring. So, you know, when
there’s an abundance of things you learn to put off to an easier time. A lot of the jellies we make are right before Christmas.

During some stages of life, some individuals were simply unable to make the time to can and therefore encountered a pause in their canning careers. Time periods or stages of life wherein people noted that they did not do any canning because they did not have enough time include: while raising children, during graduate school, military service, and while building or rebuilding their house(s) or various combinations of these. The presence of small children in the household can impede canning altogether or detract from its experience, although many respondents stressed the disconnection most Americans have from the sources of the food today and the importance of teaching children where food comes from. Most canners in this study were living in households without children; 29 households represented in this study contained just two people.

Rita: And I’m a stay at home mom – if I weren’t a stay at home mom, there’s no way I would be doing this.
SP: Why?
Rita: [Chuckles] Because it’s a pain. It takes a lot of time and, it takes a lot of time. It’s very rewarding but it takes a lot of time and if I had to work 40 hours a week, all the extra time would be dedicated to having fun with my kids.

SP: [So] you didn’t start the canning and intense gardening until after your kids were pretty well grown up?
Mark: Well we was too busy in our lives. I mean, they were in the band; they were in this and playing football or baseball or basketball. Our life when they were growing up was their lives. Whatever they did, we followed them.

Sally: Yeah, I’d say now I do [can regularly], because I have a big garden, so probably for the past 10 years I have. But when I was going to grad school there was just no way, and for awhile, when I was a single mom and going to grad school there was just really, it was hard. So it’s been more of like on/off thing until like the last I want to say 10 years, where it’s been real consistent.

Fay: We had a bulldozer come in and do that [demolition], and so we didn’t have a garden for a couple of years, so I didn’t can those years, when building the house and when the boys were really little. It was too much to watch them and have a garden and everything, too.
In addition to requiring long stretch of time and concentration, canning is also extremely time-sensitive. Canning must be done on the food’s schedule, not necessarily the canner’s schedule. So, another factor that increases a home canners’ stress in finding time or feasible means to do canning is that the produce “…won’t wait on you” (Brenda); canning should be done while food is fresh, and the foods most ideal for canning tend to be those with a “short window” (Cora) of time regarding its peak ripeness. Foods that hold well are typically those preserved via storage techniques, such as cellaring potatoes or winter squash. Therefore, the precious seasonal food at hand can itself create a sense of a time crunch: canners feel compelled by the food itself to can it quickly.

Brenda: So once you learn how to can, it’s just an automatic, the only thing that you have to plan on when you raise your own garden and you’re going to can, remember, it won’t wait on you. You have to be ready when it’s ready.

John: It keeps you busy [all summer]. But things come on at a certain time. I like potatoes because potatoes will wait on you. …Sweet corn doesn’t wait on you, it’s got a timeframe of ‘Hey I’m ready, come and get me and eat me or preserve me’, plus it’s very time consuming to preserve.

SP: And so what are some of the drawbacks of canning?
Eric: You got other things to do and it’s time to can. Today’s the day.

Deb: …I guess the part that is the most challenging, and this sounds kind of silly, is, is being in the mood to do it the day it’s going to explode if I don’t. It dictating the time it has to be done rather than I might have plans already, you know. And so having to, having to mess with my schedule. I do [paid work] and there were a couple of things that I didn’t get put up this year fast enough or get everything done. That kind of, that makes me feel guilty, that part of it. The guilt factor if I don’t get enough of it put up and some stuff gets too mature and, you know. You have to do it when it’s ready. That’s my least favorite part.

As Deb suggests in the above quotation, some canners feel a very strong sense of obligation toward food and a responsibility to see it through its most useful life cycle, whether that involves eating it fresh, canning or preserving it by other means, or passing
it on to someone else who can attend to it. As will be discussed in further detail in 
Chapter Six on the reasons why the canners in this study do home canning, many 
respondents hold a strong ethic of ‘waste not’ toward food, especially the prized summer 
crops of produce such as local tomatoes that are a once a year opportunity.

Cora: I mean it’s, I think that there’s work involved. Like I set goals for myself 
and, you know, I take it very seriously. If there’s a thing of tomatoes—we have 
this sort of like our eyes are bigger than our stomachs sort of problem in our 
house, where at one point in the summer there was just unbelievable amounts of 
produce sitting on our porch, like that’s needed to get processed. And it was, I 
mean I would deliberately not do things, …I wouldn’t go out unless I had 
accomplished the canning that needed to get done. …Because it is, it’s a job, it’s 
a responsibility, you know, but it’s also, I really enjoy it. And the benefit at the 
end of it far outweighs, you know, the sacrifices that I would have to make, how 
much time, you know, because you have this short window that food grows, that 
food stays fresh once it’s been picked and, you know, you only have so much 
time when you can can things and then they’re gone. But when you have it in 
the wintertime there’s no, I don’t know, there’s just nothing that feels that good.

Despite all the time pressures described above, investing time in canning is a 
choice that most individuals in this study freely make—an optional activity that they 
choose to take on and choose to fit into their busy lives. In this way, canning is a lifestyle 
choice; it is a choice about what an individual decides is important in their lives, and 
choices about how to spend one’s time. Canning may at times feel like an obligation, and 
one more thing to jam into one’s busy day, but it has many rewards. Also, as 
aforementioned, canners tend to be active individuals who share a strong work ethic; they 
tend not to embody the cultural stereotype of a ‘couch potato’ and are very proud of this 
productive disposition.

Leo: Any drawbacks to canning? I don’t know. [Laughs] I’m trying to think. 
Time, but I think it’s, there’s plenty of time. I think I’m a proponent of doing 
something like canning instead of watching TV. So I could always draw on that 
as a good analogy. It’s like, well, just do canning instead of watching TV.

SP: Are there any drawbacks to canning?
Thomas: Well I mean obviously, I mean it takes you quite a lot of time, right, but again that depends, that’s not really a drawback, right, because what would they rather do? You know, sit in front of the idea box [i.e., television], or do something? Right?

Brenda: And so when people tells me, ‘Oh, I just don’t have time to can.’ Well, what do you do? Well, they may be out shopping and doing things like that. But, and it could be, I don’t know, I enjoy working in the dirt and the flowers. And I used to sew and I used to make all my girls’ clothes when they was little and going to school. And I’d make my own curtains and different things like that. I’ve quilted, made my own dishtowels, crocheted them or knit them; it’s whatever you choose to do.

So, for some home canners, time use reflects their views on food, work, and leisure as well as broader issues such as the environment, politics, and the economy. Canning is a choice that they make and it is a central part of their lifestyle. Their life routines are structured around canning and the natural seasons, and therefore ‘finding time’ to can is not a question: it is, for some, a fact of life.

SP: What would happen to you and/or your family if you did not can food?
Iris: I’d have a lot more time in the summer. [Laughs] I don’t know. Like I said, I like being involved in. It’s just part of my life. It’s just part of what we do. It’s hard to think about what if we didn’t, you know?

SP: Are there any drawbacks to canning?
Sue: Well it does take time, so if you have other, if you have competing demands for your time I could see where that would be a problem.
SP: Do you have trouble finding time to can?
Sue: No, I just, it’s kind of, at this point it’s just what I do at that time of the year. [Laughs] It’s kind of like the spring is prep for the garden, and then it’s the putting in the garden, and then it’s weeding the garden and mulching the garden, and then there’s this few weeks usually during the year when it’s watering the garden, and then it’s harvesting, you know, from the garden. And when it’s harvesting I’m probably not weeding, so at the end of, when the harvesting season is over then it’s cleaning up the garden and putting it to bed for winter and then preparing for next year’s garden. So it’s the cycle, it’s become a cycle, so it’s something that it’s just part of what I do. But it’s taken time for that, you know, for that to be, you know, is kind of how I see it, but that’s just you know. …Not a drawback, and that’s just how it is.

Chris: Yes, I mean it’s, to me, it’s more about a way to spend your life and your time. So, you know, you could spend your time doing many other things like
going to the movies or watching TV or you could spend it in summer afternoons, you know, cutting things up and packing them into a jar. So I’m not saying any of this is a drawback. I’m just saying it’s got to be a part of the way that you want to live is what, I think, it comes down to….Enjoying the work has just got to be a part of it. [Chuckles] …Stores are relatively close to, you know, a lot of people and yes. And by and large, food’s pretty cheap. So, yes, you have to be pretty self-motivated to want to do it.

As we have seen, canning requires significant investments of canners’ material resources in the equipment and tools required for canning, the creation of an appropriate area and setup in which to conduct canning, and investments of time. For those who choose to pursue it, canning is a lifestyle that structures a canner’s world, even in terms of time and space. While they could choose to do other things with their time and lives, such as watch television or shop for premade foods from grocery stores, the fact that home canners choose to produce their own food reflects the importance of their relationship to food and their values in home food production and hard work. If home canning was easy and completely pleasant and safe to conduct—which it is not, as will be explored below—perhaps it would be more mainstream among Americans today rather than a traditional foodway preserved among a minority.

The Embodied Process of Home Canning: “It’s Very Physical Sometimes, the Pleasure of Canning”

Canning is a full-body, sensory experience. As Rita said, it is “very physical.” It entails physical labor, and the risk of bodily harm. The canner’s body is subject to stressful, often long-lasting and repetitive tasks such as cutting and trimming produce. As mentioned above regarding workspace setup, the heat produced by canning is often enough to drive others and sometimes even the primary canner out of the home kitchen; the indoor canning work environment becomes increasingly unpleasant as the stove heats
up and large pots of water begin to boil. There is also risk of physical harm by burns (both chemical from peppers and physical from steam and water), cuts, and, at worst, the lethal risk of not processing food safely and consuming something spoiled. Canning is a full-bodied process that involves all of the physical senses. Seeing the bad spots and cutting them off produce, for example; smelling the aroma of herbs and spices going into a tomato sauce; touching foods of various textures and handling hot liquids and steam; hearing the satisfying ‘pop’ of lids successfully sealing onto processed jars; and last but not least, tasting one’s product.

This subsection on canning and the body will begin with some words from those canners for whom canning is a multi-sensory experience, who appreciate all aspects of the physicality of canning as it involves all of one’s facilities. Here are accounts from two women canners who enjoy the process of canning via every physical sense, and experience it as a pleasurable “sensual thing”:

Deb: …And so [from canning] I get a lot of aesthetic pleasure, a sensual pleasure. I love the smells. I love, of course, the taste, but I get more than taste out of it. I get smell, you know, olfactory, is that the word? The big word for it? I like the visuals. I like the textures even. I like, I like sliming off those beet skins and getting purple hands, you know. [Laughs] I like all of that, sensual thing.

SP: So what are your favorite parts of the process of canning?
Cora: I really love, I mean obviously the growing is so great. And then, you know, the harvesting of it, and then just going through and like when you’re, you know, trimming out, say like a tomato, you know, you’re coring it, and slicing it up, and you just get to look at each piece of produce…and so really kind of developing a relationship with the food that’s going in there. And then adding spices, and herbs and flavors to the thing, you know, adding it in there. And then pulling them out after they’ve sat in the water bath, and putting them on the, you know, on the counter to cool down, and listening to them ‘pop.’ And then seeing them all lined up and all beautiful colors. Those are all great parts for me.
Below, this section will further explore each physical sense (feeling/touch, sound, aroma, sight—with a discussion of taste following in Chapter Six) in greater detail.

*The Feel of Canning: “Hot, Sweaty Work”*

To set the stage for this exploration of canners’ physical experiences involved in the process of canning, let us begin with a look at the overall scene of home canning.

While some canners argue that the step-by-step process of canning is not *hard* work, most agree that even the smallest canning projects leave a lengthy wake of cleaning in their aftermath. Cleaning up the kitchen during and after canning does feel like work.

SP: Do you have a least favorite part of the process of canning?
Vicki: Clean up! Clean up, you know, I mean it’s just messy, it is messy you know, when you’re peeling a bushel of tomatoes there are going to be tomato seeds everywhere. They’re going to be on your ceiling, on your face, in your hair, on the floor, on the dog. So that’s, you know, it’s messy, but it’s, you know, it’s part of the process. You can’t have one without the other.

SP: How about least favorite parts of the process of canning? …
Sally: Cleaning, cleaning, cleaning, yeah.
SP: Like cleaning up afterwards?
Sally: Yeah. I wouldn’t say we’re the neatest people, so like the stove top is dirty, and you got all your just stuff you got to clean, you got this huge canning thing you got to dump and clean. It’s just, and then the pan that you’ve cooked everything down in you’ve really got to, so…there’s a lot of things to wash and clean. …I mean it looks like, ‘Wow, our kitchen’s really well used’. But it’s, yeah, you look in one area, ‘Oh, I cleaned this’ and you turn around, ‘Oh, OK, I’ve got to clean this.’

Kesla: …[A friend] was like, ‘You want these elderberries? They’re leaking; put them in the back of your truck but you can have them.’ I was like ‘Yes’ immediately, you know. I don’t turn down elderberries because I know how hard it is to pick them. …So eight gallons of frozen elderberries, despite their leakage, was too big a treasure to pass up and I put them in the back of the truck and I set them on the front porch step, that turned a lovely shade of purple, and throughout the day I thawed them in a large pan on top of the woodstove and just sort of let like as much of the juice leak out as it wanted to under the bags and I would pour that out. And then I started by just putting them through the food mill… Except the size of the seeds per the size of the elderberry, it gunks up really fast. So I would be grinding it and then I would get to the point where it would get really hard because all those seeds were stuck under there
and it would pop open and then it would spray elderberry pulp everywhere. And so I had like all these like splatters of elderberry pulp on me, on my glasses, on my skin, on my appliances. …Just all over the kitchen in general, and I did quite a bit of cleaning afterwards.

Stains, especially from fruits and berries, on one’s kitchen counters, utensils, towels, and on one’s person are de rigueur. But by far the most challenging physical aspect of home canning is the heat. Canning most often occurs during the hottest time of summer in Ohio, and itself produces a large amount of heat.

Sam: …I dread doing it because it’s so hot in the summer time and I have an air conditioner but I hate to crank that up and create heat when you’re trying to cool the house down. …I mean, it’s such a hot [operation], it’s usually the hottest time of year, too, July or August when you’re doing this.

June: I don’t like the heat. And I am not fond of hot, humid summers and that’s what you get in Ohio. And the canning process exacerbates it.

Taylor: It is funny though, of course it’s always the hottest part of the summer. And I do have some clothes that I know are good canning clothes because it’s like this shirt is like, the smallest shirt I have, so I’m like wearing the least amount of clothes. [Laughs]

For many respondents, the physical experience of canning can be summarized by two words: hot and dripping. Joanne laughed while telling a story of staying up until two or three in the morning to finish a canning project, with “[s]weat pouring off your face.” Megan told me about canning tomatoes in a “pretty funky basement apartment with a ridiculously tiny kitchen” while “…it was really, really hot that day, probably in the 90’s or something. And, and then we have everything going on the stove and so it’s just like sweltering and kind of miserable.”

SP: What are your least favorite parts of the process, the process of canning? …Megan: Yes, the heat definitely. It gets tiresome and I think just sometimes the duration is one of my least favorite parts, that it does, you know, it’s about three-quarters of the way through the project and you’re like OK, seriously, I want this to be over. I’m ready to go sit down and it’s not really until stuff gets in that water and then, yes, maybe you have a 20 minute break.
Janet similarly said, “it’s a lot of hot, sweaty work” that her husband and children avoid.

Janet: [My husband] might finish the last batch with me, but no, in general that is so hot in that kitchen by the time I’m done, there’s just, it’s dripping from the ceilings, and you know it’s pretty intense, that they stay out of there.

Another unpleasant manifestation of heat in the canner’s kitchen can come in the form of burns. There are a lot of hot liquids involved in canning, as well as a hot stove and various vessels upon it. Anna said that she kept her daughters away from canning with the pressure cooker, as her mother had done with her, “…until they were older because it does feel dangerous. You know, there’s really, you know, some pretty hot steam coming out sometimes.” Not everyone’s mother was so cautious:

Deb: …Jars are hot, water is boiling, syrups are scalding, you know. My mother had a scar on her hand and she got that from as a little baby, a little toddler, sticking her hand in a hot, scalding jar of jelly.

One of my respondents was also burned by his hungry hastiness trying to consume a jar he had just processed and removed from the pressure canner:

SP: Can you tell me a story about some recent canning that you did, that’s like memorable?
Shannon: No. I mean not anything exciting. I did forget that when you take the beans out of the pressure cooker and then immediately open them they’ll blow up in your face.
SP: That happened?
Shannon: Yeah, but it mostly just got the hand. So that was dumb. You got to remember they’re under pressure, I was so hungry, beans come out ‘I’m so hungry, I want to eat something,’ poof! Oh yeah, that’s right.
SP: Oh, not the canner—you opened a jar?
Shannon: Not the canner, the beans [in a jar that was just taken out of the pressure canner]. Yeah because you open all these things, and you’re all hungry and you go ‘Oh, I’ll eat one,’ and pop, and it goes poof!
SP: Did you get burned?
Shannon: I mean yeah, it got my hand a little bit, but it wasn’t so bad.

One of Seth’s least favorite parts of canning is, “…just all, you know, all the heat and the spurtng, bubbling liquids everywhere. …It’s messy and, yes, often you get little
shots of something hot on you.” Jenni said she disliked “burning your fingers,” a mishap for which there is plenty of opportunity. Megan said that she really likes putting the filled jars into the canner, “even though I get burned a lot when I do that.” And Fay described an efficient, yet somewhat risky trick she had learned from her former husband’s sisters involved draining tomato pulp through a pillowcase to make paste or ketchup. But during the lengthy process, she says what often happens is “I scald my fingers” handling the pillowcase and boiling tomato water.

This element of physical harm extends as a threat in multiple directions with canning. A lot of canners had injured themselves with knives, like James, who said “I cut myself a lot of times, cutting up [fruit and produce].” While I heard numerous frightening stories of jars and pressure canners exploding, surprisingly no one sustained any injury from the shards of metal or glass—which, in one story recounted to me by Elizabeth about a neighbor’s disaster, was found in the baby’s crib in the adjoining room after a canner exploded. My respondents expressed fear of jars breaking during processing, which can occur with any method of canning (pressure, water bath, or otherwise). Like Joanne said, “…it’s really dangerous so you don’t want too many people hanging around in case a jar would burst or something like that.”

Another threat of physical harm is the risk of illness from the consumption of improperly canned foodstuffs. While no one in this study reported becoming ill from home canned foods, most were aware of the threat of illness or death from potential pathogens in spoiled or contaminated canned goods even if they were not particularly concerned about this risk regarding their own canning. When asked if they were concerned with food safety regarding home canning, 28 answered yes, while five said
they were somewhat concerned. Several of the 17 respondents who said they were not concerned about food safety with their home canning explained that they had no worries about their products because they were in control of the entire process and could ensure its cleanliness and safety. While a few canners would knowingly take risks occasionally, overall this sample of canners was concerned with following approved procedures for safe home canning to prevent the risk of illness or death. Here are some responses to the question: *Are there any drawbacks to home canning?*

Mark: Yes, you could screw a batch up and kill yourself; botulism, you know.

Janet: Burning your fingers and stuff. Broken jars in the canner suck. I guess, you know, I guess if somebody got sick off of it. I’ve never heard of anybody really getting sick off of it, not me personally; I’m sure people do.

Margaret: Yeah, it’s hard work. And it’s potentially dangerous. …[Y]ou can burn yourself. You can cut yourself. And if you’re using a pressure canner, you can screw up pretty easily a lot. Or you cannot process the food right and get sick. Yes, there are drawbacks to canning.

Though canning can be dangerous, home canners are not deterred by heat, threat of injury or illness, nor the hard work required. Another question I asked of all respondents addresses the work versus leisure aspects of canning: *How do you experience canning? Is it like, work, or fun, or both?* Responses to this query varied, though generally most respondents answered that it is both work and fun. If they found no fun or pleasure in canning, they likely would not do it because canning requires arduous physical labor.

Linda: … It sometimes is very tiring but I have no ill thoughts about canning.

Deb: It’s very hard work. I’m very tired when I’ve done a batch of something; I’m tired. My legs are tired from standing in the kitchen. My back hurts sometimes.

SP: Is it like work, or fun or both?
Audrey: I used to get really, really cranky the first year I canned because it’s such a long process. Now, this year, I had a lot more fun with it. And I think part of that is that I was doing it with more people. The first year I was kind of the only one who was into it intensely, but it was exhausting. It was good, but it was exhausting. …like, when you’re canning multiple batches of something, you’re sweaty because you’re standing over this boiling water and you’re standing for like seven hours—unless you can chop while sitting down, which I can’t. So there would be days when I am like “I have been standing for seven or eight hours,” and you know, just pouring sweat because I just had boiling water in my face. I probably got burned in three different places, you know. And it’s one of those things that like – I so value what it is, that it’s worth it to me to do that, but especially when I first started I was like this is such a frustrating process. [Laughs]

Additionally, the gardening or farming and produce picking that often go along with home canning also requires physical exertion. Depending on the crop, harvesting can be particularly painful, especially if it involves thorny berry bushes or crops grown low to the ground.

SP: Do you have a least favorite part of the process of canning?
Gary: The least favorite part for me is the picking, it’s the hardest thing. I have a real bad back and that hurts.

Rita: I become truly greedy when it comes to picking berries. And it’s more fun than a video game – it’s very sensory. It’s just like, ‘Oh, there’s one! And there’s one! Oh, that one’s not ripe! Darn it, something ate off of that one.’ So that’s a local farmer on the other side of town. …I do a lot of picking and my back really hurts when I’m done.

Chrysta: But probably my least favorite is when we have to pick the tomatoes, and then just taking them from outside to inside and washing them. I mean after you start into the process it’s fun, you know, it goes really fast, but it’s just washing, and scrubbing, and that’s probably the hardest, a lot of lifting.

Chris: …[W]e do a lot at a time. And it comes at a pretty stressful time of the year. I’ve always found that late August and September are always kind of the most difficult mental times for a farm and this happens at every farm that I’ve worked for and here. You already worked really hard and the demands of the season are only increasing and it’s really hot. Yes, you’re just kind of, you’re kind of out of energy and you’re having to harvest the summer crop and you have to plant the fall crop and you have to do this large work of canning. So canning can often be, especially in that season, a little bit of a strain at times.
James: But when you grow your own vegetables, green beans, tomatoes and all them things, you spend a lot of time planting them and hoeing, and then you harvest them, and you get the special, the finished product, in the cans, you think, “Boy, that’s nice.”

Yet the sensory experience of canning is not all found to be so stressful, potentially dangerous, or unpleasant. By far the most often reported ‘favorite part of the process of canning’ is simply a sound: the sound of jars sealing, the most beautiful music to a canner’s ears.

The Sound of Canning: The Satisfying ‘Pop’ of Jars Sealing

There are numerous sounds involved with the process of canning, such as the rattling of a pressure canner weight jig, or the clinking of glass jars boiling in a water bath, the whir of a blender or food processor. But there is one very unique sound that is music to the ears of every canner: the ‘pop’ or ‘ping’ made by each jar lid as it depresses with suction and seals. Most of the canners in this study mentioned this gratifying sound, and often listed it as their favorite part of the process of canning.

Chrysta: Probably my favorite is listening to the jars ‘pop’, to know that you did it right.
SP: Is that what that means?
Chrysta: Yes. It’s when you heat it up then the lid part like domes, or has a convexity, and then when it pops down and the pressure inside the jar decreases and then it goes down, and then it will ‘pop’. So then after you’ve taken them all out to cool and then they’ll just start popping, and you’re like, ‘Yay! I did it right!’

Anna: …I love, my favorite part of the canning process is after you take the jars out or you take the lid off, you can hear them pop. You know that popping sound? I love that sound. It’s like: ‘Success!’

Some canners even count the ‘pops’ to make sure every single jar is a musical success.

Fay’s favorite part of canning is after she pulls jars from the canner and waits for each one to ‘pop’ as they rest on the counter: “I can be anywhere in the house and when I hear
a pop, it’s like, ‘Yeah! Alright!’ And if there’s just a few, if there are like six jars or whatever, I’ll keep a count and when the sixth one has popped, it’s like, ‘Alright! They’re all sealed!’ So the sound of jars sealing is not just music to the canner’s ears, it is an “auditory sort of confirmation” (Summer) of a canning job well done. As Joanne said, “You know it’s done, you know it’s good, you know you’re going to be able to eat it three months from now.”

Megan: …I absolutely love waiting for the ping. That’s like, I just want to like lay on the couch and listen.
SP: The ping?
Megan: Yes.
SP: I’ll have as many ways as saying that as I do interviewees by the end. Everybody loves that.
Megan: Yes, how can you not? Yes.
SP: What does it mean to you when you hear that?
Megan: It means a job well done, like that’s what it means. Like, it’s like, ‘OK, you did it. That jar is effectively sealed.’ But it’s also just a really cute sound to me. It’s just cute and I feel like the jam or tomatoes or pickles or whatever’s in the jar is just as happy as I am.

Eric: One thing you didn’t ask and I didn’t mention is there’s the, there’s quite a rush when the jars start to seal and you hear that [makes sound: ‘pop’]! ...
SP: How does that make you feel?
Eric: Really good. It’s as good as it gets in the canning world, you know. If they don’t do that, then you’ve just wasted all your time.

Rita: And I love hearing that pop. Again, it’s better than a video game – that little pop. It’s very physical sometimes, the pleasure of canning.

When canning ends with its appropriate ‘bang’, canners are pleased with their work and themselves at the completion of a canning project. They interpret the ‘popping’ or ‘pinging’ of lids indenting as a signal indicating the end of canning, as well as a job well done and that the food will be safe to eat. Assuming that a jar will be safe to consume if the lid has sealed is merely an interpretation, and indeed, a hopeful one.

Depending on the procedures utilized for canning, it is possible for a lid to seal on a jar
and yet for the contents to be under-processed and therefore not sterilized (as with oven canning or the inversion method) or for a lid to initially seal and not hold (which the canner will hopefully discover before consumption; may be caused by reusing lids or a faulty lid). There is no perfect guarantee that home canning is safe, and so the association of food safety with ‘pinging’ jars is erroneous—although, as aforementioned, no one in this study reported ever becoming ill from consuming home canned foodstuffs and so the safety of the food is likely if not guaranteed.

Aroma: Pleasure or Danger

In addition to using their ears to listen for food safety and the sealing of finished jars, home canners also use their noses to determine if canned foodstuffs are good for eating. And of course, scent can be a very pleasurable experience in the kitchen while cooking foods to be canned, or even while harvesting raw produce for canning. Rita has “a lot of fun” berry-picking including the visual hunt for berries “so big and so beautiful,” and said that part of the “aesthetic” enjoyment is being able “to smell the strawberries,” for example. Maria said that tomatoes are her favorite food to can. “I love the process, the smell and all of that as tomatoes are cooking. But the product, you know, it’s just so superior to anything that you could buy.” Michael said that his favorite part of canning is “popping the can,” not when the lids seal after processing, but when he pops it open to eat it: “It’s so satisfying because you know it was sealed right and then you open it up and smell it. ‘Ohhh!’ [Enjoyment of pleasurable aroma] [Laughs]”

Kesla: …I always smell everything when I open it, and I’m always amazed at how fresh it smells. Like every jar of tomato that I open to make tomato soup, I’m like ‘This smells as fresh as when I processed it’. I just, I get such a kick out of it, that it smells so good and so much like summer in the middle of winter.
As mentioned above, the sensory experience of taste will be highlighted in a section in the following chapter because, for quite a few many canners, taste is a primary motivator to do home canning. As Maria suggests above, there are many canned goods that taste better home canned or that simply cannot be purchased at stores.

Smell is not always a pleasure in canning, as this sense is often used by canners to detect the safety of a food or its potential spoilage. Many respondents said that they utilize a sniff-test to decide if a home canned food is safe to eat, and put their noses toward a recently opened jar and smell the contents to determine if the food has spoiled.

SP: Are you concerned about food safety regarding your home canning?
Sue: Sure, I mean I’m aware of the signs to look for. And as I noted before if there’s something cloudy I consider that to be suspicious. And I always sniff to see if, you know, does it smell like tomato sauce, is there anything fishy? And there was one time, I think there was one time when it smelled a little fishy, and I just didn’t use it—it’s not worth that risk.

SP: Are you concerned about food safety regarding home canning?
Brenda: Not with me. A lot of people have asked me that. Mom was always cautioning me about that. We’ve always been cautioned about it and ‘If in doubt, throw it out.’ In other words, if you open up something and you just don’t think it smells quite right, throw it out.

Sometimes canners also detect spoiled jars by odor independent of cooking, before they select jars to open and eat. I heard numerous stories where respondents had followed their noses in a sort of hide-and-seek effort to identify strange smells wafting about their homes or canning jar storage areas. For example, even though Fay said that she is “vigilant” about following recommended canning procedures, she said “over the years there have been a few times that I’ll go back and notice, ‘Something smells really weird back here’ and start looking on the shelves of canned goods. And there will be a jar, you know, that the seal failed.” A certain rate of seal failures is generally tolerated
and expected by most home canners in this study (though of course, always a disappointment and frustration), but still can catch them by surprise:

SP: Have you ever had any spoilage from canning?
Deb: Yeah, I had two tomato jars one time, and it was really interesting. It was tomatoes that I canned in North Carolina the summer before we moved [to Ohio] in September, and I transported like a box of canned tomatoes. That’s how crazy I am. …And I think they must’ve gotten bumped, the seals [had] gotten bumped in the box traveling up here and I, I smelled an odor. I had them sitting on my hutch and I smelled an odor and I thought, ‘What is that smell?’ And it went on for a couple of days; I thought it was a dead mouse or something. It’s like, ‘Good Lord!’ And then I look and there was foam coming out of the top of those two jars of tomatoes. It was like, ‘OK, that’s what it was.’

As it is common for canners to have filled jars of canned foods about their homes, and stories of the occasional spoiled jar not altogether uncommon, it would seem that canners’ sense of smell would be constantly attuned to the aromas of the raw, cooked, preserved, and spoiled foods around them. Perhaps this is why some stories of surprising spoilage were told as humorous tales, where the canner felt that they should have known that the mysterious odor they smelled—sometimes, like Deb, for days before discovering the source—was due to an unsealed canning jar. This indicates the special ability of the sense of smell to demand the canners’ attention and alert the canner to the danger of spoiled food even when she or he is not intentionally focused on such a concern.

Production of a Beautiful Sight: The Finished Jars

For most canners, surely the most satisfying part of the process of canning is removing the finished jars from the canner and letting them rest, seal, and cool. Everyone appreciates a line of processed jars on their counter. They may, like Megan, even snap a few photos of their jars to further admire and share with others the fruits of their hard work. But for some, this visual pleasure extends into an aesthetic, or even artistic, appreciation of food in jars.
June: I like to see the jars on the shelves. They’re aesthetically pleasing. …I think canned tomatoes are just beautiful, or peaches or anything. They are like little jewels sitting there.

Deb: I love seeing the finished product. I just love lining them up on the, on the shelves. I love the jewel tones, the colors that you get. I say, that, you know, home-canned tomatoes is like summer in a bottle, you know. You see that, you see summertime, you taste summer in January.

SP: So how do you experience canning, like the process of canning, is it like work, or fun, or both, something else?
Teresa: I just love doing it. I think, you know, you’re involved with your food, and you know, you’re doing it. But then at the end when you see those jars lined up it’s like, ‘Oh! This is, they’re just beautiful.’ And sometimes I won’t put my food down in the basement just because I like looking at it. So I think it’s just wonderful.

Looking at one’s jars is a very satisfying part of canning, not only due to their colorful beauty, but because looking at filled, finished jars creates a sense of satisfaction and job-well-done as well as a sense of food security.

Vicki: My favorite part? Well looking at those jars … The finished jars, that’s nice. You know, I think all of the parts are good, but I think that the shiniest part is definitely looking at your work when you’re done.

Stacey: I like, yes, I like the look of jars in the canner. I like the look of jars on the shelves. There’s a real sense of, canned goods on their shelves, you know, you look there and you go OK, I’ve got food for winter.

Teresa: …It’s just, I don’t want to say it’s what I do, but it is. I love being able to, um, see what I’ve done. It’s tangible. So you’ve planted the seeds, you’ve planted the plants, and then you go and put them in these jars and they’re just beautiful. So it’s just this whole process. And you get to eat it! [Laughs]

But just as with aroma indicating a job well done or something gone terribly wrong, sight is a sense that is also utilized by home canners to detect any spoilage among their jars.

SP: Had any jars spoil?
Ruth: Oh yes, yeah.
SP: How do you know?
Ruth: How do we know? …Alright, yeah it will get cloudy sometimes. …But most of the time the lid will come up, because the pressure in it, the acid pressure will come up. Or some of it you will see different things—you might see bubbles, like air bubbles, ‘matoes will get air bubble on ‘em, ‘matoes will if they’re spoiling in the jar, they’ll get a bubble on ‘em. And they’ll bloat up and blow the lid up, you know, but you see bubbles. Some of it, green beans won’t, you won’t notice green beans being spoiled until they’ll get a mold on them, top of ‘em, in the jar. Or some fruit will turn dark. …I can see that it’s not good. Some of it will turn dark, that’s why I was telling you that it don’t keep forever, no. You might go to your tomatoes and they look dark, I don’t like to use them after they turn colors, some of ‘ems OK.

SP: Have you ever had any spoilage?
Gary: Oh, yes.
SP: How did you know?
Gary: Just by the look, smell, the seal. You look, you know, you can almost look at a jar, if it’s different than any of the others you know that something’s wrong. And if you, of course you check the seal, you know, make sure it doesn’t pop on you. You open it up, usually if it’s been sitting there for a while you know when you open it up because of the smell. But I mean, you know, you can look at it 99 percent of the time and see whether it’s good or not. And if there’s any chance, you know, like if there’s a jar that gets the year off of it, you know, and I’m not sure about, I dump; I don’t take any chances with it. I’ve never had any problems, but it’s the way I was taught, there’s no need taking a chance.

SP: Have you ever had any spoilage?
Anna: I had, I found in the back corner a jar of applesauce that was probably like seven years old. It really was not, yes, you could look at it and go, no, we should not eat this. It was, there was no guess work at it.
SP: What did you see?
Anna: Huge discoloration. I mean, it was brown in one area. A lot of times it will separate a little bit but this was like solid on one end and like water on the other end. It was, yeah, but. And then when I opened it, it smelled really awful. I mean, that’s definitely a sign.

Sometimes canners employ their physical senses to detect danger in the kitchen and in their canned foodstuffs. And at other times, the sensory experience of canning oscillates between pleasure and steaming hot, arduous work. No qualitative account of home canning would be complete without a consideration of the body and the lived experience of canning, as it is a predominant and recurring emergent theme in accounts of home canning.
Reinforcement of Social Networks, Familial Relationships, and Community

Connections through the Sharing of Food and Canning Resources

While an individual canner’s experience of home canning is a personal, physical event, most canners in this study also experience canning as a social project that forges and maintains connections among family members, friends, and community. As mentioned above, most canners in this study have learned how to can from someone else, most often from family members either extended or near. And all but 12 canners had also taught others how to can—usually other family members or friends. Thirteen respondents usually do their canning alone, whereas all the rest can with family members (especially spouses or partners who live in the same household), friends, neighbors, and/or hired help or some combination thereof.

During the course of such instructive or other shared canning, canners commonly talk and banter, and thus social ties are formed and strengthened through shared canning. And together, they have a lot of fun, like when Iris cans tomatoes and has her mother, the neighbors, and kids over at her house “It’s like a big, sloppy tomato party!”

Vicki: Oh, but you have to add the companionship to that question, remember? My favorite part of canning is that you get five hours with the person that you can with, that you might not otherwise. You know what I think some of the best times we have with others are those times when you’re doing a task. You know, like a long drawn out task…it’s more fun doing those kinds of things where you’re stuck together all day doing something, being busy, and that time that you share is hilarious. You’re joking, you’re laughing, mistakes happen, you get squirted in the eye with tomato juice, it’s funny, but it’s bonding too, you know, it’s time well spent together.

SP: Broadly speaking, what do you think the benefits of home canning are, and who, or what do you think benefits?
Linda: Fellowship. Fellowship. It’s pulling the people living in the house together. If they can together they stay together; they eat together.

SP: What are your favorite parts of the process of canning?
Sally: I like, I mean [my sister-in-law] and I just hang out, which is really nice. And with my other friend that I did it with years ago it was kind of same thing, like we just, you know, had hang out time together. That’s why it’s really fun to can with somebody, because you are like, you have to stay there, and you have to wait. And even when you’re, you know, chopping and cutting, it’s just fun to, you know, get to know somebody better, and make it more of a companion or group activity. So I think just having the camaraderie is my favorite part.

Chrysta: It’s fun because we sit and, you know, we gossip, and my mom will talk about when she canned, and my mother-in-law will talk about when she canned, and then, it’s fun, we talk about, you know, my children and different things that are going on, because I don’t always get that time with working full time and then being so busy with homework and this and that, that I just don’t get to just have fun and enjoy each other…

Being a hands-on activity, canning is most often learned through instruction from another person who is working cooperatively on the same canning project. Some canners who taught themselves how to can from reading books said that they wished they had another more knowledgeable person present to whom they could ask specific questions.

Instructing others offers the opportunity to socialize in person over a shared task:

Iris: …[M]y mom definitely showed me how to do [canning]. She started making those sunshine pickles and then showed me how to do it... But I’ve had lots of people, a handful of people, ask me, “Do you can stuff?” and I’ll be like, “Yeah, some,” and they’ll ask me, “Can I come watch you? I just need to do it with somebody the first time.” I feel like doing it with somebody the first couple times is really helpful just to break the ice, because when you read a book, they say things like, “Screw down until resistance is met, and then increase to fingertip tight,” and you’re like, “What does that mean?!” But if you show somebody, it makes a lot of sense.

Cora: I was just talking about, when I was canning, a few of my friends, a few of the people that I worked with, they were AmeriCorps members, and they wanted to learn how to can. And so they came over to my house and I had a bunch of peaches I had gotten, a huge box of seconds from an orchard. …[I]t was so fun, it was so, it was really nice, it was a really great way to connect, to have people spending time together, I mean food just brings people together and that was one of those moments that it really brought this group of people together and we had a nice time.
Another question asked of all respondents was: Does canning help you feel connected to anything, a person, time or a place? Respondents often answered with a memory of a particular person who had taught them canning, or the family member (often mother or grandmother) who first exposed them to canning. As Chrysta said, “It makes me definitely connected to my family, to my grandmother, and my mom and my mother-in-law.” But sometimes this person was also a friend or even a co-worker who had taught the respondent how to can. Some canners mentioned feeling connected to family members near and far, living and deceased. Others felt very a generalized sense of connection to their “roots,” either specifically their deceased relatives who had canned or generalized others from the past. The following are answers to this question: Does canning help you feel connected to any person, time, or place?

Janet: I think it connects me to older generations, and to my ancestors. And I feel like my grandmother did it, my mother did it, I do it.

Barbara: Well yeah it makes me feel connected to my grandmas, and their land, and my ancestors so to speak, my roots, my past.

Stephanie: Yeah I definitely feel connected to [my husband] with that, because that’s something that we can work on together. I also feel connected to like the older members of [my husband’s] family, and the ones that have passed. I feel like it’s a connection to our roots in a way. So this farm where we live it’s been my husband’s family for over a hundred years and so they’ve been people canning here for most of the last hundred years, and people growing their food here for most of the last hundred years. There was a couple of years of a break in there where they weren’t growing anything, and I really, really doubt that they were canning. But it makes me feel connected to like the history of this land where we live, and this home, and the people who have passed through here.

Beyond one’s own family and real or imagined ancestors, canning can foster connections to one’s local community, both past and present. As with family, being a canner in a community of canners fosters a sense of camaraderie. Summer said, “I think there’s definitely community involved in it, just that it gives you something you can
share, and something you can talk about with other folks.” Canning is now a distinctive activity: it is no longer practiced by a majority, nor can home canning be considered mainstream today. These facts may encourage some canners to feel that they share a common lifestyle with the other members of their canning community. I am not sure if Stacey, who owns a farm and markets her produce, is correct in her assumption that “…there are probably more people here who know how to can than don’t,” but it is notable that she would make that claim on the basis of her own experience and the number of home canners in her friendship and business networks.

Among canners, and within neighborhoods with a known home canner, canning equipment is commonly shared. Not everyone has the means, interest, or storage space to keep a pressure canner, and so this item is commonly shared among canner friends. Like Vicki and her regular canning partner, of whom she said, “We’re on our second pressure canner.” And Megan’s peripatetic pressure canner: “I’m very glad I have it and I’ve lent it out to friends to help, when they’ve done canning projects, because I have a few friends that wanted to can and didn’t have one. So, so that’s been good, it felt good to do.”

Quite a few home canners shared stories about receiving gifts of (usually empty) jars, that they either found on their own or they had jars given to them by non-canning acquaintances who knew that the canner would put them to good use. These were great stories of note, as gifts of jars are a true treasure for serious canners, and canners are willing to put serious effort into cleaning up old jars.

Rita: …[When a tenant suddenly vacated town] she left—she must have canned for three or four years—all kinds of stuff down in the basement that I had to haul up and out and into the kitchen. And so I sat there, taking off all of the friggin’ lids, dumping out all of the stuff… I was trying to get off the metal part of the lid, and it was just a butter knife. And it was just me there and I popped it up but it slid down and I just cut the tip of this finger off with a butter knife. …And so,
my desire to save all of these jars – and I wasn’t going to eat anything from that because it wasn’t mine and I don’t know what – judging from how dirty the house was, I wasn’t going to trust it. But I did want to save the jars. So my desire to save all the canning stuff [caused me injury]. So now I have like 150 frickin’ Mason jars in my house, that are calling my name, saying ‘You need to put stuff in me!’ [Laughs]

Fay: …[T]he house that I lived in where I first started canning was an old farmhouse. And there was a barn and the landlady said that we could use the jars—there were old jars stored in the barn—and there were some blue-glass jars, there were some really old jars. So I cleaned up the jars and used the jars that were good.

A few canners were thrilled to receive boxes of jars given to them by non-canners. The use-value of Mason jars is recognized even by people who themselves cannot or do not want to fill them, and so they are sometimes passed along to someone who will.

Thomas: A guy that I worked with gave me all these boxes and boxes of jars that used to be I think, I think they were his mother’s, and they’d been sitting in a loft, you know, for 20, 30, 40 years for all I know. And he knew that I canned and he said, ‘Hey, do you want these? And I’m like, ‘Yeah I’ll take them!’ And so I got them from him.

John: Now [my wife’s] mom, we helped her mom move over the summer there and she had some blackberries and stuff that was, what, 20 [or] 30 years old? I wouldn’t eat that crap for nothing. The seal hadn’t popped, but the rubber had stuck to the damn jars; you couldn’t even clean them off. Because we don’t throw no jars away. Everybody that finds these old canning jars they always bring them to us. …[O]r somebody hits the mother lode and finds, ‘Hey, I’ve got a friend that’s, they’re getting out of the canning business and they got a hundred jars—you want them?’ ‘Hell, yes, I want them.’ Do I remember that person? Yes. If you give me a hundred jars I’ll make damn sure you get your money back in something, it will be full with something.

On another level, canning connects individual canners to community by the types of relationships they create by sourcing their produce from local farmers and, therefore, stimulating the local foods economy.

Cora: …It’s a great opportunity to learn, it’s a great opportunity to spend time with people that you love. …And ultimately, you know, in a community like
this, it can bring you closer to your community. …I mean from the beginning of it, it connects me to the people growing the food—whether that’s me, or my friends, or the farmers when I go to ask them about seconds, or you know if I can come to the farm and pick some things, so it connects me to the people who grow the food.

SP: What are some other benefits of canning on a broader sense?
Vicki: Well I mean for people who buy at the farmer’s market, and at the [local] auction, we’re benefiting local food producers, so there’s a community sense of, you know, economically stimulating the community and supporting small food growers.

Deb: …I do think it’s good for the economy. If you can't grow your own food, buying it from the local farmer or farmer's market I think it stimulates your local grower movement, which I think is very important. …Literally, you depend on the farmer to grow your food if you're not growing it yourself, and no one can grow a garden by themselves. They need to ask advice, they've got to go to the feed store, they've got to find out these things. So, home-grown canned food really does require you to be a part of a community. No man's an island, of course, you have to be part of a food community to can your own food. I just think it's part of the fun of it.

Supporting local farmers is very important to many canners, especially those unable to grow all of the produce they like to can, because access to fresh, high-quality produce is a necessity for canning. We have seen in the above quotes that home canning offers the essential social needs of fellowship, camaraderie, and community, creating and reinforcing social bonds between individuals, among families, groups of canners, and broader social networks such as local food producers, farmers, and vendors.

**Community Exchange: “It’s a Circle that Just Never Ends”**

An unexpected theme that emerged from this study of home canning was the extensive amount of informal community exchange of canning resources and information that are part of many canners’ lives. Respondents’ accounts frequently included tales of the exchange of goods, such as gift-giving, trading, and bartering for foods. These informal transactions involve food items in a raw state, generally speaking, as well as
foods that had been preserved. Some respondents also share canning equipment with others, especially pressure canner units because pressure canners can be prohibitively expensive to purchase. Home canners also share amongst themselves knowledge and support about how to can and advice with troubleshooting. The informal distribution of food and other resources related to canning can connect family members to each other, and can also foster friendship networks and connections among members of a local community. Some canners even specifically can certain foods (or excess quantities of certain foods, especially jellies/jams) to share with members of their community, including family members, friends, and/or neighbors in need.

Canners tend to be known as canners within their local communities, and as such are often notified about the availability of food, often fresh produce, that they might put to use in canning. Vicki is quoted above in Chapter Five in a section detailing how canners obtain the foodstuffs that they can, and her words are worth revisiting here. She spoke about “word of mouth” food alerts, which she described as “kind of like a network.” Friends of friends will call her to let her know that someone has excess raw produce, for example, on a tree in their yard. For Vicki and some other canners, if or when they can, how much they can, or what foods they can, are all questions that can be determined by the availability of free or ‘surplus’ produce from friends or neighbors.

SP: Thinking of the average calendar year, how often do you say that you can?
Vicki: You know it really depends on what kind of produce comes my way, if, you know, somebody calls me up and says oh, you know, somebody’s pear trees got a bunch of pears on it, then I’ll do pears. But I might not otherwise, you know what I mean? If somebody calls me and says, you know, I’ve got too many tomatoes, I’ll do an extra batch of tomatoes.

SP: So, these things that you have preserved like pears, tomatoes and the roasted vegetable stock, why do you preserve these foods as opposed to other foods that you might be able to can?
Taylor: I think it’s just ‘cause they pop up on my doorstep. Like the pears, a lot of them come from [a friend], the woman who got me started canning, anyway. She just has so many pears on her property that she can't eat them all and so she'll just bring grocery bags full of them.

SP: So they’re gifts?
Taylor: Yeah. And people bring me stuff now because they know I can. They're like, ‘Can you do something with this?’ I was like, ‘Yeah, I can.’

Kesla: …So it just, when there’s a bounty of something, I just, you know, you just kind of do it and make, make the time for it so that you don’t waste all that free food.

There is a shared value or ethic of not wasting food that is especially strong among home canners. The community will make efforts to save food from spoiling before it can be used, and so they may alert a home canner.

Jenni: Well, I don’t know that it’s really like a story, well a friend of mine has pear trees. She had a brand new baby; like they weren’t going to use all the pears that their trees were producing, so she was like, ‘Just come over and get these pears.’ And so like I kind of feel like I’m like saving this food, you know, from being rotten, so I took the pears and canned a whole bunch of pears.

John: Because we have the reputation for this.
SP: Uh huh, for canning?
John: People call us when they have an abundance, because they know when we have an abundance it’s a Catch 22 situation, you know, we’re going to come around and bless you, when you’re blessing us. Plus once we get the finished product we share.

John: You’re going to offend somebody, you have to have a stop point of yeah I’ve only seen you once in my life I’m not going to give you all this stuff. But your close friends, now we had a friend call us from Racine there this year, and he had a bunch of beets, she loves beets. And we have a friend that retired from the State Patrol, he loves beets. My mom loves beets. My step-dad likes beets. So we just, people will call us and ‘hey come down here and get these damn things I don’t want them to go to waste’. But in return we have sent him all kinds of goodies so it’s a circle that just never ends, you know, somebody’s got the abundance, sometimes it’s you, sometimes it’s us, just don’t let it go to waste.

A second value, next to not letting food go to waste, is that of reciprocity.

The unending circle of giving and receiving, sharing canned food, fresh produce and
other goods, reinforces social ties and keeps community relationships strong. Those who give shall receive in their turn.

Gary: I give away all kinds of fresh produce. I take tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, zucchinis, squash, tomatoes. I don’t give away too many onions, but, you know, those crops right there. Every once in a while if I feel like it I’ll go pick green beans and I take it all to church and spread it out amongst the folks that don’t have gardens, or are too old to raise gardens you know. But it pays off though. I had a lady there, I took her a bunch of hamburger last, I don’t know two weeks ago, three weeks ago, the next weekend she had me two loaves of fresh homemade bread. So [laughs] it pays off. I mean, you know, it’s just being good to people and people being good to you, that’s what it’s all about. I like it.

Vicki: And then every year it changes too because, you know, one year I might get a load crop on my apple trees, so I’ll make, you know, three canner loads of applesauce, which means the next year I don’t really have to. So the next year when my apples are ready I can just call someone who I know that cans and say come on over and get my apples because I don’t need it this year. So it kind of works like that, too.

James: …I like to give people stuff. I like to give. I like to give people stuff. …Especially when the garden’s flourishing and I’ve got more than I can get put up or something. I hate to see it go to waste, like them zucchini, boy they just [grow so fast] and they’re up and they’re too big …[I give food away] just to make me feel good, I guess. I just like to help people. And then one day, maybe if I get down, maybe they’d help me. I mean, I just like to help people.

Food that has been gleaned, in a sense, from a neighbor’s fruit tree perhaps, has a special weight among canners. It is recognized as a gift, and even if the canner has gathered, processed, and stored it in jars, there is a sense that it is not entirely—even the finished product—their sole possession. Food canned in this way is very likely to be shared in the community or gifted in some way—a continuation of the circle.

Danny: And I’ve got a neighbor who’s got a peach tree, we can get peaches, and I make all the preserves. And I split half the stock back with everybody. I do more canning for everybody else than I do myself, put it that way.

Gary: Oh yeah, if they have, we trade off all the time with the neighbors and stuff. If [Mark] has a lot of apples, or I have a lot of apples, we’ll trade back and forth for cider and apples, and tomatoes, and if he has extra I’ll can his and he’ll
take them back. We have a lot of that going on, lot of trading and back and forth, and different kinds; it works out pretty good.

Another form of exchange that I was surprised to observe so much of was in the form of trading or bartering. This differs from the phone calls that alert canners to free food for the taking in that both parties actively negotiate so that each receives something in the exchange. A common practice of trading occurs among canners who produce jams, jellies, and the like. This form of exchange is especially valued when a canner has a crop that fails, for example, and was therefore unable to produce a certain type of preserve in a given year. The ability to trade food or other goods provides flexibility for people like Stacey: “I may buy, may use money or we may trade, you know, trade stuff. It just depends on what, you know, what’s going on and what people need.”

Sally: Yeah, oh we have this one friend too and he is like this, we call him Mr. Homesteader, and he has all these animals, and this huge garden, and he’s like, ‘I just can’t, I have all these berries—do you want any?’ And we’re like, ‘Yeah sure, that’s great.’ And, you know, ‘Oh, and I have some meat here, do you want some meat?’ ‘Oh, [my husband] will love the meat, you know.’ He’s just always sharing because he has so much. So that’s really nice that we’ve got, and then we’ll trade back, we do a lot of trading it seems like, so we’ll ask him what he needs and so this is a nice place for that. So I really don’t, I don’t really go to the farmer’s market as much because I don’t need to... But otherwise like it feels kind of good to go well we really don’t need to buy much because we either trade it or we grow it, so that feels good.

Phyllis: Once in a while a neighbor, friend, or someone will have a bumper crop of fruit, that, usually it’s a fruit that we don’t have, like peaches. We went and got peaches from a neighbor a couple of years ago and canned a whole bunch of them.
SP: For free?
Phyllis: Yeah, we just help. We did some labor trade on that, but almost everything [else we can] is from here.

Janet: …I actually barter a little bit with my produce so that’s kind of nice. I barter with [a bakery] and I get free bread, and then I barter, like I just started yesterday, a woman at the yarn shop wants to barter for yarn, for wool yarn, which is kinda cool, because I just so happen to need a lot of yarn. So she asked me yesterday if I could, you know, if my husband, who drives by her shop all
the time, could ever bring in veggies and then we could, you know, I could rack up a tab and just buy, you know, get yarn while I’m there. …for my vegetables. So I’m kind of always, and bartering’s pretty cool.

Its practitioners definitely do think that bartering is “pretty cool” (Janet), perhaps because “…it’s really interesting to get into economics of that type because we don’t grow up with that kind of thing” (Michael). So some home canners may be involved in a variety of noncash transactions with members of their community, and such community connections may be brought about or strengthened by involvement in home canning.

Helping those in Need in One’s Own Community

Canners tend to be generous gardeners, and they are also generous with their canned goods and their fresh produce. For example, Danny said that each year after he gets done with his own canning “…I just turn the garden into my neighbors, you know, it’s more or less a community garden when we get done. Everybody around the community gets something out of it, before it’s over with.” He and the others quoted here had themselves experienced times of great hardship when they have been “down and out” (Danny, from excerpt below) and now these canners are able to reach out to those who have less and provide them with some food.

Danny: …I can always fall back, rely on it when I need it, you know; it’s always there, it’s always there when you need it. Or a neighbor gets down and out, if you have something shuck it down and give it to them you know. Like I’m doing right here, like if somebody comes, you know, especially if it’s somebody down and out, my freezer’s up, everything, whatever I’ve got I give them, share it, whatever I got you know. I’ve always been that way. Well I was brought up that way so, you share what you got, and it will always come back to you.

SP: Do you give away any of the food you preserve?
Brenda: Oh yeah, I do. I’ve given it as gifts and stuff like that. There’s people that’s needing, yeah. If people needs, you know, my mom, she always managed to take care of anybody and everybody, you know, so if anybody at church, if they need food or anything like that. The only thing I ask them is to please return the jars.
SP: Does canning help you feel connected to anyone or a time or a place?
Dee: Well sometimes if somebody is sick and I have things in the garden I’ll take them some beans, like I did last summer. The lady was sick and I took enough beans to can for her, and I broke them up, washed them and cooked them (chuckle) – all they had to do was put them in a jar. So that gives you a good feeling – to help somebody out.

John: …[H]ere’s me and my wife…we have three gardens. And the elderly people in the community, we cater to them. We’re not so stupid that we’re gonna go out here and do all the planting, and digging, and sweating and deliver to some welfare bum that’s sitting on his ass doing nothing; he can grow his own damn garden. But the elderly people that can’t, we cater to them.

…
John: Well if I’ve got somebody calling up here hollering ‘hey bring me another case of tomatoes’ I probably won’t do that. But if I know somebody’s got a little bit of self-esteem, and pride, and trying to make ends meet, and they need something, I’d damn sure take it to them. But I’m not going to take it to somebody that’s laid around on welfare all frickin’ summer. Somebody that has no work habit, hasn’t retired from someplace, somebody that hasn’t made an effort to help themselves. If you make an effort to help yourself I will more than help you.

Not all gifts of canned goods are given to address only situations of financial need or when someone is otherwise down on their luck. Sometimes canners also gift their canned goods to try to fulfill the recipient’s emotional or spiritual needs:

Deb: I had a good friend who was a victim of domestic violence and her husband, it was just a horrible situation, and one day my mother said, ‘[Deb], come over here and get this box.’ So I went over there and she said, take it to [Sarah]. And this box was full of every kind of, it was a sampler of everything my mother put up all year long. Frozen foods, canned foods, dried foods, pumpkins, everything. I'll never forget that woman when I took that up to her house how she just started bawling and just saying, ‘It's not only food to keep me and my kid not hungry, it's feeding my soul. It's feeding my spirit, too.’ And that just tears me up every time I think of that story.

Anna: You know, whether they’ve been sick or, you know, had a death in the family or just going through a hard time. That tends to be where I usually would give something [canned] like that. …Why? Because words sometimes aren’t enough. I mean, hugs are great. Words are nice. But I want to do more and it’s something tangible and it’s something I’ve worked to do. It’s not like I just went to the store and went oh, that looks good and bought it. It has part of me in it, you know. I think it’s a gift that says more than just a Hallmark card.
When canners give gifts of food, especially when they give canned goods, there is a lot more in those jars than nutrition. When Gary was serving in the military and had run out of money for two weeks, his mother sent him and his wife canned goods (green beans, potatoes, tomatoes, and corn), and he said that in the jars “There was a lot of love, a lot of love.” The givers and recipients of canned goods in the stories above seem to mutually understand the time, care, and effort put into food in jars. This understanding of the intimate production of such items imbues home-canned goods with a powerful symbolism and weight of meaning: home canners give part of themselves, and they give love and support, along with gifts of filled canning jars.

Chapter Conclusion

Chapter Five has presented a general overview of contemporary home canning as experienced by the canners in this study, as well as a few emergent themes related to the regular practice of canning. The chapter began with a description of the social nature of knowledge about home canning; most respondents were first exposed to home canning by their families and most had learned how to can from a family member. A general description of what foods are preserved, sources from which canners obtain the foods they can, and other general information is presented at the start of the chapter and will not be repeated here.

This chapter then looks deeper into home canning with an exploration of the variety of material and nonmaterial investments that canners make into a regular home canning practice. First, there are practical considerations regarding the cost of canning equipment and specialty canning tools. The upfront financial investment in materials required for canning may be significant, but canners so highly value their products and
esteem the rewards of canning that they generally perceive the cost is worthwhile. Second, the canners in this study generally share ideas about what an ideal canning workspace looks like though many lament that their own homes lack such an ideal space. This ideal workspace would include such features as: ample counter space, access to running water, dependable stove(s), windows and/or air conditioning or other form of air flow, and so on. Some respondents are so invested in a lifestyle of canning that they originally designed or remodeled their homes to create ideal canning workspace(s) as well as storage space for canning equipment. Others creatively utilize other spaces or buildings outside of the primary indoor kitchen, or redefine nontraditional equipment such as turkey fryers for canning purposes. They literally redefine the space and objects around them to meet their canning goals. Lastly, home canners invest substantial amounts of time in their canning practice. Performing canning first requires planning, and its execution requires a large block of time. Respondents reported the stress they often encounter due to the fact that they already have busy lives and therefore must struggle to fit canning into their schedules; they feel further burdened by the time-sensitive nature of the raw foods to be canned. The tomatoes cannot wait, and canners tend to feel a strong sense of obligation to process and preserve food at its peak ripeness and freshness and not allow anything to go to waste. Yet the canners in this study feel that canning is a sound investment, ultimately worth the risks and costs they endure to perform it, and very beneficial in the long run.

In many of these ways, home canning can be seen as a form of ‘serious leisure’ as described by Stebbins (2001), with the exception that the home canners in this study are not necessarily involved in an organized group activity such as an orchestra or sports
team. Unlike casual leisure, which is unskilled and offers “immediate intrinsic reward” (Stebbins 2001:53), serious leisure involves hobby activities that are challenging and require an investment of time and energy to refine the skills necessary to do them. As we have seen, the home canners in this study are highly motivated individuals who have learned to safely practice what many others find to be a daunting activity. In contrast to casual leisure, bringing a serious leisure activity “…to a successful conclusion transforms them into something that is highly rewarding,” in part due to “…overcoming the adversity posed by various costs” (Stebbins 2001:55). This we have seen with canning and the financial and time investments required and the risks of burns and botulism—overcoming the costs and risks yields great personal rewards. Stebbins also describes the ability of serious leisure to offer a lifestyle and identity to its individual practitioners: “the participants are members of a category of humankind who recognize each other and to some extent are recognized by the larger community for the distinctive mode of leisure life they lead” (Stebbins 2001:56). As will be reviewed in a paragraph below, Chapter Five has shown the ways that canners recognize each other, and are recognized within their communities, as participating in a distinctive activity; therefore, resources and information specific to home canning are shared with and among known canners.

Canning is a notable avocation these days.

After the discussion of material and nonmaterial investments in home canning, Chapter Five has next highlighted the physical, embodied, and sensuous experience of the process of home canning. This study has found similarly with Click and Ridberg (2010:314) that home food preservers feel that “…the rewards are reaped at a physical level and experienced through the senses, while other rewards are more deeply felt as
pride in one’s accomplishments and a connection to the earth and humanity.” While Click and Ridberg (2010) did not exclusively interview home canners, every quotation they utilize in their brief section on “Sensory Experiences” is about canning. Every physical sense faculty is engaged within the canner as she or he preserves food. They feel the heat of the hot stove, hear the sound of jars sealing, smell the joys of cooking and the stench of spoilage, and relish the sight of finished jars resting on the kitchen countertop and storage shelves. (They also prefer the taste of many home-canned products to commercial foods; an in-depth discussion of taste as a motivator for home canning is presented in Chapter Six.) Unlike Click and Ridberg (2010:314), however, this study did not find it always true that the sensory experiences of canning “…were frequently mentioned as pleasurable markers of a job well done”—respondents in this study also frequently mentioned the discomfort of the physical feelings of heat and steam, burns from the stove and hot peppers, self-lacerations from cutting up foods, and unpleasant odors wafting from obscured spoiled jars.

The final section of Chapter Five explores the social connections fostered by home canning among the canner and their families, friends, neighbors, and local community. Morton et al. (2008) found in their survey of rural and urban users of social services that rural respondents were more likely to utilize a ‘reciprocal economy’ of giving and receiving food from family and friends while urban respondents were much more likely to use food stamps and visit food pantries and community meal sites. Many canners are extremely generous with their canned products and hasten to share them with anyone who they hear might be in need of a little help. Home canners create and maintain relationships within a variety of social networks through the informal gifting and
exchange of canned foods, canning equipment, and information. Home canners enjoy companionship with the family members and friends with whom they can, and reinforce social ties to the individuals to whom they give canned foods. The reciprocal economy (Morton et al. 2008) and ongoing circle of communal gift-giving in which canners participate continually flows around as filled gift jars are emptied and then make their way back to the original owner, and perhaps other favors or gifts are shared with the canner in turn.
Chapter Six: Why Preserve Food in Jars?:

Home Canners’ Motivations to Do, and Perceived Benefits of, Home Canning

This chapter addresses a central research question for this project: Why are people home canning now and what does canning mean to its practitioners? In light of the convenience and retail food options available today, why are people practicing one of the slowest forms of domestic food production: home canning? Why are many of these canners growing gardens, harvesting their own meat, and then preserving food for future consumption when so much commercial food is available for purchase at grocery stores and other retail venues?

At the beginning of this study, I anticipated being able to isolate canners’ motivations utilizing a typology framework, and classifying canners into groups based on the reasons why they do home canning or by influential demographic characteristics primary or secondary to these motivations. However, unlike previous survey research on home canners, this qualitative study has found that the range of meanings of canning holds for its practitioners and the variety of goals that canning fulfills for them is lengthy and complex. For the home canners in this study, motivations to do canning and their perceived benefits of home canning vary from the practical to the ideological. For example, even the most practical home canners with foremost interests in producing cheap, reliable products that taste good, will also appreciate the emotional satisfaction that comes at the end of the day after accomplishing a canning project and the empowerment that comes from being able to control what ingredients comprise one’s food. Likewise, the more ideological or political canners who believe that canning is an ecologically conscious and sustainable practice also appreciate its practicality during
times of electrical outage and the everyday convenience of cooking with canned foods.
Lumping home canners into categories such as ‘Homesteader’, ‘Locavore’, or ‘Foodie’, as Hood (2011) suggests in her description of contemporary canning, may reinforce stereotypes and generalities at the expense of the true richness of meaning and motivations behind today’s home canners food preservation behaviors.

To display the depth of my qualitative data regarding why canners can and the difficulty with identifying a dominant motivator in respondents’ accounts, I begin here with a few typical answers to my inquiry: *Why do you can?*

Deb: I can to put up healthy food. I can to, to do it for food security, because I do think that, you know, anything can happen; finances, economy, I don’t trust the grid. So, I can to preserve food in ways that’s not dependent on a power outage would not throw me out, you know, like it did with the freezer. I can to keep alive something that my mother, you know, passed on to me. I can because it’s a big part of my personality. I can to, to do some exploration of new, of new tastes and, and techniques and things like that. I’m curious so I like to try new things. That’s why I do it; it’s just all of the above. It’s, it’s not, it’s more than a hobby—it’s a lifestyle. Which I think it is any true canner who’s been doing it for a while, that’s it, it’s their lifestyle.

Barbara: Well because it’s the only way I get the salsa I like. That’s why I do it now. Always in the past it’s to not waste food. It’s to be, you know, basically it’s to be responsible about our food. …And I think being self-reliant is important. You never know when you can actually count on buying everything at the grocery store, or even having transportation to get there, so being somewhat self-sufficient I guess is a motivating factor for me for canning. And having it be, you know, special, and you know it’s good food—you know how it was grown, and where it came from, and what you added to it, and what you didn’t add to it, and you have control over how much salt it has in it. …So anything that’s processed is not going to be as good for you as stuff that you do yourself.

These excerpts speak to numerous themes that emerged from the data regarding canners’ motivations to can and the perceived benefits of home canning; it would be methodologically inappropriate to give more weight to one over another when a respondent has presented such a long list of reasons why they do canning. In the
following quote taken from my interview with Gary, I demonstrate in brackets how such responses were coded and the variety of motivation and benefit codes that could be applicable within a single account:

SP: Why do you can?  
Gary: Mostly just for the food, I mean we want the food [TO EAT]. We don’t want to see anything go to waste, that’s for sure [NOT WASTE FOOD]. And, you know, it’s there; I’ve always got it if I need it you know [PREPAREDNESS]. And I can always go out in the cellar and get something and cook it, whether it be deer, or potatoes, green beans, tomatoes, corn, beets, carrots, [CONVENIENCE]  
SP: …But you could go to [a grocery store] and buy a bunch of food and have that stored in the cellar?  
Gary: Yeah but I don’t have the cost involved in it, you know [SAVE MONEY]. …But the flavor isn’t there [TASTE], and I don’t think the quality’s there [QUALITY].

The rest of this chapter will look more closely at each of these themes.

This chapter begins with the most frequently expressed motivator for home canning: the broad theme of preparedness. Canning is overwhelmingly seen by the respondents in this study as a valuable skill, and one that can secure food even if social or natural disaster might strike. It can also help practitioners pursue lifestyles of self-sufficiency and environmental sustainability due to its use of local, seasonal foods and lack of reliance upon electricity (after preservation by canning has been completed). The consumption of home-canned foods is believed by many respondents to promote physical health due to the control canners have over ingredients, food quality, and cleanliness. Knowing where one’s food comes from can also promote a sort of spiritual connection with food and its origins in and of the Earth. Turning next toward some practical concerns, this chapter presents respondents’ perceptions of home canning as (probably) helping them save money, the widespread value of not allowing good food go to waste, and how respondents subjectively define ‘necessity’ as a motivator to do home canning.
The final motivations to do home canning presented in this chapter relate to the enjoyment of the process of canning itself, and the emotional, social, and psychological benefits some canners reported experiencing from it.

**Preparedness, Food Security, and Self-Reliance**

Preparedness, broadly speaking, was the theme mentioned by the highest number of respondents in this study regarding why they do home canning. All but 11 respondents spoke about their interests in being prepared for whatever situation of personal need or social emergency might potentially arise; these respondents reside in more urban areas, process less quantities of food, and/or are motivated to do home canning as a form of leisure. While several respondents interested in preparedness made mentions of ‘Doomsday Preppers’ types that appear on television in a show of the same name—making sure to note that they did not identify as such persons—having food in storage was important as a tactic for ensuring their future food security, come what may. This was observed among the vast majority of the sample regardless of socioeconomic status, age, or other demographic characteristics.

**Canning as a ‘Survival Skill’ that Promotes Food Security**

In general, knowledge about home canning is seen as a valuable skill to have ‘just in case’ one ever needs to fend for one’s own food supply. Gary said, “It’s a good thing to know…You never know if your food supply is going to be available in the local groceries, or what’s going to happen.” Home canning is seen as a “survival skill” that may help one be prepared in times of financial need, social turmoil, or natural disaster.

Seth: …I feel like having the skill is helpful and that’s almost like a just-in-case-we-ever-need-to thing, I’d like to know that I can do it and like be able to do it well. And I don’t know, you know, under what circumstance I would need to can but I like the idea of being prepared, I guess.
Fay: And I just think it’s really important that people who can grow at least some of their own food do it. It’s a survival skill that I hope our civilization doesn’t lose.

SP: Canning, gardening, or the whole package?

Fay: The whole package. …[Because it’s] a survival skill, you know, during times of upheaval, disaster, you know. I just think that people who do not know how to be somewhat independent in their food are really vulnerable.

SP: To what kinds of threats?

Fay: I guess political turmoil, you know, natural disasters can just wipe out everything. And having your own food doesn’t ensure that the tornado or hurricane or whatever isn’t going to just wipe everything – the best laid plans kind of thing.

The theme of preparedness specifically manifests in a variety of ways. Many spoke in generalities about being prepared, come what may. Others spoke in particular about the importance of food security, and knowing that their home food supply could provide themselves and family members with adequate nutrition as needed.

Teresa: Now we’re not rich by any means, but to me it’s important to me to have food in my house for whatever occasion comes up that I can go to down the freezer and to my shelves and say let’s have this for dinner. It’s security.

Maria: I feel better having canned things. I feel more secure on some level I’m sure. It improves my mental state when it comes to that, I think. Just feeling a little more secure. …Food secure, yeah. Like if something would go down and the world would be in pandemonium, I would have my dilly beans [laughs]. I mean, so it is all really abstract. It’s just sort of this thing out there that says that you know there’s somehow this connection with food security–just making you feel better about your position in the world if you have something that is sort of there and you can access.

While this notion of preparedness was, as Maria said, “really abstract” for some respondents (dilly beans alone might not provide the stuff of adequate nutrition for very long, admittedly), several respondents had endured times of personal financial hardship and had learned that home canning can be a valuable resource during such times of need. For example, Brenda said from experience, “you don’t know what tomorrow’s going to bring.” She had some hard times when her husband was laid off:
Brenda: …[W]hen we were first married we had a few times that were hard to go; I think we ate rice for three months, it seemed like. And we had one little girl. And from that experience I said, ‘Nope, never again.’ So, you know, I’ve made sure that I have plenty of food and I rotate it and it’s marked and it’s rotated out. I can every year, whether I need it or not.

While Gary and his wife were in the service, they ran out of money for a period of time. They survived because his mother was able to send them her own canned goods “…we lived off what mom sent canned for 17 days,” that included green beans, potatoes, tomatoes, and corn. “If it hadn’t been for what she had sent, that she’d canned for us, I don’t know what we’d have done.” Other respondents such as Jenni, John, and Ruth had grown up in poverty and were similarly motivated by their experiences to grow large gardens and can large quantities of food. Canning can be a very real way of ensuring food security; the food is on the shelf and food means survival.

SP: Does a Mason jar or a canning jar…have any meaning to you?
Danny: Survival, in a way.
SP: How so?
Danny: You can always rely on what’s in that jar, is what I’m talking about—survival. If you put it in that jar it’s going to be in that jar, it’s not going bad, not overnight.

However, one of the most popular critiques of contemporary home canning is that the foodstuffs that are very popular to can, such as jams, jellies, and pickles, are more appropriately described as supplemental condiments to a healthy diet rather than foods that provide substantial sustenance. So, there is a spectrum of canning by volume and also by variety. The nine quarts of tomato juice Sam canned in 2012 (comprising the total food he canned that year) would not be expected to last long in a crisis situation if it was needed, nor would Anna’s few jars of green beans and applesauce. As Maria laughingly said above, “Like if something would go down and the world would be in pandemonium, I would have my dilly beans.” Very few canners put up enough food to sustain
themselves or their families without any outside sustenance for any period of time; but it
is important to note that some canners do.

John: You could eat under this roof for two months and never go to the store. I
didn’t say every damn thing you wanted, but you would survive with quality
food for two months and never go to the store.

Mark: We don’t, you know, we don’t put enough stuff away to preserve ourself
you know, for the full year, you know the total self. We do it to supplement
what we have. Although we probably have in our house, we could probably go
three months easily without going to the grocery store for other than just staples.
I mean, we do have enough stuff frozen and canned that we could do that.
…[T]hat’s just the way we’ve always been. You never know what’s going to
happen.

While a minority, there are canners who do routinely preserve enough food to produce a
situation of food security for an extended period of time such as John and Mark describe.

A very realistic form of disaster that does occur with some regularity is that of
crop failure. Note that only two respondents, Shannon and Elizabeth, canned out of
necessity to be able to eat. But for all gardener canners, losing a crop is a concern due to
the unpredictability of weather or uncontrollable pests. Not every year is a good year for
every crop. When asked if there are any drawbacks to home canning, James explained,

“Oh, a lot of times you’ll have a bad year and won’t get anything.”

James: …Yeah, it’s a gamble; well farming is the same way, it’s a gamble. You
might have a good year, you might have two or three good years and then you
might have a drought or too wet, it’s the same as gambling. Which, I like to
gamble. [Laughs]

To negotiate the threat of crop failure, some canners intentionally put up “too
much canned goods” (Elizabeth). Elizabeth, Phyllis, and Brenda purposefully preserve
multiple years’ worth of certain foods when they are available so that they can be sure to
have plenty in case they are unable to can that item the following year. Phyllis calls her
extra stock “a buffer, just in case” for years when “things don’t do well.”
Elizabeth: …I think I don’t can much at all. …Oh, they think I have too much canned goods but I said, ‘You never know what the next year has.’ That’s what my mother used to say. ‘If you have it in the garden, don’t waste it—can it. You don’t know what the next year has.’ And, you know, that sometimes worked that way.

So canning can, again, promote food security in light of climate change and the unpredictability of the weather. Canning can help gardener-canners deal with the risk of ‘gambling’ on crops, as James put it, especially if they have already put up a large stockpile. In these ways canning is a tactic toward preparedness, to help address the anxieties of life and the fundamental concern of having enough to eat.

“Post-Apocalyptic Skill Sets” and Self-Reliance

Another form of concern about preparedness that some canners expressed is that of being ready to address any drastic emergencies, social or natural, that might suddenly occur. Negative stigma and stereotypes surround ‘doomsday preppers’ as seen on television; these are everyday citizens who practice survivalist behaviors and may hoard money, food, and/or guns or build emergency shelters for long-term habitation throughout social upheaval or natural disaster. So home canners are careful to emphasize the importance of home canning in their preparedness plans or feeling of food security but to distance themselves from what they perceive as over-the-top preppers. Thomas said that he has sometimes “goofed around” and said “I have post-apocalyptic skill sets” as a defense to any critiques of his canning. But there is a seriousness in his play—the reason he says such a thing is “to wake people up” to the insecurity of the national food supply, and therefore defend the value of individuals knowing how to fend for themselves through behaviors such as home canning. Many others similarly see canning as a survival skill that could assist in a time of crisis.
Chrysta: I think with the way the world is now, I think it’s a very important skill to know how to do. …To be able to live with the economy the way it is, and to talk about, bombing, you know, and having your shelter ready, and all the safety things that happen in the world. I don’t think it’s a bad thing to know.

Rita: [My canning is] not for survival. Although I really like having the knowledge that if the world were coming to an end, I have the knowledge on how to prepare food. But I don’t expect the world to come to an end. At least not until 6 or 7 billion years when the earth falls into the sun. [Laughs]

Some home canners are a bit more concerned about emergency situations and readiness, while not as extremely as ‘preppers’. Kesla said that it is important to her to maintain an off-grid food supply so as to ensure her family’s safety. But, “short of being one of those doomsday preppers,” “…it’s still nice to know that should some sort of natural or manmade disaster occur that at least we’re going to be OK for a little while until things can get up and running again.”

Jenni: And so like I really believe that, without being too much of a conspiracy theorist or anything like that, that it’s important to know that you have some backup plans you know. I mean we lost power, you know, and like some of the things like with climate change, like we just need to be prepared to take care of ourselves, you know, in case of disaster or what have you.

Phyllis: I really don’t like feeling dependent on entities that only have their monetary interests as a guiding goal. And I feel like our entire lives are that. …I do feel very vulnerable and unsafe about feeling like, well, what if it’s not in their best interest to sell us gas anymore, because they’ve got somebody else, some other country that’ll pay more, believe me, they’ll be gone in a flash. So it’s not like I’m staying up nights worrying about it, but I’m constantly attempting to cover as much as possible the basic bases of food and water and shelter and hopefully some kind of transportation.

Other canners are even more concerned about forthcoming societal emergency or collapse—waiting, as Eric put it, for our society “just go to hell.” Eric is worried that with global warming and our reliance on nonrenewable energy sources “…that we are a disaster away, at times, from something major happening.” Yet while he said “I’m not an alarmist or survivalist or anything,” he also remarked that “[m]y basement’s looking
awful good if that were to happen [laughs].”

Harold: I’m a little, if you’ve watched the show on TV, *The Preppers*, I believe sooner or later this country is going to go to hell in a handbag, and it may be sooner. If you have this on hand and everything goes to hell in a handbag you’re going to have something to eat.

... Harold: But no, but you can see it coming, I mean you really can. I don’t know when or how long it’s going to take, but it’s going to happen sooner than later.

SP: So canning is a good tool to have in a preparedness arsenal?

Harold: Oh absolutely, yeah. ...Plus like I said if you have the stuff on hand, and you can grow a garden, and you know how to survive, you can go out and shoot a deer, you can put it in jars, you know, you won’t, you have enough to survive on, until maybe somebody comes to their senses or whatever. That’s just my theory.

Are home canners pessimists? Realists? Alarmists? As with any other population, there exists among canners a range of concerns about the future and food security. Being so close to the ground, so close to their food sources especially as gardeners and hunters, home canners may be intimately acquainted with the fragility of the food supply. There is also a resounding lack of trust in social institutions and a prevailing anti-corporate attitude in many home canners’ worldviews. These respondents would rather take control of the production of their own food supply, even though this requires hard work.

In the previous chapter I described the tendency for the canners in this sample to have a strong work ethic, and how they veer toward rather than away from the hot and dangerous labor of home canning. Many prefer to spend their time doing productive activities like gardening or canning rather than watching television, as quoted above. Many respondents are probably similar to Mark, who said, “Work is my relaxation. It’s just like I tell people, I can see what I’ve accomplished, you know. Gardening’s the same way. You can see what you’ve accomplished. Start from seeds and you grow to a, get you a crop. That’s just my life. That’s the way I am. I can’t sit still.”
For some respondents, this work ethic is related to a strong personal ethic of self-reliance. These canners do home canning, in part, because they value hard work and feel that it is every person’s responsibility to fend for themselves.

SP: Why do you can?…

Brenda: …I just feel like you should take care of yourself. If you’ve got the opportunity to do it, don’t turn your back on it. If it’s there, learn to do it. Only you can do that, I can’t do it for you.

Kesla: [I think we should] [t]ake care of ourselves, yes. And that’s kind of a responsibility. I think a lot of people really depend on all the systems that we’ve put in place to ensure that they have a good, easy and safe life rather than understanding that those systems could and most likely will fail at some point. No system is flawless. So just having some back-ups of your own. You know, it’s not everyone else’s responsibility to take care of you.

While not all of the just quoted respondents are originally from southeastern Ohio, their sentiments about independence, hard work, and mistrust of external social “systems” (Kesla) are representative of the Appalachian culture and region in which they now live. The rugged geography of Appalachia has historically cut off the region’s inhabitants from much outside influence including systems of social support, and thus has encouraged an ethic of self-autonomy and the ability to make ends meet by living off the land. For example, John spoke further about his canning and hunting practices: “I had six kids to feed. Never in my life have I taken one food stamp of any kind, or any freebie handout of any kind. If I didn’t grow it or kill it, I didn’t eat it—or if I didn’t buy it with my own sweat.” While boastfulness and ego would be seen as unacceptable, there is a certain pride to the hard work of making or creating one’s living. It is simply expected that one would do whatever they could be physical capable of accomplishing to meet his or her own needs, without relying on outside help—or even grocery stores. Elizabeth
said, “It just wouldn’t seem right, you know, to sit here and not do canning, then need to go to the grocery.” Elizabeth’s Amish religious ideology and lifestyle is perhaps the height of self-sufficiency and self-reliance, as she and her family produce all their own food and preserve as much as possible for winter and accomplish all of this without the assistance of public utility services.

Just as relying on the grocery store for food is unacceptable in Elizabeth’s worldview, other canners find it unacceptable to rely on other people for food. They themselves eschew public assistance, and they also tend to find it unacceptable for others to rely on government assistance:

Jenni: We were poor [when I was a kid]. My mom always had a garden, and my dad always hunted, so like in addition to having kind of an unpredictable income—my mom would get laid off a lot—and so it would just, things kind of ebbed and flowed. So I think [canning] was a way for her to know that she had food for us when times were lean. But I also think there’s a very strong value in my family of being, like being sustainable, and being self-sufficient, so just like not being dependent on other people, you know, and like assistance. I don’t think they ever wanted to go on public assistance so they just looked for ways to make ends meet otherwise.

Danny: I think the poor people benefit from [home canning] more than anything, those people can’t afford to go to buy the stuff to start with, you know, but most people are too lazy to put a seed in the ground and go through the process of doing it. A lot of people wouldn’t go hungry if they’d do this today, you know; it’d solve a lot of problems. People waiting in line for food stamps—Christ! You can plant your seed and work your own garden you don’t need to do that, you know.

In the minds of canners like Danny, it is unthinkable that people would choose to “[wait] in line for food stamps” rather than grow, hunt, and preserve their own food. Canners like Danny have such a strong sense of self-reliance and such a motivating work ethic that they do not understand, or do not admire, “lazy” people who do not try to support themselves. Being or becoming self-reliant means working hard to provide for oneself.
and one’s family, and home canning is a form of work that can help achieve this responsibility. Jars of food on the shelf help promote a feeling of preparedness for whatever yet-unknown challenges life may bring, and assurance of the future well-being of the canner and her or his loved ones.

After the Storm: Canning and the Unreliability of the Power Grid

During the prior growing season in which this research was conducted, an historic weather event, a land hurricane called a derecho, had affected the region under study. The derecho occurred in June 2012 and had a many powerful effect on millions of people, both immediately (by leaving upwards of 5 million people in the Midwest and Northeast United States without electricity) and in the long term (such as reevaluating individual dependence on electricity and the home installation of alternative energy technologies for future use).

This weather event is especially interesting because so many respondents in this research spoke unprompted about the storm, commenting on their own experiences, those of their neighbors, and general observations about how their community and others around them behaved during the situation. They also reflected on the general instability of public utilities, specifically electricity, in the region where they live. Electrical outages are frequent occurrences for many members of the sample under normal conditions, even in the absence of historic weather events.

Vicki: My electric is kind of sporadic, you know, here in Appalachia you can’t really rely on your electric holding up, and if your freezer goes out you’re screwed. So I don’t usually like freeze tomatoes and peppers like some people do, because I don’t have a generator and I don’t really want one.

SP: So does that motivate you to use other forms of food preservation, like canning?

Vicki: And drying? Yeah.
Maria: In the last four years I always haven’t had a freezer, but when I do I try and take advantage of that. But, being in Appalachia, where the electricity is sort of on and off, I don’t think that that’s necessarily the best to put all your eggs in one basket. As many people have – like we did in the summer when the electricity was off for 10 days, and people lost so much food. So that’s a real drawback for that. But drying and dehydrating as well. I do some of that as well.

Even though Vicki did not herself want to own a generator, it is quite common for people to own generators that they operate when the electricity has gone out, and the primary reason they do so is to save the food in their freezers.

Eric: We live, you know, like most people we live in the country out here. Our electricity is sometimes interrupted for days in a row and the biggest worry is your freezer when that happens. We do have a generator and it all works. If we have happen to be home, it all works out right then takes the slack. But if the power’s out for a length of time, you know, all your canned stuff is still good. So anything that I can can, I try to do that with.

Others use alternative power sources as a back-up when conventional systems fail.

June: You know, when the derecho came through we were without power for 11 days, and I had my freezer as you see, full of food which is an enormous amount of my work, both meat and vegetables. The vegetables are vegetables I’ve grown. And we kept the freezer going with the solar panels. I don’t know if you were here at that time, but it was incredibly hot and sunny. It was 100 degrees one day. … Because we’d put in the solar panels and the battery pack, just six months before. We never had them before, so that was a real plus.

The lack of reliability of the electricity grid was such a prevalent topic that came up in so many interviews that I found it strange when conducting the interview number 49 that the respondent, Gary, had not yet mentioned power outages; so I directly inquired if this was a concern for him. Gary seemed to be the only person for whom this was not an issue because, as he told me, he has natural gas wells on his land and had invested in generators that run on natural gas—he had all his bases covered. Unfortunately, some of the rest were not so well equipped. This particular outage of long duration served as a wake-up call for some people.
Danny: …[W]e had 11 days we was out [of electricity]. …It was nasty, it was nasty, yeah. I went to buy a generator, couldn’t find a generator; they sold out of them, my God. I even went to just buy a $4,000 one that no one would ever buy and it was gone. Shit! So I got free gas here, so. My next step is I’m going to put my own source of electricity, buy my own generator and hook it up to natural gas, get off the grid completely if you can. And maybe one or two weeks out of the month I’ll use it, see what happens.

SP: Did you lose anything out of your freezer?

Danny: No, we passed everything back and forth, kept buying ice, packing my freezer with ice. I don’t waste anything if I can get by with it. So we took, we had one generator, we’d run it for 4 hours up there, my trailer up here, and bring it down here 4 hours, and back and forth, back and forth. We did that for 11 days of it, yeah.

Like Danny, other canners felt that the storm caused them to re-prioritize their food preservation tactics. Just as some canners voiced negative criticisms of food-producing corporations and their reliance on outside manufacturers of canning equipment, canners also distrust local government and public services—especially the utility grid that provides electricity.

Deb: …I have no trust in the grid anymore. After the derecho this summer, and see this is interesting because you're doing this research right now after a historic event happened, you know, here in this area. We lost so much food, especially venison in our freezer. …[W]e went without power for six days and it was hell.

A few canners, including Deb, had the financial resources and newfound motivation to make some new purchases to be better prepared during future (anticipated) outages.

Deb: So, anyway, we, after this experience, we went ahead and bit the bullet and we bought a solar generator. So this is canning from the 1800s meets, you know, the twenty-first century. But we bought a solar generator, a really expensive one, that will run our freezer for seven day on one charge, and we bought four solar arrays, solar panels, not very large ones, but four, and they can recharge that battery up to what it's supposed to be in eight hours. …[B]ecause I do not trust the grid. I do not trust it, and this was a horrible experience. …People aren't prepared; they don't think like this. And the reason I do is I'm not one of these doomsday preppers; I'm a kid who was raised in Appalachia and that's all my parents were raised with, that's all we could do back then, they could do.
Home canners were inspired by this storm not just to reevaluate their reliance on electricity and what options they might be able to afford regarding alternative energy sources, but also to weigh the costs and benefits of various forms of food preservation. In general, canning is perceived as “…the ideal because you don’t need electricity once you’ve made it” (Michael); it is shelf-stable. “So canning is something that without electricity, if everything goes wrong we could still have food in the middle of winter, if we canned it” (Cora). “If you can it, it’s good for years” (Harold).

So the *derecho* helped reprioritize how some people preserved or stored food, and by talking about their concerns, revealed some of their cost/benefit analyses of canning and other techniques of food preservation:

SP: How do you decide what process of preservation to use for a particular food?
Jenni: I think it depends on, like it’s kind of dependent. Like we froze all these green peppers this summer, and then last summer we had frozen tomatoes. Well then our power went out this summer and we lost all the tomatoes that we had frozen. And so that was kind of a learning experience for me. I was like I’m not going to freeze these anymore because I don’t have to, like I can can them and then I know that they’re going to be there regardless of if we lose power or not.

Kesla: …[T]his past summer, we had a power outage of close to a week and I, thankfully at the time, did not have a lot in the freezer. …But, you know, [canning is] a lot more secure. You can’t always depend on electricity.

While most would agree that the ease and convenience of freezing foods is very desirable compared to the heat and lengthy work of canning, a balance of risk and stability must be achieved for security of one’s food supply and preservation of the hard work of gardening. Barbara said “freezing is definitely much easier than canning” but canning offers “more of a guarantee” in shelf stability without reliance on electricity. Iris said that “…it was just painful to watch all your work and all that food just’ go to waste in the freezer during the long power outage. So while freezing is easier, it requires
constant use of electricity and electricity is not always available. Taking such considerations into account, canners prefer the long life and lack of maintenance required to store canned foods.

**Self-Sufficiency and Environmental Sustainability**

Many respondents in this study perceive home canning as an environmentally responsible practice. Those respondents in the pursuit of self-sufficient lifestyles often cite the low ecological impact of canning as a primary motivator to preserve food in this manner. Home-canned foods are the ultimate local and slow foods, often sourced out of the canner’s garden. They therefore travel less miles than food stocking grocery store shelves, and also offer canners interested in sustainability peace of mind because they do not have to rely on giant agri-business to eat.

Another very real aspect of self-sufficiency is the ability to keep life going when social services fail, like the electricity grid. Power outages are common in the rural Appalachian Ohio region, especially in association with turbulent weather events. Interestingly, this research was conducted after an historic storm, a land hurricane called a *derecho*, passed through the region and the northeast United States leaving millions without electrical power for up to several weeks’ time. The lack of electricity also restricted or cut off cell phone service and, for some, public water service as well. During such a time of disruption, people must know how to carry on with their lives, how to take care of themselves and their families, and make do without normal public utility service.

In evaluating their reliance on electricity to store frozen food, many canners reflected on the sustainability benefits of home canning in terms of its positive ecological impact as well as its ability to store food without requiring any further energy inputs. For
some, home canning is one technique they use to minimize their impact on the Earth and the consumption of finite resources such as fuel—by canning food that they have grown themselves or sourced locally, they cut down on fossil fuels utilized to ship food because it does not have to travel very far. They also reduce the amount of waste and packaging that must be thrown away, because jars and bands and sometimes also lids are reused.

Self-Sufficient Lifestyles and Ecological Responsibility

Some respondents are interested in becoming as self-sufficient as possible in order to promote their independence from and resilience against what are seen as environmentally-degrading industries, such as monoculture farming and unsustainable sources of energy such as petroleum or coal-sourced electricity. They are concerned with eating with the seasons and eating locally (if not from one’s own garden), and shun global food shipping due to its negative effects on the natural environment.

Leo: Why do I can? It is a crucial element to food security and sustainability. …I have control over my decisions for what I buy and what I sell and share with the community. And, just like, I can, I’m very political. …[A]nd local, not organic, is not an option for me. So local is one thing, but it has to be local sustainable or local organic, in those two directions.

Stacey: …[I]t’s a responsibility. It’s just something that you do and if I don’t get it together to put something up in jars every season, I feel really guilty [laughs] for [not doing it], in the winter. …Because I did not fulfill my role, I did not fulfill the task of which is, you know, paying attention to providing food for yourself in the winter. I mean, you know, we didn’t always have all of this food available all year round and I very much remember that. You know, I remember going to the grocery store and if it was the winter time, you didn’t find fresh fruit, maybe some bananas because those always had to get shipped in anyway.

A few respondents were guided by deeply held personal values toward self-sufficient, sustainable lifestyles which were purposively chosen and designed to uphold those values. For example, Cora had recently moved into a house with two other women who shared the goal of becoming “as self-sufficient as possible”:
Cora: …I think that we are capable of living a life that isn’t so governed by finances, something maybe governed a little bit more by true wealth. And I think a lot of that is based in food. And so, you know, we were thinking about this…homestead that we’re beginning to really manage, to really define, and so the first thing that we wanted to think about was our garden, how much food we would grow, how much we could get out of it, and then the second part of that, you know, was how to make that food last.

Similarly, Chris lives collaboratively on a farm with several other adults who are trying “…to be more holistic in the way that we’re living”:

Chris: Yes, I mean, our, the primary, you know, reason for canning is to, yes the primary reason we can is to be able to extend our season and to live off the land. Well, I mean, I think that’s part of that kind of broader goal for us is to live in a way that’s kind of, that’s rooted in place, live in way that kind of sees the beauty in the world around us and the land around us and especially in the work that we do… So, yes, being connected to the land does all those things and in addition to being incredibly empowering. You know, you don’t go to the store and purchase somebody else’s work. You’re taking in your own work that you did.

The reality of it is, however, is that individuals may strive for self-sufficiency as a goal and to harm the Earth as little as possible but are unable to completely achieve a state of absolute self-sufficiency. Sue said, “I think that there are certainly gardeners and canners who are more self-sufficient than I am, and I’m working in that direction,” and she works hard at her farm and garden to achieve this goal, but drives a gas-powered car for a long commute for her paid work and utilizes public utilities at her home, for example. Even Phyllis, who grows most of the food she and her husband eat, makes purchases of items she is unable to grow such as olive oil and coffee and owns several automobiles. And so June’s comment, “I like to feel that I am living in a sustainable life mode,” suggests that she (and others) are satisfied with the lifestyle they have chosen and designed for themselves, even if they are unable to produce 100 percent self-sufficiency, they are satisfied with their efforts.
This ethic of self-sufficiency as promoting environmental sustainability is tinged with political dissent. Overall popular trust in multinational food corporations and other large-scale food manufacturers has decreased in this era of frequent, wide-ranging food contamination recalls, outbreaks of foodborne illness, and debate about the human health impacts of genetically modified organisms in food and use of chemicals such as preservatives and pesticides. A strong sense of self-reliance among home canners often echoes distrust in society and corporate foodstuffs, like Iris’s comment that she’s “…not all that into products in the mass sort of way” and finds it “…more ideal to do it myself than to buy” food from a corporate entity.

SP: Do you remember your initial impression of canning?
Kesla: I was like that’s kind of cool. We can, what? We can make our own food in can and like put it in cans and it stays and I just thought it was really neat to be able to, you know, we didn’t have to depend on the store which was pretty cool. I guess that was the beginning of my not depending on, I’m trying to put this in a polite way rather than ‘F’ the man. …[Like] depending on yourself and self-sufficiency, you know. Not just expecting other people to do all the work and you reap the benefits for a price. It was a lot more fun than shopping.

Summer: Yeah, I mean I definitely like the idea of self-sufficiency and, you know, if the grocery store is less of a necessity is more comfortable than if it isn’t. Yeah it gives you, I mean I guess canning gives you that sense of self-sufficiency that you, the security of having things put up. I mean generally I think being, like knowing what is in your pantry because you put it there rather than trusting the manufacturers of un-perishable goods is also a benefit to canning.

But there is a catch-22 that some canners recognize and struggle with: in their pursuit of self-sufficiency via canning, they still need to be able to access and purchase canning supplies in order to do so and are therefore “reliant” on “industrial products” (Seth).

Michael: …I like that it’s all reusable except for the lid, I guess. I don’t really like technology that I have to buy from a faceless, industrial supplier. Like I don’t know anything about the corporate owner of all these different canning,
you know, canning jars, but, I always kind of get frustrated it's like I can't, I don't know anyone who could make this ever, probably, not something to this grade.

Janet: …it’s the lids and the rings that are not sustainable to me. Like, you know, if I ever could, if there was a time where I didn’t have access to lids I can’t can, but I’m trying to teach myself how to like save things through drying out in the sun…

Canners such as these feel frustrated because they are “dependent” (Phyllis) on the manufacturers of canning equipment in order to have the materials that they need for canning, and these items—specifically lids—must be purchased new with some regularity from “a faceless, industrial supplier” (Michael). Jars, canners, and other equipment can be sourced second-hand, but not lids. While this situation is far from ideal for those who strive for self-sufficiency, they would agree that such drawbacks of home canning do not outweigh its benefits overall.

*Sustainability and the Environmental Benefits of Home Canning*

Concerns about the use of electricity to preserve foods in a frozen state are not just practical concerns, such as those regarding power outages and the loss of frozen food (discussed in the following section of this chapter), but are also ideological concerns regarding values of environmental sustainability and ecological impact. Slightly less than half the sample cited home canning as having a positive environmental impact. These respondents are of various ages and backgrounds and tend to work in the local foods economy or be very engaged in their home gardening and food preservation.

Canned products are shelf stable and therefore require less energy than frozen foods to stay in a state of preservation. For those environmentalist canners who feel that electricity is an unsustainable energy source and are trying to “…reduce the amount of fossil fuels and everything that are being used in the corporate, …global food system,”
canning or dehydrating foods may be preferable to freezing because of the smaller
“ecological footprint” (Megan).

Iris: I’m doing a bit more drying [lately], but it’s tricky because stuff will mold. We have a humid environment here. …But yeah, in general I feel like canning is a good method for here. And especially with my not really wanting to be reliant on the freezer. …Mostly because of the electrical dependence of it. Not just outages, but paying for the electricity. You know my jars are just sitting there, not requiring anything. But freezing, I not only have to worry about keeping it frozen, but I’m paying for it—I’m paying for its storage every month—in coal or nuclear power! Because we don’t have alternative power at our house so any electricity that we’re using, I feel a little guilty about because it’s tied directly to sources of power that we don’t really want to support.

Others are concerned about eating locally to reduce the amount of distance that food is often shipped from producer to consumer and therefore also to reduce the amount of energy consumed in its transportation.

Janet: Our food travels less, it goes from my garden to my house, into jars, and jars to the stomach, you know, so it’s kind of, you know, we don’t have a lot of gas travelling, transport kind of stuff, you know, pollution coming off of it kind of thing, so for the broader spectrum of like global warming and what not. But we try to, and that’s one reason why we do it too is so that we have minimal impact on the earth with, you know, carbon footprint and that kind of stuff.

Many canners in this study feel that our American food system is broken in many ways, and that existing food production practices and distribution chains are on the verge—if not already in the midst of—disaster or even collapse. For individuals with such concerns, home canning is one way to address what they see as an unstable situation and provide themselves with some food security in light of these environmental and social issues. Our current reliance on fossil fuels, a nonrenewable resource, will not last forever.

Cora: …Things like canning, things like growing your own food, preserving your own food, really help to have a positive impact on the planet, on our world. And I think that that is increasingly more important. And so, you know, I worry a lot that there’s going to be a lot of people that are ill-prepared if things get
worse, if we, I mean there will be a time when our finite resources, you know, our food right now is so tied into fossil fuels and, you know, my number one goal for next year is to design an outdoor kitchen where I can can without using, I have a gas stove, we have a gas well on our land, and my goal is to have a fossil fuel independent, you know, a renewable resource canning operation.

Another perceived environmental benefit of home canning is the smaller amount of waste especially regarding packaging that it utilizes in comparison to store-bought products. Food sold at grocery stores is commonly wrapped in plastic, sometimes along with a nonbiodegradable Styrofoam tray or boxed in a paperboard or cardboard package, or contained in a plastic, glass or metal vessel; only portions of common food packaging are recyclable, and recycling facilities are limited in the southeastern Ohio region. For such reasons, canners delight in the sustainability and reusability of glass canning jars:

June: …I think it’s much more sustainable than buying tin cans; even if you recycle the can, there’s a lot of energy used to melt the can down and make a new can and print labels and so forth and so on, whereas the jars you use year after year after year after year – and I don’t have much of a breakage rate, so I take care. Sustainability is something that we all need to be working for, toward, in my opinion, which is pretty strong [laughs].

Audrey: And that you can reuse them a million times if you take care of them. I mean, literally you don’t have to buy any more, so that’s awesome. That’s not how our society is built today. The products you buy aren’t meant to last forever and aren’t produced with the goal in mind of you only buying them once, you know.

The only portion of canning equipment that is not reusable and therefore becomes trash is the flat metal lid. Vicki said that this is “…another beautiful part about canning”: “the only thing you’re really throwing away is that little lid.” Otherwise, home canning creates “no packaging,” “[s]o our waste is a lot less because we don’t buy our food at the store like that” (Janet). So in comparison to mass market shopping, which creates a lot of packaging waste that cannot be reused, home canning is seen as a more sustainable and Earth-friendly option.
Interestingly, I spoke with more than one canner who did not feel that home canning offered an environmental benefit. I include them in this section because it is interesting to see how their motivations to can or preserve food by other means are similar to and dissimilar from the majority of this sample.

These respondents are generally concerned about the energy consumption required to do home canning. For example, if Sue does not have enough garden produce “…left to justify the propane to fire up the canner,” then she sees small batch canning as “a waste of fuel.” Taylor questions the efficiency and energy use of home canning because she realized it uses “…[a] lot of electricity to preserve these things.” So even though canning creates very little trash and she can utilize local food in season, she worries that “this stove has been on for hours and hours and hours.” And so Taylor is not sure if freezing or canning has a lesser environmental impact, because freezing “requires constant electricity”: “So I don’t know; I haven’t figured it out,” she said.

Due to the energy requirements of canning and the need to use disposable canning lids, Shannon prefers dehydrating and root cellaring:

Shannon: …[I]t takes resources, canning, so it’s not as cool as, you know, it’s really neat but it’s not, in my mind it’s not nearly as wonderful as root cellaring or something. …Because you have to have glass jars, you have to have a fire source to heat the stuff up, you have to an apparatus to pressurize it, if it’s going to be pressure, you have to have the lids, often they’re disposable. So it’s not really in my mind like reusable, it’s close, and better than others, but. …Sun dehydration and root cellaring I think are, you know, I think are much cooler. But a bit of everything.

Janet wants to increase her food security by becoming independent of conventional energy sources:

Janet: I guess I’ve slowed down [canning] in the last few years because of, my concerns are that my, I don’t want to get systems that are too dependent on energy, like on gas and electricity. And so I’m trying to grow things I don’t need
to can: potatoes, dry beans, squash, you know, carrots, things like that that I don’t, that you can store without having to use energy for them. And then the energy goes into either cooking them later or cutting them up later, or something like that. So I’ve kind of, but I do do tomatoes, and I do do jam still, you know, because we enjoy them. …I would like to learn how to do most of my food storage with solar or with, you know, just like dry beans and stuff like that, that don’t need energy... I feel like I have more food security if I don’t depend on natural gas or anything.

So while this project focuses on home canners and, specifically, their canning practice, many respondents are interested in other food preservation techniques and may even prefer other techniques for reasons such as convenience (e.g., freezing) or sustainability (e.g., solar dehydration). Canning is not necessarily the end-all-be-all of domestic food production and preservation. But as Shannon said, “…a bit of everything” can help balance the risks and strengths of each form of preservation and help home canners pursue their goals of self-sufficiency and sustainability.

Health Benefits, Control Over Food, and Connections to Food Origins

By and large, home canning is perceived by its practitioners to offer positive health benefits to those who do the canning as well as anyone who consumes the food they put up. For most home canners in this study, the most crucial aspect regarding human health and canning is the fact that the canners themselves are in control of their food. They can control what ingredients are in the food they can, what chemicals may or may not be within or on the ingredients themselves (such as pesticides, fertilizers, or growth hormones), and they know the origins of the ingredients. So they often say that home canned goods are more healthy because they tend to be made with recognizable whole food ingredients, preserved without synthetic chemicals but rather with reasonable amounts of salt and/or vinegar or no preservatives at all, and the food they are preserving they have usually grown or hunted and processed themselves and therefore do not have to
worry about how the food might have been handled by others or if its nutritional value waned during a long shipping or storage period.

Another related benefit of home canning is that this closeness to the origins of one’s food tends to foster feelings of connection to the natural and social environments. Canners praise basic knowledge and awareness about where food comes from, such as the importance of teaching children that carrots grow in dirt, not in grocery stores, because they are concerned about the American public becoming distant and disconnected from the sources of food and the skills required to produce it. Because canners tend to grow or hunt the foods they preserve, they are often highly knowledgeable about and intimately acquainted with the life cycles and natural processes that affect the plants and animals that they eat. They feel a positive benefit culturally from carrying on the tradition of canning, and also having a supportive effect on the local foods economy. In these ways home canning can broadly be seen to promote the health of individuals, families, local communities, and, by extension, the Earth.

*Health Benefits of Home Canning*

Most home canners echoed Barbara’s statement regarding home canned food: “It’s healthier for you; the food is better for you.” Thirty-three respondents said something similar to “…it’s better for you” (Harold) or “I think it’s safer from pesticides and ingredients I’d rather not eat” (June). Brenda notably attributed her recovery from a rare illness in part to eating the home canned foods she had put up before becoming sick.

Why do canners believe home canned goods are healthier? What are they comparing? Generally, these canners perceive that store-bought foods contain several different categories of unwanted substances, or do not contain as much nutrition as home
canned goods. Home canned goods are perceived as “wholesome, and good, and safe, and better than anything in a store” (Vicki). Therefore it is better “to eat your own home-canned food” because “it’s good for the environment, it’s good for your health” (Deb).

Home canned foods are commonly described as “real food,” suggesting that store-bought goods are not real food—they are seen as unhealthy because they are contaminated by chemicals, or lack much nutritional value, or contain too much of an unwanted substance such as sodium.

Taylor: And the benefits of canning... I think it's way healthier than other canned food that a person can buy. I can put the amount of salt in there that I want. You know, all the ingredients are real ingredients, I like that a lot, that's really important to me.

Anna: I think part of it is it feels like that’s real food. There’s something about it that seems healthier in that, you know, I know that I picked it this morning and canned it this afternoon. You know, and so I feel like somehow the good stuff in it is still there. You know, maybe I saved it, right. So I think there’s this perception in my mind, whether it’s true or not, that that’s better food.

One type of substance in store-bought foods that some home canners prefer to avoid are chemical additives such as monosodium glutamate (MSG), coloring, artificial flavors, and other “chemical words” that are unfamiliar and suspect and “…don’t make it really sound much like food” (Sue). Fay said she believes that “there is a health benefit” to home canning because when she cans she uses “…a lot less chemicals and stuff,” not “…artificial flavors or ingredients or anything like that.”

SP: So do you feel like canning is a necessity for you? Danny: Yes, now, I do, yeah. ...Just the way the world is today, I mean that shit they put in the cans and stuff and you’ll go buy it it’s got this, that and the other in it. Mine’s got fresh vegetables and salt and water, that’s it. It ain’t got 901 yellow dyes and this, that and the other put in. It’s all natural what I’m eating, yeah. ...I like to watch what I put in my body.
In contrast to conventional commercial foods, home canned goods contain ingredients that canners easily recognize as food—“real,” “natural” food. Most of the time they have grown the produce or hunted the animals that they can, and the only preservatives added to home canned foods are usually food substances such as salt and vinegar. “[A] bunch of preservatives” (Joanne) or added salt are seen as unhealthy chemicals in store bought foods that can be avoided by home canning.

Kesla: Benefits? Well, healthier food for one because you’re, most of the time you’re not adding any artificial preservatives to it. You’re just removing its own enzymes so that it’s not digesting and spoiling itself. You’re not adding in sodium benzoate or any of that other crap, if you will.

John: Quality, the quality of that food [is high if canned at home]. It ain’t pumped full of shit… What’s in it, as far as preservatives? A teaspoon of salt. OK, that’s it. That’s all that’s in them tomatoes right there, a teaspoon of salt.

Another chemical concern is linked to packaging, specifically bisphenol-A (BPA) in commercially canned products sold in metal cans. Such “Teflon lined can[s]” (Eric) contain a plastic coating designed to protect the metal can from reaction with, especially, acidic food products such as tomatoes; BPA is also found in other food packaging such as plastic bottles. It is believed that BPA can seep into foods from the packaging that contains it, and exposure to BPA may cause some negative human health effects—“those kinds of things worry me” (Eric). Because home canned foods are stored in inert glass jars, chemical leaching is not such a large concern.

However, BPA is present in many of the commercially available metal canning lids because they are plastic coated.

Stacey: I try not to put any more pollution into my body... I avoid what I can avoid, and some things you can’t. There’s some things you cannot avoid.

SP: You [said you] tried to find BPA free canning lids? Doesn’t sound like you found it.
Stacey: No…I’m stuck with them. I have to use them. So, you know, you just, but it, you know, it kind of does take away some of the sense of good that you’re doing when you know that it could be better if they would just, if they, the big ‘They’, you know, would manufacture a product that didn’t have it.

A few canners including Stacey had made efforts to research and purchase BPA-free canning lids, to no avail. As mentioned previously, lids are contentious because home canners striving for self-sufficiency and sustainability have to rely on corporate manufacturers to make and sell them, and consumers such as Stacey feel they have no control over this process and are “stuck with” lids containing undesirable synthetic chemicals. Yet in a final cost-benefit analysis, even unsatisfied canners like Stacey say that canning—even if not perfectly ideal or completely safe—is still beneficial to the health of the consumer in comparison to many commercially produced food products.

*Control over Food: On Knowing What Is In It*

One of the most powerful motivators for home canners to preserve and produce their own food is that they want to have control over the food they eat. They want to know the nature of their food—what is in it, what its origins are, and how it was grown, harvested, and handled. They want to be in control of processing their food because they want to know exactly what went into those foods, and they do not have to read a label or try to decipher the health impacts of unfamiliar chemical ingredients. In these ways, they take their food supply into their own hands (at least to some degree, even if only canning small amounts of food) and therefore disconnect their reliance on others to feed them.

While most canners perceive local farmers as trustworthy, especially if a personal acquaintance exists or friendship can be forged, sourcing food from distant manufacturers or purchasing produce of unknown origins at the grocery store requires a lot of trust and faith in such latter entities that many home canners simply do not have.
Some of this interest in control over food is about self-determination and autonomy from what are perceived as shaky, unreliable social structures and services such as the electricity grid. Control over food also materializes in various ways, such as having a secure food supply on hand, not having to depend on or travel to a grocery store or someone else, not depending on electricity, and whatnot. But some canners’ interest(s) in self-determination and self-sufficiency is specifically about food itself and its health-giving aspects. Some lack trust in giant agribusiness and multinational food corporations; they do not think that corporate-sourced food is safe, healthful, or clean. These canners much prefer their own, or organic, garden produce and meat from the nearby woods. If they grow their own and can their own foods, such canners are then completely knowledgeable about the nature, treatment, and quality of their food at every stage of the process of home food production.

Mark: …[W]e like the product, of course. We like what we do and we like the control. We know what we’re eating. …Well from the point it’s grown, I know what it is, you know. I know what like the cycle, going through the canning process, the whole thing. So it’s, you know, I’m controlling it.

Iris: …I know where all my stuff came from and like I know how long I did that, and if I skimped on something then I know it and I can watch it, you know what I mean? …I feel more safe from my perspective having control over what we are eating than buying some dented jar off the shelf at Kroger’s [laughs].

One of the most frequently voiced motivations for why people do home canning is because they want to know exactly what is in the food that they consume, and how that food has been handled. With home canning, there is complete transparency of ingredients, no guesswork or label-reading required to “tell what’s in there,” because you can recognize the whole food ingredients through the glass jar: “…there ain’t nothing hiding in there” (John). You know where it has come from and when: “you pick it on
Tuesday and you put it in a jar on Tuesday and it’s at its peak and you’ve captured that,” and so “…it doesn’t sit in a truck for weeks and all that stuff” (Eric).

It is no surprise, therefore, that many home canners in this study garden as closely to organic guidelines as possible, and choose organic foods as much as possible when they cannot grow it themselves. As Sam said, “…I don’t use any pesticides or fertilizers in my garden. Everything’s clean as far as I know.” By growing and buying organic, undesirable chemicals such as fertilizers and pesticides can be avoided.

SP: Why do you can?
Kelsa: Because I like to know what’s in my food, and if I make it, then I know what’s in it. I like to know that it’s local and as organic as possible even if it’s not certified. I can at least still go to the farmer’s market and ask a farmer what in the world they put on it or if I grew it, I know exactly what I did with it.

SP: [Do] [y]ou like to eat organic?
Iris: It’s important for me to minimize the amount of synthetic chemicals and various other chemicals that my family is exposed to. And so if we use our own produce, I know exactly what happened to it. And if I buy it from the neighbor or from somebody else in the community, then I also have a pretty good idea of what chemicals I am or am not exposing my family to.

Some canners are also particularly concerned about genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and their as-yet questionable health record, and do not want to consume foods that are themselves genetically modified or contain GMOs. Again, eating certified organic foods helps to avoid GMOs in both plants and meat products.

SP: Do you feel that canning is somehow a necessity for you? Do you feel required to do it in any way?
Janet: If I want the level of quality that I require, yeah, I think I would have to. Because I’m so particular about what food my family eats and where it comes from, and what’s in it, I’m not willing, you know, I won’t let anything like high fructose corn syrup come into this house, and anything genetically modified. I really work, I mean I save all my own seeds, and I know if my neighbors are growing anything and if it could cross with mine, you know, and if their stuff is genetically modified or not, and whatever. So I kind of watch, I go right down to the, you know, how does it cross-pollinate, and you know how can I control it, so that I don’t get GMOs in my house.
SP: Why do you can?
Vicki: Well I enjoy it. I believe that it is, you know, much healthier than anything that you can buy in a store, even if it is organic, because you’re controlling the whole process, you know. And especially if you can grow the vegetables, can your own vegetables and cook your own food, then you’re controlling that whole food chain. And, you know, I always buy organic seed as well. I’m trying to keep, you know, GMO food out of my house, which is a struggle in this country for some reason, we’re not supposed to know about that.

By growing and canning their own foods or foods sourced from familiar and trustworthy local sources, home canners can control what foods and additives, if any, that they and their family members consume. Much of this interest in taking control of what is in their food likely stems from the vast number of chemical additives, unfamiliarity with their often complex names, and lack of knowledge about their safety (both personal as well as lack of knowledge regarding the known and yet-to-be determined safety of some food-like substances within the scientific community); additionally, GMO foods and ingredients are currently not labeled as such on food products in the United States, and so the only way concerned American consumers know they are not eating GMOs is to grow their own or buy certified organic foods.

*Control over Food and Connections to its Origins: On Knowing Where Food Comes From*

One powerful way to control food is to know where it has come from, and, by implication, knowing how it was grown or raised and what might be on or in it. More than half of the sample said that it was important to them to be informed about or personally familiar with the origins of the food they eat and especially any food items they might choose to can. Many canners also suggested that knowing where their food has originated from and the processes required to turn it into a meal fosters a feeling of
connection and closeness with their food and its sources—a feeling that many lamented was generally lost by the broader American population.

Having control over the quality and safety of foods begins with knowing about its origins. Danny said one of the “main thing[s]” of importance about home canning for himself and his family is that they know the origins of the food: “We know where it come from.” Fay said that she cans because “I believe it’s a better quality of food than I can get at the store. I know where that produce came from, I know how it was grown, I know what was used to grow it as far as fertilizers and pesticides.” By knowing about where their food comes from, many canners assume it is safer and offers more health benefits than factory-produced, processed foods from the grocery store:

SP: Why is it important for you to know where your food comes from?
Vicki: Well you want to know what you’re putting in your body, you know, you want to know that the food that you’re eating is made by reliable human beings, and that you’re not going to poison your family. You know, that it’s wholesome, that it’s pesticide free, that it won’t make you sick, you know, that it won’t cause cancer, or you know horns to grow out of your head, who knows. You know I think food safety is a big issue, and wholesomeness and nutrition is really important to me.

Stephanie: I feel like the closer your food is, I feel like the safer it is, the more you can really know what’s on it, and what’s gone into it, and where it comes from. And I don’t like the idea of, you know, like a head of lettuce, or cabbage, or strawberries, or whatever, being picked out in the middle of California and then shipped on a truck, and all of that fuel, and all of those hands touching it, and just everything that went into it, it’s just like such a mystery, and then it shows up on the shelf at the grocery store, and then you buy it. I would rather go to the farm where the strawberries grow… And it just, it feels, it makes me have, it makes me feel really good about like the relationship that I have with food.

When canners say, “When you can, you know where it’s coming from” (Sally) it is usually because they are speaking as gardener-canners; the assumption is that they have grown the food that they can. Most of the canners in this study grow home vegetable gardens and sometimes raise fruit as well, and they mostly can food that they
have raised therein or meat that they have raised or hunted.

Chris: …We know where it’s from. I think one of the big things along that line is when you are kind of doing the work of canning, you’re taking these fruits and vegetables that you’ve worked really hard to produce in the garden and then you’re doing your best to utilize them and putting them in a jar, you know. And then months later, you turn around and eat them.

Linda: But it’s very rewarding to eat your own food. You know, you see it twice. And it’s just, there’s something satisfying with eating something that you know where it comes from, hasn’t been touched with anything, including other people’s hands, and it just, you know, it breaks the food chain, you get it right from God to you, and you got nobody dabbling with it.

Canners have insight into food production process not only as gardeners and hunters who literally create the food itself—they do the work required to create or obtain the food—as well as processing the food for preservation. So they have a lot of knowledge and skills that allow them to pursue domestic food production; these skills and knowledge foster a sense of connection to food that most of the population may no longer have.

SP: Who or what benefits from canning?
Phyllis: On a more society scale? Well, I think as far as the problems the society is having with health issues, or let’s just say lack of health, I think it would greatly benefit people to become more connected with their food in any number of ways, canning might be one of them. …But there’s very little connection, I think, on a societal level with where it’s produced, how it’s produced, what they’ve done to produce it, what it all means. …I think it would help people to become closer to the production and the handling and all the way down the line; from producing it to cooking it.

SP: Are you saying that…[food] manufacturing has grown to such a large scale that we’re kind of taking it for granted as we walk down the grocery store aisles?
Summer: Well yeah, I do think, right, you can definitely take it for granted. And yeah canning is, can be a way to close that loop, or, which I mean ideally maybe it would be to close that loop, but in the smallest sense, I mean I feel like if you canned once you might not walk through the grocery store the same way. …I mean it just might occur to you like the sort of work that might go into something on that scale, or make you wonder about what the differences is
between you could you do at home and what industry could do, and if those are good or bad differences.

Home canning fosters intimate connections with the origins of food, near and far. It offers “…connection the basic realities of life” and “…it connects you to where your food is really coming from” (June). Knowing the life cycles of the plants or animals from which your food originates, the “circle of life” (Joanne), and how it was produced or processed fosters these feelings of connection.

SP: Why do you think it’s important for us to know where our food comes from?
Joanne: Well, I think it gives you an appreciation for lots of things. One, it gives you an appreciation for the folks that are raising it, the folks that are working those fields. It gives you an appreciation for, if you’re eating meat or animals, that the animal sacrificed its life for you. I think you need to understand that there’s a full circle here and that it’s not about you. …It’s about the circle, the circle of life. It’s not about what you want, it’s really about everybody. Can a farmer make a living? Is the animal raised humanely? Lots of things there rather than just that slick package in the Kroger store. I think it’s important.

Several older canners, especially, lamented all the myriad changes that they perceive the American food system has undergone during the course of their lives, notably consumers’ disconnection from the sources of their food. America has urbanized, and over the course of the past few generations, millions have moved from farms to cities. Notably, many young people are reversing this trend and choosing farm life over urban careerism; there is a so-called movement of young farmers who call themselves ‘greenhorns’. The youngest respondents in this study were some of the most political, environmentally-minded, and value-driven home canners. Cora and Audrey are examples, showing that their value sets guide their practical choices about food.

Cora: I think food unites all of us. It’s a primary need, something that we can all relate to. And if we can get connected to our food then we can get connected to, you know, the very earth that sustains us, and the community that we’re a part of, that we exist in. And so it can enrich our lives. It enriches my life to be
connected to the plants and to the food, and to can and to preserve, and to feel like an active participate in life, and feel like a positive impact on life. ...Every time that I participate in something that’s, you know, the living up to my belief that I should live sustainably; that I should live a simple life that allows other people to, others, other people, other creatures. You know, there’s that quote that says ‘Live simply that others may simply live.’ And I really believe that, and I think that the more simply I live the more enriched I feel. And so canning is a big part of that.

Audrey: ...[My husband and I] really care about people and being responsible with our lives and how they affect others. And so we have been doing a lot of self-education on like social justice, sustainability and things like that. So canning for us was like an awesome way for us to, like really know what was in our food and where it came from, you know. If we grew a tomato and put it in a jar, I mean there’s just no questions so, you know, we just felt like – and it eliminates waste and, you know the travel, it takes money out of the question, for the most part. Like, it just seemed like this really awesome way to really move towards those values I guess.

These two quotations show how home canning can be both a means to a practical end as well as a means to another end beyond itself. These young women can not only to eat good food but to uphold their personal values about the respecting and protecting the Earth, social justice, and sustainable/frugal living. The practical act of putting up food puts them in control of their food, in greater connection to it, and promotes the values of simple, sustainable living and social justice.

Home Canning, Gardening, and Connections to the Natural and Cultural Environments

On a broader scale, respondents spoke about the ability of home canning to connect them with the specific origins of their food and its production and preservation, as well as to nature or the environment in general. Respondents said that it is especially important for children to understand such connections as humans’ place in the natural world, and for adults to feel that connection on a mental and emotional level. Home canners also express a feeling of connection to their cultural environment, a shared identity with other canners both past and present and perhaps also a regional identity that
is the connection of food and place. Due to the importance of geographic place in canning and the emphasis on seasonal and local foods, some canners also feel connected to and supportive of their local economy and especially food workers within it.

It important to many home canners to feel close to their food sources because many perceive the current American food system as being broken and unhealthy, driven more by corporate greed and environmentally unstable global trade practices than local economic, political, environmental, and nutritional sensibilities.

Anna: I think especially if you grow your own food, I think it really helps us connect with just the whole process. I mean, I kind of feel sorry for kids who only think food comes from Wal-Mart, you know, that they don’t understand that the Earth had to produce it and it had to be tended and then something had to happen to it so that it could stay good until they got to eat it, that it gives us a bigger picture of what it takes to keep us alive and it’s not just going to Wal-Mart and buying it. They don’t magically get there. So I think it connects us more, I don’t know, with the Earth, with the universe, with life. I think that’s, I think that would be lost if we didn’t can, if we didn’t, you know, and it has to do with growing our food but if you grow your own, gosh, why wouldn’t you grow enough to can it, right?

Maria: But I think that it’s also important—and I’m not sure if it’s specific to canning, or just preservation in general—but I really feel that it’s important for people to have a deeper relationship to food. …I mean other than just going to the store and buying what’s on the shelf. I see canning for me as an extension of gardening. And so it’s an understanding of knowing where your food comes from and gets into the form that you use it to make the food that you eat.

As Maria and Anna suggest, the industrial food system and proliferation of mega food retailers have created so much convenience foods, food itself is so abundant and easy for consumers with the financial means to buy that many people’s relationship to food has become superficial. Because most Americans buy all the food that they consume rather than produce it themselves, they have become distant from the sources of the foods they eat and are reliant on environmentally unsustainable food economies. Gardening, and by
extension, home canning, foster a deep connection with the Earth and the natural
environment.

Maria: We have this – we’ve been given this huge gift of being able to grow the
food that nurtures us. That keep us alive, and so having a relationship with the
food and understanding that whole cycle, as I said: from seed to compost, you
know. So how that all works is really I think very, very important, and I think it
strengthens us as a culture and as human beings. It’s just something that I think
about.

Deb: And then I think on the broader scope, I think it, it does put you in touch
with nature, you know, in a way, and then the environment, the community of
the environment. The seasons, how the earth, you know, operates… I’m an
environmentalist. …I just see anybody who grows foods and who sees the cycle
of dead in the winter and the new birth of the spring and the maturing in the
summer and in the harvest of the reaping of the food and seeing that go over and
over, I just think it applies to so much of our lives.

For a handful of canner-gardeners this closeness to nature can foster a spiritual
relationship with the natural realm. As Thomas said, when he is gardening or canning he
has “…a feeling of almost like a spiritual closeness to like the earth when I am doing
these things.” Janet told a fascinating account of the spiritual side of her seed-saving
practice:

Janet: …[T]here’s a lot to say for like tapping into this older energy that exists,
that’s been probably since the beginning of time, that my beans have tapped me
into, my seeds have tapped me into, because now I save them, I know what their
life cycle is… And I think that’s what we need to do, is we’ve lost that contact,
as a society, as a humanity, we’ve lost that contact with our life force that keeps
that seed going every year. And I’ve tapped, there are jars on my counter right
now, I mean I have like a bazillion jars of beans on my counter, and in my
freezers and in my smokehouse that are keeping me connected to my food
supply.

Interestingly, some canners feel that their closeness to the origins of their food
also fosters a social or cultural identity. For Maria, her own familial origins and sense of
place include canning as “…part of my own cultural foodways,” as something that has
“[b]een handed down to me.” So her understandings of food and tradition of canning
have transmitted through her family or origin and for her are intimately linked with her childhood and the place where she grew up. The foods that people learn to put up, and the recipes and procedures with which they do so, vary by geographic region. Such regional variations in canning can foster a social identity that connects people with the natural environment around them and the foods of their region as well as a place-based social or cultural identity. As Deb said, canning is “culturally important” because “…canning traditions and recipes [vary] around the world,” and so “it gives a cultural identity” and “builds community.” This place-based connection and variety in domestic food production may help offset the creeping mono-cultural dominance of the global food economy (a slightly different kind of McDonaldization than Ritzer [1998] describes):

Megan: …[Canning] helps us like recalibrate our priorities, right, that, I mean, it’s not just about the local food economy but about, you know, I think doing these kinds of projects connects us more strongly with our food sources with our local environment. …I think being connected with where our food comes from is important because it’s, I guess I feel like it’s integral to who we are as people, you know, that are the kinds of food that we eat are very closely linked our culture and that, you know, even I’m sure what we can locally, you know, what people are canning here in southeastern Ohio is, could be potentially very different than what people are canning in, you know, Montana or something, you know. Like I think that there are cultural differences and when we lean more heavily toward these kinds of projects in terms of, you know, growing, consuming, and preserving local foods, we’re helping kind of reinstitutionalize that cultural variance that is lacking in the global food economy. …I think whenever we’re connected to, more connected to our food, it not only gives us that relationship with our food but also it heightens our sense of place.

These connections to the sources of one’s food and the emphasis by many canners on local foods and seasonal eating are also perceived, rightfully so, as benefiting the local economy where one lives. Respondents who mentioned benefits to local food economy tend to be younger, more political about food, and/or working in local foods industry. Surprisingly few (six) respondents directly mentioned the positive impacts of canning on
the local economy, though it was often implied in comments about the importance of eating locally.

Those who do not grow their own food tend to source it locally; buy food from local producers that they then can. By shopping at the farmer’s market, for example, “we’re benefiting local food producers, so there’s a community sense of, you know, economically stimulating the community and supporting small food growers” (Vicki). If canners grow their own or source the foods they can locally, “…that definitely really strengthens the local food economy” (Megan).

Deb: I think the environment benefits. I think if you're growing food, you're more conscious of the environment on a home level. I'm not talking about Monsanto growing food. I'm talking about people home-canning because they’ve home-grown some of their food. …I do think it's good for the economy. If you can't grow your own food, buying it from the local farmer or farmer’s market I think it stimulates your local grower movement, which I think is very important.

Specifically, a few home canners who perceive that canning benefits the local foods economy are concerned about local farms and farm workers everywhere. Audrey said that she is concerned about the “domino effect” of her food sourcing decisions, such as the negative and far-reaching implications of “…buying something out of the store that doesn’t treat its workers well, by farmers who weren’t paid well,” for example. By keeping food close to home, or even at home, she said “I know that my impact doesn’t reach that far” in terms of any unwanted impacts. Michael similarly said that he aims for “narrowing down the relationships involved” in his food origins, shipment, production, and the like. He has cut down on much of this by working himself in agriculture, and hopes to always continue working in the food industry because “my access to really quality healthy things is so improved” and he can be assured of their health and origins.
The subject of connections via canning is broad and deep. Home canners see so much value in their food preservation practices, and also express their values through it.

Audrey: So living and understanding that every action is connected to everyone else in some way, and to fueling something, makes me think a lot more about the kinds of decisions that I make. And gives me the energy to work harder – like by doing canning, even though it's exhausting – I have the energy for it because of what it means, you know.

While the food on the shelf itself is material and physically desirable, the immaterial motivations to can and the beneficial connections, sense of personal control and empowerment, and health benefits it promotes may be even more compelling.

**Food Values and the Value of Food: On Thrift, Necessity, and Canning**

Thirty-eight respondents also mentioned that home canning can potentially save money, though few in this sample are financially required to can to meet their nutritional needs. While the vast majority believes that home canning can save money, especially when canning foods that they themselves have grown or harvested, there is some debate on if this is true. A few dissenters said that canning and gardening require so much time and financial investment that there is a negative net financial effect. Other respondents are so value-driven, and/or so much enjoy the act of canning, that they explained their home canning practices are not about money at all.

It is worth briefly noting that three respondents in this sample sell their canned goods to make money, and thus are profiting from canning and not just saving money. Brenda sells jellies at the farmer’s market. Elizabeth sells jams and jellies and other foods produced on her Amish farm. Leo sells his canned goods in the food products he makes at his commercial restaurant.
Many other respondents work in various ways in the local foods economy as farmers, farm workers, local foods restaurant employees, and the like and so make money selling local foods that are not necessarily canned or other preserved goods.

On Saving Money: Home Canning and Frugality

Roughly half the canners in this study are certain that home canning is “a money saver” (Charlene). As Cora said, “there’s no doubt in mind that I save money.” However, “…it takes money to buy the jars, and fill the jars, you know, or to buy the lids, but still it’s cheaper than going to buy out of the store” (Elizabeth). As previously discussed, gearing up to start practicing home canning tends to involve what are oftentimes significant investments of money in canning equipment and sometimes even the creation of canning workspaces and storage spaces. Barbara said, “I think you save money by canning if you can every year,” because it can take a while to pay off one’s initial investments in jars, canners, and other supplies.

Respondents also noted, however, that the potential savings offered by home canning are somewhat reduced by its hidden costs—these include the unpaid hours and physical work they invest into the long-term effort of gardening. Like many canners, Kesla thinks she probably saves money by canning because she does not buy much of the food that she cans, but she invests time and unpaid work into harvesting it and processing it: “So a little bit of sweat equity and then I’ve got a whole lot of food for winter.” By investing this “sweat equity” (Kesla), canners can sometimes avoid making cash money transactions and thus experience the feeling of having “free” (Iris) food:

Iris: I like having an abundance of food at my disposal. …[W]hen I pull a jar off the shelf, I don’t really think about the money or the time that went into it. It feels free. It feels like, ‘Ta-da! I made this and it’s free.’ I feel like it’s almost like a gift or something. Even though I did the work for it. And I know that
there’s costs involved, like I had to buy some of the things that went into it like white vinegar… But it still feels like, somehow it feels less expensive. Or it feels like I’m saving money.

Another common consideration is the fact the home canners are not remunerated for their work—as June said, “I’m not paying myself.” When time and labor investments in canning are reflected upon, many canners doubt their true ability to save money via their canning. But such calculations are complex and it is therefore “hard to say” (Eric) what the true costs and savings of home canning might be. Maria similarly said “I also perceive, however falsely it may be,” that home canning is a money-saver, “but when you factor in your time and stuff, I’m not so sure it is.”

SP: Do you think that canning saves money?
Summer: That is a really good question. Because I would, I feel like I would initially want to say of course it does, but when you think about buying cans [i.e., glass jars], or buying the equipment to can, or if you were figuring in your time at all, or figuring in the produce that you took time to grow or purchase, I am not entirely sure that it would be, especially, you know, like if you were looking in the grocery store at some of the like value, you know, generic brand value of canned vegetables, or whatever. But I don’t know. Those questions of economics are really difficult…

Just a few canners agreed with Ruth that home canning is “very costly to do.”

“[T]here’s no way [you can save money by canning],” Ruth declared. “Absolutely not.”

“…[Y]ou cannot can it cheaper than you can buy it.”

So why do people can? This chapter is directed toward answering that question. Because it is sociologically curious that so many people who do home canning would say, like Rita, “We don’t do it for economic reasons.” For the vast majority of canners in this sample, home canning is “…not all about money” (Vicki). Especially for gardener-canners like the following men, “Gardening is not about money” (Robert) and by extension, therefore, neither is their canning. Here are two of their answers to the
interview question: Do you think you save money by home canning?

Thomas: Probably do but it doesn’t, it doesn’t enter into the equation. I mean the reality is I spend a huge amount of [unpaid] time doing it.

Danny: …Truth is you can’t put a price tag on it, you know, you can’t put a price tag on your garden, your vegetables. I mean, nah, I couldn’t never do that. You couldn’t get your money back, and the time you put in the garden, no, you know. It’s either in your blood, you like to do it or you don’t like to do it.

These quotations emphasize the underlying fact that most home canners today choose to do home canning; it is a choice that they make in assessing a variety of practical and ideological concerns, the pleasures of gardening and hunting being a related element. They are financially able to make this choice; they do not have to can to eat. Thus, as Danny suggests above that “It’s either in your blood, you like to do it or you don’t like to do it,” canning is largely a lifestyle behavior, an avocation or hobby, or an integral part of one’s overall lifestyle and personal values.

Stephanie: …I do feel like it saves us money. I don’t really think about the monetary aspect of it too much, but it’s part of our lifestyle. I mean we’re growing food so that we don’t have to work extra hours to have money to go and buy food. And to go along with that it just makes sense that we would can it so that we’d have it, yeah, in the fall and in the winter, and in the early spring before anything’s growing.

Food Ethics and Not Wasting Food: “Eat What You Can, Can What You Can’t”

Home canners place a very high value on food, in particular the fresh, seasonal bounty of summer and most especially any food they themselves have grown. A major theme mentioned by more than half of the study sample was not letting food go to waste because it spoiled before it could be consumed or preserved. Since most canners in this study grow vegetable gardens, they have food at hand especially during the harvest months; canning is a way of dealing with one’s garden abundance.

Some spoke broadly like Barbara about themselves, “I’m one of those people that
doesn’t like to waste anything…” or Robert, “I always have a sense of disappointment when something goes to waste.” Many canners spoke of learning a general value of frugality and learning “a waste not/want not tradition” (Linda) from their families during their upbringing.

Margaret: Why do I can? Because it’s there! Because I’m stingy! That’s actually why I started is I just couldn’t see this stuff going to waste. …When we bought this farm, the people who had been there before had this great big garden, and when we moved in there – I think it was Labor Day weekend – there was this whole garden full of stuff, you know. And you can’t let that go to waste, no. My mommy told me ‘No!’ [Laughs] …I don’t like to see it go to waste. I like to see it used up and if I can’t use it, I want someone else to use it.

Allowing food, specifically, to go unused is perceived as especially criminal (Deb: “I just have this thing about wasting food—you just don’t do it!”) and saddening (Jenni: “I hate to think about really good food going to waste”). But as avid gardeners, canners tend to produce more food than they and/or their families and significant others can consume fresh. Summer described this passion for gardening (“I love growing in the garden”) as being difficult to restrain (“…it is really hard to only grow as much as you can eat”). So during harvest they must face their abundance. The solutions to this fortunate problem are cooking and canning: “You always have more than you can eat [from your garden]. Eat what you can, can what you can’t” (Robert).

Perhaps because of the time-sensitive nature of such canning, and the busyness and demands of canners’ lives in other areas such as paid work outside the home and childrearing, some frugal canners find themselves motivated by their ethic of no-waste to do canning even if they would prefer not to feel ‘required’ to do so at that particular time. Overflow harvest from the garden is both a joy and, at times, a nagging problem requiring urgent action. I asked respondents: Do you feel like canning is somehow a
necessity for you, or do you feel required to do it some way? This question brought forth a variety of interesting responses (further explored in another section below) regarding personal economics, frugality, and lifestyle choices. Here are two answers to this question that address the subject of not wasting food:

Dottie: Well, I think it's a necessity rather than to see things go to waste. I can't hardly stand to see food be wasted, especially when you know there's so many that don't have what they need.

Dee: I feel like I should try and can. I feel like it's probably a necessity. ‘Cause that's the way I was raised.

SP: Why do you feel like you should try to do it?
Dee: Well, if you have ground out there and a good garden, don’t let it go to waste – can it.

These two older women’s responses to the notion of canning as ‘necessity’ reveal canning, and in these cases and many others, gardening as a fundamental value and part of one’s worldview: gardening is, for many, a fact of life and seeing that food put to use is a requirement of growing it. This perspective is extremely practical, as Dee and Dottie express, in making use of the resources that one has available (such as land and food) and also responsibly working with and managing these resources while acknowledging that not everyone gets enough to eat. The values of frugality, of reaping what you sow, and the appreciation of the bounty of nature in the form of food are so profoundly held that canning can be seen as a necessity for some home canners—a form of necessity that can be deeply emotional.

SP: So what would have happened if you hadn’t [canned your surplus garden tomatoes]?
Cora: They would have gone to waste, and I would have been, I would have never forgiven myself. Yeah I think that, I mean I can’t imagine what my life would be like right now if I didn’t have those foods, I mean that’s the majority of what I eat in the winter time, is what I’ve been canning through the summer.
SP: Do you feel like canning is somehow a necessity for you, or do you feel required to do it some way?
Morgan: [Yes.] I just feel the pressure of, I would just, I don’t think I could live with myself if I knew I was throwing away all this good food. I mean I could live with myself but I would really hate it if I had to just say, ‘Oh! I’m not going to do that this year.’

For canners such as these, their motivation (value: frugality) inspires behavior (canning) and a definition of the situation (belief: necessity) that is mutually reinforcing for such canners. Not all home canners feel this way about canning as ‘necessity’, a theme further explored below. For example, as we shall see below, a few canners in this study are more concerned with having enough to eat and making it through winter than saving money or not letting food go to waste.

On Canning as ‘Necessity’: Canning to Eat, and Canning as Lifestyle Requirement

As mentioned above, a variety of interesting issues emerged from the range of respondents’ replies to the question, Do you feel like canning is somehow a necessity for you, or do you feel required to do it some way? Interpretations or definitions of canning as ‘necessity’ or ‘requirement’ reveal the range of socioeconomic privilege respondents embody and therefore the range of freedom in their food choices and financial concerns. A follow-up question was posed as: What would happen to you or your family if you did not can? Along with the necessity/requirement question, these inquiries were designed to determine respondents’ reliance—if any—on the foods that they put up.

While canners’ economic concerns and motivations were my original focus, it turns out that many more home canners feel that canning is personally necessary for a variety of value-driven, lifestyle choices such as seasonal eating and personal preferences such as taste. Financial concerns and the ability to eat are not most canners’ prime motivations to do canning, but ‘necessity’ manifests in other ways. Some canners like
Kesla, Stephanie, and Megan say they feel ‘compelled’ to can. Some of these reports of feeling ethically or morally obliged to can are due to canners’ personal values: a strong work ethic, a gardening imperative and not buying food for canning from a store, not wasting food, sustainable/low environmental impact lifestyle, food as a central part of personal and social life, and interest in carry on tradition or a canning imperative as ‘just part of life’ learned in childhood and ‘what you’re supposed to do’. In this section I will begin first with a discussion involving a more conservative definition of ‘necessity’ wherein home canning plays a central role in an individual’s ability to eat and sustain themselves and their families, then I will explore the accounts involving an ethical ‘requirement’ to can.

Shannon is a 30-year-old single father of a young daughter who lives alone most of the time in a rural area on an old farm; at time of interview he had recently separated from his daughter’s mother. Because he does not make much income from his self-employment, and must take care of his daughter half time, he has had to make some creative decisions about financial expenditures. As he put it, “…It builds that appreciation for food when you have no money to buy more, and you have to eat what you have, and you got to get clever.” One technique for saving money that he had put to use just a few months before our December interview was to unplug and therefore stop using his refrigerator/freezer. Without these conventional means of cold food storage and preservation, both short- and long- term, he got “clever” about eating via canning.

Shannon: Well I’ve got no fridge, and no freezer, so I can’t cook a large of thing of crock pot beans and put them in the fridge. And so to get around that, I cook about a half a cup of beans in a pint jar, which we use with Mason jar lids, and I can use them directly. And then I can cook 16 up at once, and then use them up in about two weeks or so.
Unlike most respondents, Shannon does not can for long-term food preservation; he and his daughter often begin consuming jars of beans as soon as they have cooled down to safely open after processing. “Mostly it’s a way to get away not having a fridge on a daily basis.” But the reason why he does not use a refrigerator is because he cannot afford it; and so he currently cans beans in order to eat and to feed his daughter. Canning dried beans “…means that I get to eat,” he said. He said that canning was “absolutely” a necessity for himself and his daughter, and if he did not can, “I’d be hungry.”

    Shannon: …It’s been about all I eat now for the last, at least a couple months. I tend to eat beans and grains, I mean I have a bunch of variety, I have probably 12 different types of beans, and maybe 12 different types of grains, and so I grind them up or cook them, and then I have some squash that I grew, and I still have some beans growing in the garden, and so that’s pretty much the ol’ diet, except for, you know, oils and minerals and such.

    For some many other home canners today, canning is a choice that they make, but Shannon’s financial limitations do not allow him the freedom to choose whether he should do it—he has to can his stockpiles of dried beans to make it through the winter. He was eagerly awaiting the produce from spring gardens and anticipated learning how to can more foods in the next growing season.

    Elizabeth is the only Amish respondent in this study. She is past middle age and lives on a large, remote farm with her husband and one adult daughter; several other children live on adjacent properties. Other than religious restrictions on the use of electricity, her canning is quite like that of other gardener-canners and, especially, those interested in environmental sustainability and lowering their reliance on nonrenewable energy sources. But there are some distinctions in Elizabeth’s case, such as her lack of a personal automobile with which to travel to a grocery store; she and her family do occasionally shop at a grocery store and will get a ride into town from their rural farm
with someone who does have a car. This limited access to conventional food shopping makes Elizabeth and her family much more reliant on their home stores of preserved foods that include a large volume and array of canned goods.

SP: Is canning a necessity for you?  
Elizabeth: Yeah, I would say so. 

...  
SP: Why do you can?  
Elizabeth: Well so we have something to eat. Just like last night we had church here yesterday, and last night we had singing, and we gave supper, and our children were home... And we had the young folks here, and we fed them. Well I went in the basement, I came up with more than I could carry, I had more of the children help me bring it up, jars, I opened [them], made dressing, and I made macaroni and cheese, and we made cheeseburger sandwiches, plus desserts [that’s] what we had. Well I had mixed pickles for our salad, it was canned ...Like that, you know, what would we have done if we wouldn't have the basement?

Since Elizabeth and her family produce so much of their own food during the growing months, including meat, fruit, and vegetables, eating well during the summer is not so much as a concern as eating throughout the cold Ohio winter. 

Elizabeth: We can ahead so we have when we need it. When it’s cold in the winter, and it’s snowing and blowing and cold, you wouldn’t want to go out and see what would we eat? We can go in the basement and have all kinds of goodies. It’s very interesting. I wouldn’t want to be without a basement with canned goods. That’s why we can, so we have to eat, and our families, to support our family. 

While only Shannon and Elizabeth were living at time of interview in situations where canning was necessary for their year-round subsistence, a handful of other respondents had grown up in poverty and they and their families had canned out of financial necessity. When asked if he felt that he saved money by home canning, Jack said that while he was growing up his motivations were different toward canning than they are now: “Canning back then, yes. [But] It wasn’t for saving money, you didn’t have any. …It was something you had to do.” Now, he said, “I have more money now. So I
don’t can as much, but I still can every year though.” So as far as canning as a ‘necessity’ for respondents like Jack: “It was back then; it ain’t now.”

Like Jack nowadays, most canners in this study replied that canning is currently not an economic necessity for them to get by, and they do not feel required to do it. Most respondents had the financial means to purchase all the fresh and commercially preserved foods they would need if they chose to do so. Joanne’s answer is a typical response to the question: *Do you feel like canning is a necessity?* Joanne said, “No, I don’t have to do it. I mean I could buy anything I wanted to buy.” Similarly, James said, “No. [Laughs] Not really. We could buy everything out of the store but we save a little money and it’s nice. I love to work in the garden…”. When asked what would happen to themselves or their families if they did not can, respondents’ most typical response was ‘nothing’.

However, ‘need’ is subjectively defined and can reflect financial necessity as well as psychological, emotional, or moral values and interests. Other canners do feel that their current home canning is a necessity for some interesting reasons unrelated to actually having food to eat. As discussed above, canning can be seen as a necessary action to prevent food from going to waste. For others, canning is a generational lifestyle, something they were “always brought up with” and have “always done” (Brenda). For example, Stacey is a 60-year-old organic farmer. “For my generation, it’s just something that you do… It’s one person’s way of providing food for themselves in a season when you can’t, you won’t, you don’t have that food” (Stacey). Sally said that canning is “part of a ritual,” occurring every summer, that has become “just a part of life I guess at this point.” For Gary, “Canning’s a necessity for me. …It’s just something that’s in my blood to do. I just, it’s something I just need to do every year.”
Other reasons why people said that canning is a necessity or requirement for them relate to other themes presented above, such as preparedness, saving money, health benefits, and controlling what is in their food.

Deb: Definitely for my family, it is [a necessity], for me. …[Because] I think people should be better prepared, spend less money on food, eat better food. When you just want to get right down to the bottom line, that’s why people should do it.

Phyllis: For me it is [a necessity], yeah. …Because my diet would be just so horrible otherwise. You can’t buy canned tomatoes that don’t have the stuff on the inside of the can. Even if it says organic tomato, you’re eating stuff that causes all sorts of funky diseases. …In this world you’re getting exposed to so many toxins, constantly. The only thing you can control is what you put in your mouth.

Vicki: I require myself to do it. …Because I want, because it tastes so much better than food you buy at the store. So I want to make it because I want to make high quality food.

Still yet others felt that canning is a necessity for them in order “…to live a certain type of way” (Seth). For example, Seth explained that canning is a necessary “part of the lifestyle” in his pursuit of sustainability and self-reliance. So while canning is not necessary for Seth (“…that like I’ll starve to death if I don’t do it”), he said that he feels “…obliged, yes, like theoretically, morally obliged” to do home canning to live up to his values. Leo similarly said, “It’s definitely required for my philosophy and for what I want to do in life.” And Kesla reported, “I feel compelled to can” because she knows how to preserve food more safely and healthfully at home, and can do so with lesser environmental impact, than purchasing commercial foods from far away.

Stephanie: For my own life I do feel like it’s a necessity [to do home canning] for the way that we want to live. Yeah, I feel like it’s a crucial component of it. We don’t, we don’t have a television, and we don’t have different things to like distract us in that way, and so honestly I kind of feel like I don’t, like I don’t know what I would do with my evening time, especially during like late summer and stuff, like if I wasn’t canning. So yeah I don’t feel like, I don’t feel
pressed to do it, like I know that we are not going to go hungry and starve if I
don’t can, but I feel like we’re going to be a lot more comfortable, and we’re
going to be able to eat the way that we want to eat, and have the food that we
want. Yeah just to sustain the life that we want to have yeah, I feel like I have to
can.

So the spectrum of ‘necessity’ spans far and wide among the canners in this
sample. Some can to eat, other can to enact and uphold their values such as wanting to
live a sustainable lifestyle.

The Most Highly Valued Food: Home Canning and the Creation of “A Priceless
Product”

All the canners in this study obviously place a high value on good food, and home
canned food in particular. It is amazing how much more is going on in these glass jars
than just the food going in—at times it almost seems that the food itself is secondary to
the variety of complex practical and ideological concerns that motivate canners to
preserve food in jars. The taste of home canned goods was mentioned as a reason why
people do canning in a fewer interviews than the themes of preparedness and food
security, saving money, and pride and satisfaction in one’s work; taste was mentioned as
a reason why people can in as many interviews in which self-sufficiency appeared. It may
be somewhat curious that a taste preference for home canned foods was not mentioned by
every single respondent, seeing as how the main subject matter of concern in the
interviews is food itself! As Cora said, “the taste factor is definitely there” as a
motivation to can, but at this point it is also clear that there are many other factors
calculated into why people can other than just to eat the food.

Most home canners would agree that “there’s nothing quite like the flavor of
something that’s home canned” (Stacey), and “…the food you can yourself does seem to
taste better” (Summer). The implication of ‘better’ here is that home produced food is
better than commercially produced foods that can be bought at American grocery stores.

SP: So why do you feel like you have to can? I think I heard you say that, when
there is so much, for example, commercially available food?
Stacey: It’s just not the same. I mean …The flavor isn’t the same.

SP: Why do you can?
Teresa: Well I like the taste; there’s a huge difference between things that you
can and things that you buy, it just doesn’t compare. And because I am a foodie
[laughs] I want things to taste as good as they can.

While Teresa was the only self-described ‘foodie’ in this study, many would agree with
her taste preference for home canned foods. Some people mentioned specific preferences
for individual food items preserved in certain ways, one popular preference is to the
flavor of home canned green beans: “I can green beans because I don’t like frozen ones”
(Dottie). And overwhelmingly home-grown and home-processed tomatoes were preferred
over store-bought, and were said to offer “…a whole other flavor spectrum” (Stacey).

Megan: I don’t buy canned tomatoes at the store and, or very rarely would I do
that. …I don’t think they taste very good. I mean, I grew up eating like real fresh
tomatoes… home grown, yes, you know. Just like walk to the garden to get your
tomatoes and come back to the house. So, you know, always with food from the
grocery store, even if it’s, you know, produce from probably far away or if it’s
been processed and canned in the grocery store, yes, I’m just not as likely to eat
it. I really like the flavor of home preserved food. It is so much better and, so it’s
flavor.

Jenni: I think also like just the love of good food and food that tastes so much
better. Like a can [i.e., jar] of tomatoes from the garden is just, you know, substantially different than a [metal] can of tomatoes from the grocery store, so—the flavor.

Many respondents spoke about canning helping people “eat better food” (Brenda).

As mentioned above, the word choice ‘better’ implies a comparison, and that comparison
is generally between home-produced food and food that comes from somewhere else and
is purchased, the reference point for the latter being grocery stores (and, perhaps
curiously, not farmer’s markets). So when a respondent like Chrysta says, “Because it’s much better, it tastes a lot better” she means home canned food tastes better than what can be bought. There is a general implication that rests in respondents’ comments about home canned food being ‘better’, which generally implies that the food tastes better but also suggests a difference in overall perception of ‘quality’. The use of the descriptor ‘quality’ shows the higher value placed on home canned products in terms of importance, preciousness, and integrity as well as taste. Home canners tend to feel that their products are “…just so superior to anything that you could buy” (Maria).

Some home canned foods are perceived as being so precious and unique—another form of specialness that adds to their perceived value—that home canners must make the products themselves if they want to have them. Barbara prefers “fresh” salsa, not “pasty” varieties available at the grocery store. “I can’t buy salsa that I like as much as my salsa, so that’s why I always can salsa,” because “…it’s the only way I get the salsa I like” (Barbara). After much trial and error, Summer finally found a type of ketchup that she enjoyed the taste of: ketchup that she made and canned. “If I want ketchup that really tastes complex, and spicy, and sweet at the same time and actually like tomatoes, I don’t know anybody that sells that” (Summer) and so she must make it herself. While there is a large cottage industry in southeastern Ohio offering many canned items such as pickled watermelon rinds and the like canned in glass jars, if Maria wants to eat her favorite dilly beans she must can it herself because, she says, “it’s not really something you can buy.”

Also contemplating on value but taking the conversation to another level, Phyllis reflected that home canned goods are so superior to store bought that “It’s like a priceless product” because home canned goods are “impossible to purchase.”
Phyllis: …[Y]ou can’t buy this quality anywhere. I mean, it’s far beyond anything you can lay your hands on in the store. It’s just not available—an organic product in a jar. What we do is probably worth $10 a quart and nobody’s going to want to do that or buy that. So it’s not obtainable unless you do it yourself.

So some canners must home produce certain foods that they love and want to eat because they are not available for purchase. Taste can be a strong motivator, especially among older respondents who have had a lifetime to formulate strong taste preferences for certain home canned foods. Another practical reason why people like Shannon and Elizabeth can is so that they can feed themselves and their families year-round. Still yet others bank on the financial savings they perceived as being offered by home canning, though there is some debate about whether this perception is true or false—depending on the size and success of one’s garden and the longevity of one’s canning practice. On the more ideological end of the spectrum, a few respondents feel that canning is personally ‘necessary’ or ‘required’ of them due to a variety of lifestyle goals and personal ethics.

Pleasure in the Process: Canning as an End in Itself, and the Emotional Benefits of Home Canning

One last dominant theme mentioned by most of the sample is the feelings of pride, satisfaction, and sense of accomplishment they experience after successful canning and the completion of the hard work it entails. These emotions stem from the actual act of home canning and all the behavior it entails, and thereby differs somewhat from much of the other aforementioned motivations to can and benefits of home canning. As discussed above, the home canners in this study have strong work ethics and typically would rather be doing something ‘productive’ with their time and energy, such as home food production via canning.
Some canners enjoy the act of canning in itself as a leisure activity, and this sort of motivation to can or benefit of home canning manifests in a variety of forms: from those who love canning in itself and pursue it as a ‘fun’ hobby, those who can because they enjoy the companionship they experience with their canning-mates such as family members or friends, and a few canners experience the act of canning as ‘therapeutic’ and enjoy the mental state they achieve while processing food for preservation.

*Emotional Benefits of Home Canning: Accomplishment, Pride, and Empowerment*

Canners tend to be quite proud of knowing the skills required to can, as proficiency in home canning is nowadays a more unique than common skill set. After their day’s and/or evening’s work at a canning project, they feel a sense of accomplishment and enjoy admiring their filled and sealed jars as they cool at rest on the countertop. As discussed in Chapter Five, canners relish in the ‘popping’ of jars as they seal because this is a sign of a job well done. And for some, the knowledge of canning and success at its practice can even instill a feeling of personal empowerment, a sense of being proactive and able to fend for oneself regarding life’s basic necessities.

SP: How do you experience canning… Is it like work, fun, both, or something else?
Iris: Yes, both. I love it because it’s so rewarding. I love like at the end of the day when they’re all lined up on the counter, cooling. And it’s just like I got a whole bunch done. …It just really feels like an accomplishment. It’s sort of a big task to take on, canning like, tons and tons of strawberries or tons and tons of tomatoes.

Dottie: …I’m sure there’s people that don’t have ambition enough to can. Well, I’ve known some of them but, uh… I like to can because you feel like you’re accomplishing something.

Perhaps due to the work ethic that motivates canners to be productive and “accomplishing something” (Dottie), they experience a very strong sense of satisfaction
from canning. As Dottie further explained, “…we get a lot of satisfaction out of what we grow and can,” much more so than buying food from a grocery store.

Joanne: It gives you some satisfaction, self-satisfaction, to know that you can do it.

Seth: …I do sort of like feel good about it like after, when I do it and I eat it, it feels like a sense of satisfaction or something from having done the whole process. …I think it is, it’s an accomplishment. It’s like I, you know, I, shows that I did successfully grow something and not just let it rot. I used it and enjoyed it especially when it tastes good or when you get to share it with friends like at a meal and they like it also, that’s a good feeling.

Following these feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction in one’s work, canners also feel proud of their ability to can and, in some cases, feed themselves and their families. As Chris said, “I take pride in putting up food to serve our household.”

Gary: … I’m proud of what I put up, and if it doesn’t look right and it doesn’t taste right I’m not happy with it, you know. I want it to be right, I want it to be good and pretty, and look good and taste good. I guess I’m kind of conceited about it I reckon, because I’m proud of what we do; I’m proud of what we put up.

Deb: It's like I've done all this freaking work, you know. …I do feel proud of myself. I feel a little elitist that, by gosh, you know, I know how to do this. This was hard work and I learned how to do it.

A very few canners in this sample are even so proud of their efforts that they want to share their canning successes with friends via social media. Jenni said “…I put stuff on Facebook when I feel like we’ve, you know, canned a lot, or done something exceptional, yeah.” And Megan, who loves the look of finished jars, also loves to share her canning projects with friends: “…[W]hen those jars come out at the end, the camera comes out too because…I want to take pictures of it and show it off to my friends.” By sharing such photographic proof with friends, these women receive affirmation of their efforts and their identities as home canners.
The raw knowledge and ability to create and preserve food for winter or times of need can be extremely empowering for some home canners, especially younger women. Megan said that skills like gardening and canning promote a sense of “culinary efficacy” that allows one to see “…that you’re capable of providing food for yourself or for your friends or community.” Because Stephanie thinks “…it’s important just to be able to take care of ourselves,” she feels “…like it’s empowering to know how to take this food and to be able to make it last” until it is needed.

Stephanie: …Yeah, I definitely feel like just food preservation as a whole it’s definitely empowering, just to know that you made that, you know where it came from, it’s sitting there waiting for you whenever you’re ready for it.

Jenni: …But I also think that it’s empowering to know that you can prepare, that you have food that you can prepare for yourself and, you know. Like, just knowing that, like I know how to take care of myself in situations. And like, just, it’s a life skill. I think people don’t have a lot of like life skills these days. [Laughs]
SP: What do you think the effects of that are?
Jenni: I think just being more confident, and maybe being, having more financial freedom in some ways, like, you know, we know how to make food stretch and so if I need to, like if I lost my job or something like that then I would have a little more of a cushion I think because I have these different options of self-sufficiency and taking care of my family.

Chris and Gary were the only man-canners who mentioned confidence and empowerment. At Chris’s farm, he and his collaborators teach others work skills like canning, gardening, and basic construction and building, skills that he sees as “very empowering.”

Chris: …‘Yes, I can feed myself. I don’t have to necessarily go to the store. I can build this myself.’ And I find that that has a lot of power to it. [Teaching people]…with the end goal of feeling more empowered, feeling more sense of self-worth, feeling more sense in, kind of the work of yours hands, feeling more gratified by that.

Gary said that he would like more people today to learn how to can and to practice it:
Gary: …Because they don’t realize what’s involved, and how good it is for your spiritually, and wellbeing mentally too. …[Y]ou have a sense of self-worth when you can. You're taking care of yourself, and you’re taking care of other people. It’s not anything that’s overwhelming, but you realize, you know, ‘Hey, we’re eating something that, you know, we’ve done with our own hands here, and we should be proud of it.’

Admiring the aesthetic beauty of one’s jars is somewhat about the pleasurable sight (this has been discussed above in terms of embodiment and sense of sight) and is also very much about the satisfaction of a job well done. Canners love to admire their finished food products gleaming within glass jars. Vicki often cans with a female friend, and after finishing canning, “…we like to stand next to our products and admire our hard work.” When asked why she cans, Taylor replied: “So I can look at the beautiful jars of something and, I feel sense of accomplishment.” Joanne similarly expressed that canning is “…a lot of work but looking at the finished product is the goal and that’s really why you have to do it.” There is something particularly joyful in the materiality of canning.

James: I enjoy it, but it’s a lot of work. I think it’s an accomplishment. …I think it’s the accomplishment after you get it done. See all them jars... A lot of work, but when you get done you look and see what you’ve got, finished product. And I think that’s great.

The finished jars lined up on the counter cooling signify the end of the main work of canning, and as they ‘pop’ and ring in the ears of a satisfied canner they instill a great sense of accomplishment. As James said, you can see what you have done—the work produces a tangible product that canners admire not only for its intrinsic beauty but also for what the filled jars of food represent to them.

*Canning as Leisure, Hobby, and Entertainment*

Home canners are roughly divided about whether canning is more like work or more like play. Maybe not everyone shares Brenda’s idea of fun: “I’m excited whenever I
can say, ‘Well, I’ve canned two bushels of beans today,’ or ‘I canned a bushel.’” But many home canners find true pleasure (for its own sake as well as pleasure in its accomplishment) and entertainment in preserving food in jars. Charlene said, “…I mostly do it for my own enjoyment, so I’m entertaining myself I guess.” Some canners “just love” (Teresa) canning:

Teresa: I just love doing it. I think, you know, you’re involved with your food, and you know, you’re doing it. But then at the end when you see those jars lined up it’s like, ‘Oh! This is, they’re just beautiful.’ And sometimes I won’t put my food down in the basement just because I like looking at it. So I think it’s just wonderful.

First and foremost, however, most canners are gardeners and their gardening practice usually precedes and trumps their canning. It is their love of growing food that extends into an appreciation of preserving it beyond the growing season.

Eric: …I love to garden and I love to grow food. So, and I love to eat food. So canning is just a part of the process.

Cora: …I mean I get so excited about canning, I get so excited when I see jars full of food that are going to be there to nourish me all winter, I think about it as an extension of my, you know, the summer harvest. And growing food is my favorite thing, growing edible and medicinal plants or harvesting. Basically food acquisition is my favorite thing and so then the preservation of that food is my second favorite thing.

Thomas loves to grow food; all the food that he cans he grows himself. “I grow all this produce and it’s my hobby, I really enjoy it,” both gardening and canning (Thomas). So for some canners, canning is an enjoyable and “very fun” (Chrysta) activity. Deb said that she cans because she enjoys it and will continue to do so as long as it remains fun, because otherwise “[t]here’s too much in life to add un-fun things to it. …I’m at that stage in my life now that I don't, I don't really have to do a lot of things that aren't fun anymore; I don't.” Danny likes canning and said he considers it like “a game”: “See how much you
can pick, and how much you get in a jar, in that one day’s time, that’s what it’s all about. That takes the work away from it, you know, make a game out of it, that’s what I call it.”

Another way of looking at canning as a pleasurable activity is to see it as a form of art. The aesthetic aspects of food are usually topics for food preparation especially within the commercially culinary, but some canners in this sample also see canned foods as visual art.

Vicki: Oh it is fun. It is work, but you don’t, you know, I don’t look at it like work, you know what I mean, I look at it, oh, you know, it’s like knitting a sweater; it’s work but it’s not work because you’re making something, you’re creating, it’s a creative thing. So no I don’t look at as work, I look at as fun and, you know, in a certain way you could say it is, you know, it is creating like art, food is art just as art is art.

Brenda: …I just enjoy canning. It’s like an art, I guess. I want to look at canning like an art. My mother always told me, “If you put a peach in a jar, make sure that it’s pretty.” …You know, when you look at the food that you can, you want it to look pretty. I want to be proud of it. So yeah, I do. So I call it an art, to me, to make sure the pears all goes in so-so and the peaches and stuff like that.

But not everyone is peachy keen on canning. About half the sample said that they experience the process of canning as more like work than fun, but the vast majority admits that it has elements of both work and leisure. A handful said that they do not necessary enjoy the act of canning itself, but of course look forward to the finished product. Seth said, “I wouldn’t say I love the process of canning. I’m looking forward to having all the food put up [however].” Dottie explained that her favorite part of the process of canning is when it’s all done and it is “sitting on the shelf” ready to eat. Fay used to do a lot more canning when her children were still in the house, “but now I do as little as possible” and usually only cans “begrudgingly” to save things from going to waste from her garden.
Companionship in Home Canning

The theme of companionship in canning would seem to be obvious—it is easy to assume that all these families are getting together over the canning kettle, and friends and neighbors alike. To a certain extent this is true. Thirteen canners in this study usually do their canning alone, and many others often can alone and sometimes share a project with someone else: spouse or partner, close family or extended family members, neighbors, friends, hired help, and students. But even though most canners do can collaboratively, companionship was only directly mentioned by six female respondents. My interpretation of this finding is that companionship went unmentioned in so many interviews because it is an assumed or taken-for-granted aspect of home canning. That said, many wife and husband teams probably were motivated to share the work of canning by a stronger sense of obligation or duty than companionship and fun. Stephanie was the exception to this because when she and her husband can together late at night after the children have gone to bed, “…we enjoy it because we can hang out in the kitchen just the two of us... [I]t’s like our quality time.” So there may be something special about those cases where ‘companionship’ came to mind, or considerations of household composition that make companionship a more or less present theme for some canners.

Sally often cans with her sister in law and also another female friend, and she said that “the camaraderie is my favorite part [of canning].”

Sally: …[Canning is like] hang out time together. That’s why it’s really fun to can with somebody, because you are like, you have to stay there, and you have to wait. And even when you’re, you know, chopping and cutting, it’s just fun to, you know, get to know somebody better, and make it more of a companion or group activity.

Chrysta often cans with multiple generations of her family, and especially enjoys the time
spent working together and catching up because it is so hard to fit into her busy schedule:

Chrysta: It’s fun because we sit and, you know, we gossip, and my mom will talk about when she canned, and my mother-in-law will talk about when she canned, and then, it’s fun, we talk about, you know, my children and different things that are going on, because I don’t always get that time with working full time and then being so busy with homework and this and that, that I just don’t get to just have fun and enjoy each other, even though we’re busy, busy little bees.

While much socializing surely does go on during canning, perhaps it is also the case that when interviewed about one’s motivations to can and the perceived benefits of home canning, home canners focus more on the reasons and meanings of canning presented previously in this chapter at the expense of the companionship element. Perhaps they are more focused on the task at hand itself.

*Canning as Personal ‘Therapy’*

One last benefit of home canning or motivation to can for some canners is the experience of an emotional release brought about via the process of canning. Rita explained this as “a Zen thing” where she enters a sort of canning concentration zone and is able to focus deeply on the tasks at hand. For a stay-at-home mom like Rita, the opportunity to can alone could translate into some particularly restorative downtime. As aforementioned, canning can be enjoyable and “relaxing too” (Danny), at least for those who are experienced with canning.

Thomas: But it’s almost, it’s like, it’s more like, it’s like therapeutic. It’s like what I said like when I’ve spent so much of my life doing stuff that’s really technical, I mean the best vacation I think is canning, right, it’s therapeutic activity, right. Same as like, you know, like I was pruning trees… Again it’s not like work, it’s like it’s therapy, I mean canning is that to me. It’s almost like therapy and that allows me to do, I’m also clearing my head when I’m doing these things, and I’m thinking about, you know, that’s when I do my quality thinking.

Thomas said that he “psychologically benefit[s]” from canning, and that unlike his paid
work as a researcher he is able to slow down and “have this mental downtime” because “it’s very, very, very automatic to me.” Again, an inexperienced canner would probably not be in the same emotional state as Thomas, who obviously goes into automatic pilot while canning and is able to “get a lot of my thinking done” while canning. He also feels a strong connection to the Earth, “it’s almost like back to nature, like nostalgia,” he said. Gardeners tend to have this sort of emotional fulfillment and spiritual connection from their work.

Gary: …[T]he garden’s therapy. If you’ve got something going on in your mind and you need to stop and think go to garden and do some hoeing or weeding and just sit there and talk to the Lord for a little while and get it out and, it’s therapy, gardening is.

Unlike the previous theme of companionship, the five canners who described canning (and by extension, gardening) as ‘therapy’ prefer to do their canning alone. Margaret is the best example of this, as she prefers to can alone rather than with her husband. She laughingly stated that “…it’s therapy. It satisfies my kind of compulsive behavior to do it my way. So that’s how I really prefer it, yeah.” Margaret finds her solo canning “very comforting” and “therapeutic” and does not “…have any great desire to go share it with somebody else.”

The range of experiences with home canning is truly exceptional. From personal mental health benefits, to companionship, to producing a delicious food, canning does not fail to satisfy as an end in itself. We have already explored the wide breadth of meanings and motivations that canning holds, from saving money to saving the planet. But here even more so in the realm of more practical than political concerns, the range of meanings that canning holds for its practitioners is notable.
Chapter Conclusion

At the start of this research, I anticipated that home canners’ motivations to can food would neatly identify them in categories such as those outlined by Hood (2011:38-39): “Thrifty Householder,” “Foodie,” “Homesteader,” “Locavore,” and the like. I expected that factors such as age, socioeconomic status, personal interests in food and gardening, and rural/urban homeownership would contribute to distinct ‘types’ of home canners. However, I observed far greater complexity and overlap in home canners’ motivations and perceived benefits of canning; simplifying accounts into one category of a typology of motivations would have been extremely reductive. The dominant reasons why people in this study do home canning range in two major directions: (1) practical concerns and preferences, and (2) ideological concerns that include political interests as well as personal values and ethics. Framing the range of responses about why people do home canning in this way reveals that canning can be a means to another end, or an end in itself. The practical concerns generally result in outcomes where canning is an end in itself, such as having food to eat, producing a better tasting food, or finding pleasure or entertainment in the actual process of canning. Home canning can also be a means to an end beyond itself that is not directly about preserving food. Via home canning, practitioners pursue ideological or value-driven outcomes such as feeling prepared for an emergency situation or time of need, honoring an ethic of hard work and feeling pride and accomplishment in one’s canning efforts, promoting a self-sufficient or ecologically sustainable lifestyle, or carrying on a familial and/or cultural tradition. However, while these distinctions can be made between value-driven canning and home canning that
lends itself to more practical concerns, each canner in this study expressed a range of motivations and none could be categorized as being solely motivated by one or the other.

This chapter first looked at home canning motivated by respondents’ interests in preparedness. The majority of canners in this study are concerned about being ready, come what may, and being able to take care of themselves and their loved ones. Canning helps individuals create conditions of food security for themselves and their families and promotes the values of hard work and self-reliance. The knowledge and ability to home can is widely seen among the respondents in this sample as being a valuable skill upon which one would be able to draw if calamity should dictate its necessity.

Next, themes of self-sufficiency and sustainability have been presented. Self-sufficiency differs from self-reliance due to the former’s primary interest in local and sustainable food systems and the minimization of one’s personal ecological impact. Many respondents perceive home canning is an environmentally beneficial form of food production that helps them tread lightly on the Earth. Self-sufficiency and sustainability are also concerns for many respondents due to common electricity outages, during which conventional forms of food preservation such as refrigeration and freezing usually fail. The inability of home canners in southeastern Ohio to depend on this public utility has, first, inspired several respondents to pursue the installation of off-grid power options at their homes such as solar systems or generators that operate on natural gas. Second, erratic electrical service also contributes to the common perception among respondents that home canning is the most desirable and reliable form of domestic food preservation due to the shelf-stability of canned products.

Another motivator to do canning and perceived benefit of home-canned foods is
the positive contribution to consumers’ physical health. This finding diverges from that of Baer et al. (1992) who found that while the community cannery users in their sample said they believed their canned food items were healthy, none reported being motivated by health concerns to can food. Respondents in my study strongly feel that the foods produced via home canning are better quality than anything that can be bought at a grocery store because the food is in a more ‘natural’ state and contains less synthetic chemical ingredients such as preservatives and dyes. The better quality and therefore perceived superior health-promoting properties of home-canned foods is obtained in part due to the control home canners have over the contents of the food they produce.

Respondents expressed interest in avoiding the consumption of numerous common ingredients in commercially manufactured foods. They assume that unfamiliar or synthetic ingredients such as GMOs are unhealthy, though Pringle (2003) notes the lack of scientific literature for or against the human health impacts of GMOs. Home canners know where their food has come from, how it was grown, what is on and/or in it, and how fresh it was the day they processed it. Canning and the related practice of gardening thereby promote an intimate connection with, and appreciation of, food and its origins, soil, seasons, and the natural cycles of life.

While not all respondents in this study agree on whether the regular practice of home canning helps the canner save money on food, most respondents do canning in part out of a sense of frugality. Most respondents place a high value on food, not just a money value but an ethical value as well. They feel strongly that it is unacceptable to waste food—especially allowing fresh produce to rot when it could have been canned and preserved. Few canners in the sample, however, must can to meet their nutritional
requirements year-round. Many others define canning as a personal necessity for them to do to uphold their values or pursue the kind of lifestyle they want to live.

Lastly, this chapter has looked at the pleasurable benefits of home canning that are experienced by its practitioners. Respondents widely reported positive feelings of accomplishment and pride in their canning achievements. Some also described feelings of empowerment instilled by the knowledge of being capable to produce and preserve food for themselves and their families. Others find pleasure in the leisure pursuit of canning, the companionship they experience while sharing the work of canning with others, and/or the emotional ‘therapeutic’ benefits of the hands-on process of working with food.

Black (1981:62) notes in her brief historical review of food preservation that “[w]e are no longer so directly responsible for our own survival” today as when humans first began drying and smoking foods to preserve them. As we have seen in this chapter, the reasons why most of today’s canners practice this traditional foodway do not directly concern the need to eat. Overall, respondents in this study reported canning for many reasons but primary themes relate to honoring one’s values and being able to take care of oneself. So much of contemporary home canning, as observed by this research, is not so much about food as it is about control and self-determination. Underlying the practice of this foodway are deep anxieties about personal safety, security, and well-being. These are the issues embedded in domestic food production that ferment and later manifest on the surface level of everyday life for home canners in the form of tomatoes and pickles.
Chapter Seven: The Gender Division of Routine Domestic Foodwork
and Canning as Home Food Production

This chapter addresses the final research question guiding this study: *What role(s) do home canners perform in providing food and regular meal preparation for the household in which they live?* While inquiring about home canners’ food preservation practices, this research has also sought to explore broader sociological dynamics regarding gender and domestic foodwork. Previous studies of home canning have not examined gendered themes and sometimes fail to provide even basic demographic information regarding the number of women or men canners included in some studies; none have compared and contrasted canners along gendered themes.

Extensive sociological research (reviewed in detail in Chapter Three) on the gendered division of household labor shows that women tend to perform more housework (including cooking) than men, and women are generally associated with the domestic sphere (including the culinary) (Bianchi et al. 2000; DeVault 1991; Sayer 2005; South and Spitze 1994; Warde et al. 2007). Because this study has recruited and interviewed female and male home canners, it must be noted here that the male respondents are already involved in an aspect of domestic foodwork—home canning—and this likely sets them apart from men who do not do any canning. The study includes more female respondents than male (34 and 16, respectively), even though male participants were actively sought. During the latter half of sampling for this study, a gender imbalance was noted as female volunteers outweighed the number of males; from that point, special emphasis was placed on recruiting male respondents.
This chapter will begin an overview of gender and the household division of labor regarding regular meal preparation in canners’ homes. The canners in this study tend to be the primary provisioner of routine meals in their households. This trend may be influenced by the presence of more women canners in the sample than men, and the previously proven finding that primary provisioners tend to be women (DeVault 1991).

Next, the theme of gender division of labor is continued via the question: Is there a gendered division of labor within home canning itself? As already presented in Chapter Five, we know that most canners share the work with at least one other person, most often a live-in spouse or partner. This study did not find any clear-cut gender divides of labor within canning, although activities secondarily related to canning such as hunting game may be definitively gender-specific. In most cases respondents were also their household’s primary canner who plans and initiates most canning activities. As the final section in this chapter explores, some female canners struggle to balance both roles of primary provisioner and primary canner in their households, especially among employed mothers. Home canning is (still) strongly associated with women. Many respondents, especially women, felt powerful generational connections to past women canners in their families and in general there is a gendered nostalgia that surrounds home canning. The final section lastly explores a few reflections on the potentially changing gendered meanings of contemporary canning among young women canners.

**Gender Division of Domestic Foodwork among Home Canners**

Most households in this study contain two members total (29 households). The sample overall is weighted toward an older demographic, and most households represented do not have young children. This study observes in accordance with the
existing sociological research on the gender division of household labor and foodwork that the women canners in this sample tend to do more regular meal preparation than the men. Additionally, this study finds that women are also more involved than men with home canning. Nineteen of the 34 women report being the primary household member in charge of everyday meals. Six of the 16 man canners in this study report being the primary foodworker in their homes, and four more report sharing cooking and cleaning up after meals with their spouse/partner.

Primary Provisioners and the Work of Routine Meals

In most of the households represented in this study except for those households in which respondents live alone or with disabled partners, meals are shared among household members at least once a day on workdays and multiple meals each day commonly on weekends. Home cooked meals are frequent, especially among retired canners or those who work in the home. In half of the households represented by this study, the respondent is the primary foodworker for their household and is generally responsible for the preparation of daily meals. DeVault (1991) developed the concept of ‘primary provisioner’ to identify the person who is primarily responsible for the preparation of everyday meals as well as the mental and emotional labor that accompanies such work, such as planning menus and tending to family members’ personal food preferences. The respondent identified themselves as such a figure or was identified as such by the interviewer based on answers to the questions: How are meals planned and prepared in your household? Who does this? (Commonly paraphrased as, or followed by, these probes: When the members of your household eat together, who
decides what you are going to have? Who cooks? Who cleans up?) How do you feel about this?

The 25 households represented wherein the respondent is the primary provisioner exclude the five additional households wherein the respondent lives alone. Interestingly, all five respondents who live alone are women and who can for themselves without the presence of immediate family members. They are single (Megan, Taylor), divorced (Barbara, Vicki), or widowed (Dee).

What can be said of the canners in this study who are their household’s primary provisioners? Out of the sample total of 45 home canners who share a household with at least one other member, six men and 19 women are the primary foodworkers in their households. All of the men in this study except one (Shannon, a single father) were living with a female partner or spouse, and half of the men reported that their spouse or partner was their usual canning partner and that they usually share the work of canning together. While many women in the sample reported regularly canning with their male spouses, the women overall were more likely than the men to share the work of canning with a variety of people such as extended family members or friends, or to do their canning alone. Are men who live alone less likely to do home canning? While this question is beyond the scope of this, it is notable that all of the male respondents except one were living with, and often canning with, a woman.

How Meals Are Made: Gender and Household Division of Labor

We have just seen that six men and thirty-four women are the primary foodworkers in their household, and that most households in this sample are composed of the respondent and one other (usually adult) member of the household. Four more
respondents stated that their partner is primarily responsible for the work of everyday meals shared by their household. Of these four respondents, the one woman (Ruth) who said her spouse did more meal preparation is physically disabled and therefore unable to do the work of everyday meals.

In twelve more cases, everyday foodwork was reportedly shared in some way between the respondent and usually another adult member of the household, typically a spouse. Five of these respondents said that the work of meals was fairly equally shared or divided between themselves and their opposite-gender spouse or partner (John: “Some days she cooks, and some days I cook”). Just two women (Deb, Jenni) said that the work of meals was equally shared with their husbands: “We both do [mealwork]. We work really closely on that” (Deb).

Five additional respondents said that they usually cook and their spouses or partners clean up the dishes afterwards; three such women are their household’s most frequent cook but their partners do cleanup. Linda, for one, was very happy with this arrangement with her husband: “I wouldn’t do it without it. If I was doing all the dishes afterwards I would stop cooking. I would really stop cooking, I really would.” Two more women (Fay, Sally) said that their spouse usually cooks meals and they do cleanup. The final four respondents either provide primary care for their disabled spouses (James, Teresa), or live collaboratively with several other adults (Chris, Cora) and have more complex arrangements for daily meals.

For several of the households wherein the respondents reported sharing the duties of cooking and kitchen cleanup, it appeared that the woman might end up doing more work than the man. For example, Anna explained that even on the nights that her husband
cooks, she ends up doing the dishes on those nights as well as the dishes on nights when she cooks dinner; also, Anna is usually in charge of deciding what her family eats, and if they have input in that decision it is because she asks. Similarly, Kesla usually cooks for her male partner and daughter and then the agreement is that cleanup will be shared. However, Kesla said it only works that way about half of the time: “We are supposed to split [the dishes] but I do most of them” because “he’s tired from getting home” after working his day job and “…for like every two loads I do, he’ll do a load.” Numerous other women described how they felt they had to follow up behind their husbands and finish kitchen cleanup even if he was on dish duty because he would fail to finish the job to their standards such as loading the dishwasher to maximum capacity and running it, cleaning out the sink and wiping down stove and counter surfaces.

Looking now at a few of the men’s perspectives on the unequal division of foodwork in their households, Sam said that regardless of whether he or his wife cooks, “I try to get out of [washing dishes].” Sam continued, “So yes, she usually does them. I mean, I hate to say that, I hate to admit it, but she usually does [laughs].” Similarly, Harold’s wife usually cooks but he does “some” cooking like the outdoor grilling of meat: “I’m a fairly good cook, I just don’t like to clean up my mess.” Therefore Harold’s wife also “usually does” the dishes.

When explaining how meals are created within their households and who is generally in charge of such work, respondents commonly expressed that one adult has greater talent or interest in cooking than the other; very few spoke directly about gender and the division of labor in their household. Phyllis is primarily in charge of everyday meals for herself and her husband; she enjoys the creativity involved in cooking. She
explained, “I like to cook. But I don’t follow recipes. It’s more like an art project.” Even though Maria’s husband is “very good” at cooking and will do so if she asks, she makes most of their meals: “…I make the food. …I was trained in the kitchen, you know, as a chef so that’s just what I enjoy doing. He’s very good at it and if I ask him to make food, he’ll do it. And he does a great job with it, it’s just mostly that – I just enjoy doing it so I do it.” Iris and her husband share meal planning and preparation, depending on “who’s home.” But if they are both home, she said, “It defaults onto me—because I’m the better cook.” Explanations of household division of labor such as these reveal that respondents are more likely to favor narratives about taste and talent than socially constructed notions of gender difference.

Age seems to be an influential factor in the gender division of labor within household meals among the members of this study. Interestingly, both the oldest and some of the youngest female respondents reported the most traditional gendered division of labor regarding foodwork in their households. Common responses among older female respondents (ages 70 years and above) describing their husbands include: “He don’t cook at all. He just doesn’t cook” (Dottie). “I do all the cooking; he doesn’t cook. He can’t fry an egg” (Linda). But Linda and June both have husbands who clean after the women cook: “I do all the cooking and all the food preparation and he does all the dish-washing. He’s not much of a cook” (June).

While these older female respondents did not have much else to say about meals in their households, a few younger women who were also involved in a traditional gender division of labor with their husbands in what may generally be called “homesteading” (Iris) lifestyles expressed satisfaction with their arrangements. Stephanie proudly writes
on tax forms that her occupation is “stay at home momma.” “It’s true, daddy’s a farm hand and I’m a stay at home momma. It’s the truth. That’s what I write, I love it.” She emphasizes that she and her husband went to college but have been able to choose to have a farm and a family, and that it is her choice not to work outside of the home—“And I feel like this is like my feminist statement.” She works in the garden and home schools their three children. While having an admittedly “fairly traditional role,” Stephanie says, “I don’t mind at all, I feel like it’s just, it’s what works for us. And I think to be living out here, like having a farm, and having a family, and just what we want to do, like those roles they just make sense for our lives.”

Stephanie: Pretty much things that take place outside of the house is his domain, and then I’m there to back him up, and things that happen inside the house, like that’s my domain, and then he’s here to back me up.

…

Stephanie: I cook more, because I’m here more. He really likes to cook. …But I do most of it. I think part of it is because I’m here more often than he is, and a lot of times if he’s here he’s working on something outside, working on a building, or taking care of animals, or something.

Iris said very similarly that a gendered division of labor on the farm she keeps with her husband and three children is “helpful” and efficient because each person knows what jobs they are expected to do:

Iris: …[H]e’s more of the farmer—you have to divvy up roles, basically, is like how it works, I think. Because like if we were to be all egalitarian about it, it would be, like a mess. Like, then, you’d have to have a whole lot more communication than you would have to have otherwise. ‘Did you refill the chicken food today?’ Or, ‘Did you...?’ As it is, I don’t have to worry about that. ‘You do that; I’ll make sure you have breakfast on the table when you come in.’ [Laughs] …So like, yeah, it’s helpful.

Interestingly, Mark felt like his traditional gender division of labor in the household he shares with just his wife resulted in his doing more work than she. He said, “I do all the maintenance, the painting, repairing, all that kind of stuff. She doesn’t do
that kind of stuff. She does the cooking and the cleaning. …[But] I clean the garage. I clean the utility room.”

Mark: We have, here’s how our household runs. She does 90 percent of everything inside the house and I do 100 percent of everything outside the house.
SP: How do you feel about this?
Mark: I get the short end of the stick.
SP: What do you mean?
Mark: Because I never stop. No, I mean, I’ll run the sweeper for her. I take the trash out. I do that kind of stuff. I take my plate and put it on the counter when we’re done with dinner.

Unfortunately due to the construction of this sample of home canner volunteers, their spouses and partners were not also available to interview about their interpretations of and feelings about the division of labor in their homes.

While Stephanie and Iris find a traditional gender division of labor in the kitchen to be helpful in promoting the smooth operation of their homesteads, other women in similar situations are not so satisfied and feel that the unequal division of labor is unfair. Sue lives on a rural property with her husband and grows a large garden. She generally plans, executes, and cleans up after the meals they eat together daily. Her husband does more masculine-typed tasks around the household such as taking out the garbage, mowing the lawn, and home maintenance including electrical and plumbing upgrades and repairs. When asked how she felt about the work she and he do at home, Sue said, “There are days when I feel like it seems unequal.” Then she went to long lengths to list numerous projects that her husband had done around the house, as though she did not want it to seem as though she did more housework than he: “…So I feel like even though the daily routine tasks there may be more that fall to me, there are other tasks, you know, installing a door bell, which he did recently, fixing the door, fixing this, fixing that, the
lawn mowing, chainsaw a tree down, clearing out underbrush, things like that…”. Her experience expresses a typical gender divide found in previous housework studies, between female-typed tasks like every-day cooking and male-typed tasks, the latter of which tend to be outdoors and/or intermittent tasks such as taking the trash out weekly or infrequently-needed repair work.

Mothers of young children, especially such mothers who work outside the home, seem to be most likely to be unhappy with their household’s unequal arrangements for mealwork. Rita and her husband have two young children. Because she works outside of the home only occasionally, she cooks most of the meals and generally does dishes and kitchen cleanup; when her husband attempts to assist with dishes “…he only does them half-way.” Rita tartly remarked that the way she felt about this was that the situation is a “Crock ‘a crap!” “That’s just the way it is. I still hate it and it’s still stupid and it’s not fair and whatever.” Her reconciliation that followed these statements was: “I have other things that I can do whatever I want so that’s okay.”

Kesla works outside the home part-time at a nearby farm and generally takes care of her and her male partner’s young daughter. She usually does most of the cooking and canning for their household, while he works outside the home fulltime.

Kesla: … I guess he’s making the sacrifice of working outside the home and working, you know, seven or eight hours a day. …[H]e is a very good cook and I love when he cooks dinner because it’s always tasty and it’s, then I don’t have to do it. But he is busy doing other kinds of work and improving our lives. So as much as I wish it, I do understand and I, if he wasn’t such a good cook and willing to do it at times, I would probably be more like what is that called, division of sexes in the home?... I would feel more poo poo and pouty about it but, you know, he still watches her a lot when he can and I get to go do stuff and I still do stuff outside the home and have a very active job. And he doesn’t think I’m just this little woman that has to sit at home and cook and clean. So I’m not too worried about it.
Chrysta works full-time outside the home and plans, cooks, and cleans up most of her family’s meals—with the exception that her husband grills meat sometimes. She does not like feeling left behind in the kitchen to finish cleanup alone while her family pursues other activities.

Chrysta: I like the shared duties of cooking, and I like it when people help me clean up. My girls will do the dishwasher but I’m usually the one that wipes everything down and finishes the dishes. And I don’t like that very much. I wish they’d all help and not scatter. They go up to watch the news or, do homework or, watch TV until I get everything done and then they come back and do homework.

Now that we have heard from numerous female respondents who act as their household’s primary provisioner, let us turn to the six men who also fulfill this role within their families. Again, we see the explanation that one partner, in this case male, has greater personal interests and talents with food. Thomas grew up being more interested than his sister in growing and harvesting plants, and he was more involved than she in canning with their mother and grandmother. While he is almost apologetic in being his household’s primary provisioner for his wife and children, he says this situation is “fine”: “I love cooking, as I said, I mean I love growing food, and I love making stuff with it, and I love eating it, and we have a very, very good diet, you know, and so I very much enjoy doing it.”

SP: Who decides what you’re going to eat?
Thomas: [Exhale] I hate to say it’s probably me. I think it’s half the time it would be, and half the time it would be my wife. No actually probably more of me because I think, because I usually cook more, you know. So I think it’s, I think me, it’s not exclusively me, it’s probably two-thirds of the time me, and one-third of the time my wife.
SP: Who does the cooking?
Thomas: Me more so than she does, it’s probably about again it’s two-thirds of the time me, or maybe more, probably about 80 percent of the time me.
SP: Does she do the dishes if you cook?
Thomas: No, we just share, I mean it just happens. Just whoever loads up the dishwasher, I mean sometimes the kids load up the dishwasher and put the stuff away. I don’t know, it gets done…

Eric also gardens mostly alone and does most of the cooking and kitchen cleanup for himself and his wife. He explains that “My wife…she does not feel the same way I do about all these things,” referencing his interests in local food, gardening, and cooking. Again, he describes his role in terms of personal preferences and talents: “I have my interests and she has hers, I kind of look at it like that. She likes to eat it. So that’s good enough.” Seth also plans the menu, cooks, and cleans up “probably 70 percent of the time” for himself and his wife. Seth owns and operates a farm and grows a lot of their food, while his wife works outside the home. He said, “I enjoy cooking. …I like, I guess, the creativity of having to like look at, you know, what we have and then making it into a meal.” Of their nontraditional gender division of labor in the kitchen, he remarked, “it’s not really an issue, I guess.” Neither is this an issue for Danny, who retired many years ago after a serious injury, and his working wife:

SP: So when you eat together, who decides what you’re going to have?
Danny: Normally I do, I do all the cooking. She works out of the house so I do all the cooking.
SP: Who does the dishes?
Danny: I do.
SP: How do you feel about this?
Danny: Don’t bother me a bit, don’t bother me a bit, it’s got to be done, somebody’s got to do it, and I can’t stand to see dirty dishes.

Gender Division of Labor within Canning and Home Food Production

Is there a gendered division of labor in home canning? Gender and analyses of the specific activities or roles involved in home canning have been left out of many previous studies of canning and the gender division of housework, unlike the latter’s detailed attention paid to meal preparation and its components such as meal planning, grocery
shopping, cooking, and cleanup. Most respondents in this study were their household’s primary or lead canner. When respondents indicated that they usually shared the process of canning with other people, I inquired about how they decided who would do what activities. Who was involved preparing food for canning by washing and chopping, filling jars, inserting and removing jars from the canner, and the like? The most common response regarding shared work organization was that the process was ‘organic’ in nature, and individuals simply did whatever jobs needed to be done. Within canning itself, there were no female-typed or male-typed tasks observed overall among the members of this sample; no tasks involved in the process of canning are generally considered more or less feminine or masculine. However, for meat-eaters, there is one gendered exception: the act of hunting.

Respondents as Primary or Secondary Canners within their Households

As with the provisioning of meals, respondents perform a primary or secondary role in the canning that occurs in their household. Most respondents in this study were their household’s primary or lead canner. As Robert explained, he “takes initiative” to begin canning and then if other household members are present they may join in. Robert said, “I’m the head canner” of the household. Very few interviewees were assistants to another household member’s canning; such cases were usually explained by factors as lesser interest or experience. In two distinct cases worth noting, James and Harold had learned how to can from their wives after the women became physically unable to continue the work of canning alone. Both James and Harold still perceive their wives as the primary canner in their households, even though James does all of the canning for their household nowadays and Harold has done his own solo canning projects. These men
were recommended to me by other canners and I directly solicited interviews from James and Harold; had they heard about the study themselves, it is unknown if they would have felt strongly enough about their role in canning to contact me and volunteer to be interviewed.

The primary provisioner of regular meals within a household is most commonly also the primary home canner. If the respondent tends to share the work of everyday meals with their partner or spouse or other housemate(s), then they also tend to share the work of canning. Many of the female respondents who are the primary provisioner or primary cooks for their households receive help from spouses or partners or other family members with canning; 23 canners indicated that their spouse was their usual partner in canning. As reported in Chapter Five, most respondents share the work of canning collaboratively with others; however, 10 respondents who live in a household with an adult partner regularly do their canning alone (seven women and three men). With one exception among these 10 respondents who usually can alone (Michael and his cohabiting girlfriend who share the work of daily meals), these canners are also their household’s primary provisioner or head cook. So while many spouses or live-in partners work together at canning to greater or lesser degrees, this is not always the case. Canning is often, but not always, collaborative.

The following question was asked to gauge respondents’ personal investment in canning: *Do you, or would you, call yourself a ‘home canner’?* Who identifies as a home canner, and what does this imply? At the outset of this study, I anticipated that there might be gendered differences in responses to this question but observed that women were only slightly more like to identify as a home canner than men. Twenty-nine
respondents, including eight men, said they would identify themselves as a home canner. Six other respondents, half women and half men, said that they might identify as a home canner or qualified their response in some way. Lastly, 15 respondents, including five men, said that they would not call themselves a ‘home canner.’ While it may seem odd that not every respondent would identify as a ‘home canner’ in light of the primary requirement for participation in this study being that respondents do home canning, it became clear that this identification was often interpreted as far more than a descriptive term regarding one’s behavior. Examination of the responses to this question and the stated reasons why respondents would or would not identify themselves as home canners reveals what participants think about home canning and the people who practice this form of food preservation.

For many respondents, calling oneself a ‘home canner’ is a privileged title that must be earned, an identity that must be proven over time. In their definitions of what make someone a ‘true’ home canner, these respondents are first concerned with issues of knowledge; knowing how to do canning is a learned skill that some feel distinguishes people who know how to can from those who do not. Might home canning be a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984)? Second, respondents are also concerned with issues of time and investment in defining who is or is not a home canner, such as the regularity with which one cans and the number of total years one has been canning. Lastly, issues of identity and lifestyle come into play and influence whether one feels comfortable with the title ‘home canner’ or if individuals have other more prominent identities or roles in their lives.
Some of the 29 respondents who said that they would call themselves a home canner stated that this was an accurate “descriptive” term because they “…do can at home” (Maria). Audrey said “I think that if you can anything you can call yourself a home canner.” As Maria further pointed out, this activity is somewhat distinguishing because “[t]here’s a lot of people who don’t do that” nowadays. For others, the regularity of their canning practice determines their positive identification as home canners. Fay is a ‘home canner’ “[b]ecause I can at home and I do it regularly.” “[I]t’s something I do every year, you know. I’ve done it forever it seems like you know” (Gary). Some like Gary and Elizabeth identify as home canners because they grew up with canning and continue to do it: “Well [because] we canned at home all our life, since we were, since I was old enough to do it” (Elizabeth). Other respondents identify as home canners because they have successfully tested their talents over time: “I think I’ve done enough projects now that I qualify I think. [Laughs] …I feel like I have skill” (Taylor).

For a few other respondents who would call themselves ‘home canners,’ issues of lifestyle and identity are more prevalent. As Megan said, home canning is “…part of my lifestyle or my habits” which include a variety of modes of home food production and an emphasis on supporting the local foods economy. Rita explains that she is a home canner “…Because I can at home [laughs]. I mean I’m kind of part of that lifestyle. I can in bulk, I buy bulk food, we also have a garden…” So apparently the lifestyle of a home canner includes an interest in food, certain shopping practices, and, of course, gardening:

Sam: Yeah, I’d say [I’m a home canner]. …[Because] I’ve done it and I plan on doing it again. And the only way I would quit is if I sell my house and wouldn’t have, you know, had no way to buy vegetables to can. I mean, you can because you have them in your garden and they’re in your garden because you want to eat them. And I enjoy the process of watching them grow every year.
And for some, this lifestyle centered around food can color one’s prevailing worldview:

Deb: Oh, definitely [I am a home canner]. That’s my, that is my identity. A food preserver, yeah. …Because it is, it is part of my personality to look at food and think about how I can eat some now and later [laughs]. It’s just, it’s just the way I look at the world. …That’s just how I look at food.

But not all home canners feel so strongly about food and their own domestic food preservation and production practices. The six respondents who felt they might identify as home canners, though uncertainly, expressed that they did not feel canning is “part of my identity,” as Seth put it, but rather “[i]t’s just something that I do to be able to eat my own food.” Sue said that while, yes, she does home canning, she was unsure “…in what context I would like present myself that way,” and that she does not “…have enough people around me that that kind of [thing] comes up.” So perhaps for canners like Sue there is some sort of necessary community element required for identity validation. But since home canners do canning as well as a variety of other life activities and roles, their domestic food production may not be a singly defining aspect of how they perceive themselves. June said she might identify as a canner (“I guess”), but “among other things. I mean, I have a lot of other parts to my life besides home canning, but that’s one of the things I do.” She would be “more likely to pick home gardener than canner,” she said, because “I cook almost everything from scratch”—but surprisingly she did not say ‘cook’ or ‘chef’!

A few other respondents who were reluctant to identify as ‘home canners’ qualified their responses to the following question: Do you, or would you, call yourself a ‘home canner’? Harold said that he might be a “hobby canner” because he shares the work of canning with his wife, who up until a few years ago was their household’s primary canner before she became unable to lift the canners onto and off of the stove, and
also because he does not can out of necessity. Linda has a history of performing an enormous amount of canning annually when she was raising her children on the farm, but now that she is 78 years old and has slowed down with canning she said, “Oh, I dabble in it, you know. I think a home canner is somebody that puts everything up.” So again here are the issues of quantity and, by implication, necessity. Mark cans “recreationally,” not out of need, nor to provide the entirety of the food he and his wife consume: “We don’t, you know, we don’t put enough stuff away to preserve ourself [sic] you know, for the full year, you know the total self. We do it to supplement what we have.” And finally, experience and heritage come into play in one’s canning identity, such as self-defined “novice canner” Summer, who has no family history of home canning and had taught herself how to do it mostly from books.

Summer: I would always, if anybody, in conversation I would always probably say ‘novice canner’. …Because, I mean I feel like canning…carries the weight of generations with it kind of, or even like people who have traditionally canned for necessity, you know, and so because I can’t really claim any of those things yet. …I guess why I would say ‘novice’ is because every time I’ve gone to can, it has felt like I am trying something new. Like I’ve never really felt like oh it’s, you know, like ‘Oh, this bird is singing—it is time to can’, you know, sort of like [instinctual signal]…It’s always been like a new, like I’ve never really canned the same thing, well tomatoes I guess, but usually, like I very rarely can the same thing twice. So yeah I guess I just feel like for those reasons I would be a novice.

Lastly, the definitively negative responses (to the question: Do you, or would you, call yourself a ‘home canner’?) further define what qualifications and ideals home canners compare themselves against in defining who is and is not a true home canner. Anna has been canning for most of 25 years, but does not identify as a canner because “…I don’t do it every year. I do it most years. I don’t ever feel like I do enough…it feels like it’s such a tiny part of what I could be doing or I’d like to be doing.” Similarly,
Stacey does a fair amount of canning every year but would not identify as a home canner.

“Because I don’t do enough of it.” She explained that “…if someone is an avid home canner, in my mind, pretty much everything they eat is canned. So I guess that’s why I don’t think of myself as a home canner, with that label.” Perhaps Stacey remembers the kind of canning she grew up with in her parents’ home, where all the fruit they ate during the winter months they had to put up themselves. Joanne and Chrysta had similar memories of their mothers, “real” home canners:

Joanne: Jeez, I’d say no [I’m not a canner]. …Because I don’t do enough of it. I just do—One, I only hot bath, so that probably eliminates me from people that do pressure cooking stuff. And I really only do enough for family and friends; I don’t do a lot of it. I just do it for me. …I think a real home canner would be somebody like my mom, where you canned everything, using all methods. You did jellies, you did jams, you did fruit, you did vegetables, you did meat, you hot bathed, you pressure cooked. You did everything. I think the little stuff I do—I was actually surprised that I qualified to be interviewed because I don’t do everything. Somebody like my mom, who did it all, I think that that’s the home canner.

Chrysta: I don’t think I do. I do can, but I’m not [a home canner]…I don’t know, I guess it’s a hobby more than a profession. I don’t know. …Like I do canning, I enjoy canning, but I wouldn’t say I am, I would think of a canner as someone who does it like more full-time. …More than for fun a few times a year, I think is someone who is a canner [and who] maybe does it two or three days a week in the summer. Like my mom, like she’ll can green beans for two or three weeks and then she’ll, then whatever comes in season next, or whatever she can find next, you know, pulling her tomatoes or whatever, then she’ll say ‘Well then we’ll do this’ and then ‘We’ll do that’. But I’m not usually home for that; I’m working. So I would say I’m a hygienist, I just do canning for fun.

While no gender differences were noted in women’s and men’s amounts of readiness or reluctance to identify as home canners, their understandings of who does home canning may be somewhat gendered: not a single respondent recounted a memory or description of a ‘real’ or ‘true’, authentic home canner in the image of a man. Their memories were instead of female home canners, often their own or others’ mothers or
grandmothers. It would seem likely that such general cultural associations of canning with women would somewhat deter men’s involvement in canning and their identification as home canners.

Is There a Gendered Division of Labor within Home Canning Itself?

Just as there are female- and male-typed household tasks and tasks that can be perceived as gender-neutral (South and Spitze 1994), this research began with the postulation that either women or men might be more likely to perform certain parts of the process of home canning or take greater interest in certain aspects of it in gendered ways. The thinking was that perhaps men are more likely to be involved in the gardening and farming for the production of the foodstuffs and its harvest—outdoor activities—and perhaps women would do more of the tedious detail work of chopping and coring produce indoors in the kitchen, for example. Among the many female-male canning teams represented in this sample (respondents most commonly can with their spouses or partners), a gendered division of labor within canning itself was anticipated but no clear such trend was actually observed. Only one respondent (Maria) said that the Italian American women and men in her family “divided into roles” the work of canning as gender-appropriate activities. While the women work over the food, Maria said, “…One thing men are usually good for in our family is setting up whatever little machinery you need to grind the applesauce – that’s sort of their job. The screws and the nuts and the bolts, and setting up that sort of stuff up.” No other respondents related any similar observations or experiences.

For every respondent who described her or his participation in a somewhat gendered division of labor in canning, there were other canners who do their canning
with others in gender-unspecific ways (this statement presuming that we temporarily set aside the cultural association of all canning with women). Seth described his wife as “the chopper” who preps the food while he handles jar sterilization and processing, and Harold does “most of the heavy [lifting] stuff” while his wife “does the prep.” But Audrey is “a lot more interested in the technical aspects” of canning than her husband and is “in charge of the timing” of processing the jars, while he is “usually in charge of the chopping and the washing.” For most canners, gender does not seem to be an issue with their canning and they instead tend to describe the shared labor of canning in mechanistic, or functionalist, terms without any apparent hierarchy of power. As Chrysta put it, “Everyone just pitches in.” It is work that needs to be done.

John: Hell, [the way people may see my canning] doesn’t affect me, as far as people’s afraid of their so-called feminine side, you know. I don’t believe that everything in the house, inside the house is women’s work, and everything outside is man’s work, because [my wife] helps me greatly outside and I help her greatly inside, or try to. We don’t say ‘This is your job, and that’s your job.’ It’s work—get it done.

The word respondents most often used to describe the process of how they divide up the work of canning and who does what is, appropriately, ‘organic’. Phyllis and Jim take a “fairly organic approach” to canning since they both know how to do it and so they “just jump in wherever” with what job is needed. When Kesla, her male partner, and another couple with whom they are friends can together, the work is divided in a way that “happens pretty organically” depending on talents and interests: “It all just sort of works out,” Kesla said.

In a few cases, the shared activity of canning seems to disrupt some female-male couples’ usual division of labor within their household. For example, Mark described a very traditional gender division of labor in the household he shares with just his wife.
Mark does most of the work outside the house (including gardening), while she takes care of regular meals and chores inside the home. But when it comes time for canning, he said “we’ll work together” and “we take turns” doing certain jobs: “it’s whatever job that needs to be done, each of us do it.” Neither Mark nor his wife will can without the other because, he said, “[i]t’s a two-person operation” wherein they are both needed to work cooperatively to get it done.

Stephanie also described a very clear gender division of labor between herself and her husband in regular meal provisioning wherein “…things that take place outside of the house is his domain” and “the kitchen is typically my domain.” Yet these divisions cease or reverse when she and her husband can together. Stephanie said, “I’m definitely not the boss like when we’re canning…I’m definitely not the boss in the kitchen at that point.” “[I]f we’re canning I don’t feel as much like ownership of the space, and just ownership of what’s happening, because it is more of a joint effort, and yeah we’re both working together to get it all done and stuff.” This may be partly because that Stephanie grew up with no family history of canning whereas her husband did, and they live on farmland that has been in his family for generations where she assumed “there has been people canning here for most of the last hundred years.” So she learned about canning from her husband, who had been exposed as a child by his grandmother and great-grandmother.

Kesla told a story about an observation she made of “flip-flopped” gender roles while canning was commencing with her male partner and friends. While Kesla was pregnant, she and her female friend were outside while their men were inside doing the canning preparation work. She said, “[Us girls]…were outside doing yard work while the boys were inside canning and we looked at each other and we were like, ‘This is kind of
flip-flopped but it’s kind of cool.’ And I really like that, you know, that we’ve got men
that aren’t afraid to be in the kitchen.” So canning may be an activity in which there are
no predefined tasks for the women and men who participate in it—perhaps because it was
traditionally work delegated to women only?

There may be a few supportive activities related to the practice of home canning,
however, that may not be so evenly divided by gender. First, gardening; second, hunting
and fishing. Most home canners are also home gardeners, or participate in growing a
garden alongside another member or members of their household. As with primary
provisioners and primary and secondary canners, most households represented in this
study contain a primary gardener and their secondary participants. Most of the men in the
sample grow gardens and could probably be described as their household’s primary
gardener. Eric is one such male gardener, who gardens “pretty much alone.” While many
of the women could also aptly receive such recognition, quite a few of them said that
their husbands were “more of the gardener than I am” (Iris) and that “he’s like the main
gardener” (Maria). Unfortunately, the questions this study asked about gardening were
not designed to target a gender division of labor therein and so this data is tentative.
Among home canners there may be a tendency for men to do more of the outdoor work
of gardening while women do more of the everyday cooking and canning; this is an area
on which future research could focus more specifically.

Other activities secondarily related to canning, at least among households of those
who eat meat, are hunting and fishing. While more women do canning than men, and yet
the activities involved in canning itself do not seem to be gendered, hunting and fishing
are primarily practiced by the man canners in this study. Many men who home can also
hunt animals for food. Nine respondents regularly hunt for meat, and Cora is the only woman among them. So men who do home canning may also tend to hunt, though not all man-canners in this study are also hunters. In addition, not all of these hunters actually can the meat that they harvest (like Eric, who prefers all his venison frozen because he feels there are a greater variety of ways that frozen meat can be cooked as opposed to canned meat), or they may can portions of the meat and freeze the rest. And sometimes respondents will can meat that they themselves have not hunted; sixteen respondents said that they receive meat from hunters such as neighbors or from those individuals to whom they have granted permission or leased their land on which to hunt. There were six additional respondents who reported that someone else living in their household hunts for meat (that they consumed); all of these were women. And all seven respondents in the sample who do not eat meat are women. So the women canners in this sample were likely to eat meat, but only one hunts for meat.

Hunting may be a tradition passed down through men just as canning is a women’s tradition. Danny curiously answered the same way to both the questions Why do you can?, and Why do you hunt? Of canning he said, “Because I think it’s just in my blood, it’s been bred into me, just through the years, you know, through my generation, my family’s generation, everybody, you know. It’s bred into me I believe, something I got to do, meant to do, let’s put it that way.” And of hunting he also said, “It’s in my blood, I love doing it. It’s something I’ve been raised on, I’ve been doing all my life. My father taught me how to do it; I taught my kids how to do it.” And Gary could have also responded the same way about gardening and canning as he did about hunting: “It’s just tradition. I love to hunt. I’ve hunted my whole life. I’m a hunter and a fisherman. I enjoy
it; I love being out. I love to outsmart the animals.” While John, as mentioned earlier, stated that he and his wife do not believe in traditional gender divisions of labor in the running of their household, it is clear who the hunter is: “I don’t mean to brag but I’m pretty damn good with a gun and a knife. …[A]nd I can process it and it will be to eat.” He explained that his wife “…is not a football widow,” though “a lot of women complain about during football season they don’t see their husbands, and she’s probably a hunting widow,” meaning that he is not a couch-potato, sports fan but rather an avid outdoorsman who spends very little time at home during hunting season. Both activities are highly gendered—there is no concept of a ‘football widower’, for example, as this sport and the sport of hunting are associated with masculinity and men.

**Home Canning as a Women’s Tradition: Is Contemporary Canning Still ‘Women’s’ Work?**

Home canning in the United States is a traditional foodway that has been preserved by and passed down through generations mostly via women. Canning, as with hunting, very much runs in the family, so to speak, and women tend to be the bearers of this knowledge. As previously discussed in Chapter Five, most of this study’s respondents grew up in families wherein someone canned regularly or had canned in the past. Two-thirds of the sample grew up with canning in their household of origin or were exposed by extended family members during their childhood, and therefore learned how to can from their families. But there is a strong gender component of this transmission of knowledge. For example, when Brenda says that canning while she was growing up “…was a family ordeal, we all got together and canned,” she is actually talking about canning with her sister and grandmother. As the quotations cited in Chapter Five and
those below show, most of today’s home canners learned how to can by watching and participating with their mothers and/or grandmothers. They remember being child onlookers watching and sometimes helping their mothers with canning, or being in their grandmother’s kitchen while she canned. So there is a strongly sentimental, gendered nostalgia about home canning among today’s home canners.

Especially among contemporary women canners, this nostalgia fosters a sense of connection to the prior generations of canners in their families. They think of these women while canning, and enjoy a feeling of closeness to past canners through the continuation of the practice of this traditional foodway. So canning is still associated directly and indirectly with women, as will be shown below in some respondents’ gender assumptions about who is canning today. The gender division of labor in the households of some respondents is probably not all that different from their grandparents’; the work of both provisioning regular meals and food production via canning can be challenging for some women today, especially those who work outside the home and/or have young children. This section lastly switches gears and looks at how some young women canners are redefining canning as a feminist activity, a celebration of femininity and women’s freedom and ability to choose to engage in whatever activities they desire.

*Family Tradition, Generational Connections, and Gendered Nostalgia about Canning*

Home canning is a gendered tradition carried on largely by women, though sometimes passed down to men. All but two of the men in this study (the two youngest men, Michael and Seth) grew up in families wherein some member was known to do home canning, and these men most often learned how to can from their mothers or grandmothers. A few men who had grown up in households where women were canning
had been only secondarily involved as children, such as with stringing beans in preparation for someone else to process, and later learned how to can from their wives (James, Harold).

When asked about their first exposure to home canning, many respondents’ replies were similar to Janet’s: “When I was a girl, my mom canned when I was younger. So I helped her can when I was younger…and my grandmother canned.” Since most respondents were exposed to canning while they were children, they usually learned about canning from female family members, like Stacey: “I first started canning with my mother and my aunts.” And as for extended family members’ canning: “Sure, [my mother’s] sisters can, she has two sisters, and then her mother, my grandmother, and my dad’s mother canned. But I think that’s all” (Chrysta). A very few like Barbara even canned with great-grandmothers, or remembered them canning even if the respondent was too young at the time to help. Only two men (Danny, Gary) said that men in their family canned, both of their fathers and grandfathers. More typical responses from James and Janet below show that the respondents’ “ancestors” who canned, upon further inquiry, were usually women:

SP: You said you have known about canning all your life. 
James: All my life; my ancestors. 
SP: Did your mom or dad can? 
James: Oh, yeah. Dad didn’t, no. He was too busy, but Mom always canned, and my grandmother.

Janet: I think it connects me to older generations, and to my ancestors. And I feel like, my grandmother did it, my mother did it, I do it.

The lack of attention paid in some accounts to the gendered tradition of canning is notable, as with the statements above about “ancestors” canning. When respondents talk of such previous generations of “people” canning as “tradition” (Teresa), they fail to note
that canning has been predominantly the activity of women:

SP: Why do you think that canning is still relevant in this area?
Teresa: Because people grew up doing it, that their grandmothers, their mothers did it. …Tradition.

Perhaps because home canners today feel so strongly about the familial, regional foodway in which they participate they feel that using gender-neutral language when speaking about canning gives it more weight—rather than evoking a feminine, and therefore lesser, history they appeal to the generic language of ‘heritage’, ‘ancestors’, and the like. Vicki was an exception:

SP: Why is important to keep old recipes and traditions alive?
Vicki: Because that’s the way I was raised, you know. The things that I learned from my grandmother she learned from her grandmother, and I want my future people to learn those things too. Like Grandma Maxine’s pickles—somebody’s got to always make them; it’s part of Grandma Maxine, it’s part of keeping her alive. And I think that’s important. Somebody wrote all those recipes. Some little old lady some day long, long ago wrote that first recipe. So I think that’s cool. It could’ve been man but I like to think it’s a woman.

Because knowledge about home canning has been typically passed down through families via women, today’s canners—women canners, particularly—feel connections to past generations of women in their families via the continuation of its practice. Also, for respondents like Vicki and Maria, carrying on the tradition of canning may be even more special because it is a women’s tradition. “I really like the idea of canning being this thing that’s passed along. That it’s part of my own cultural foodways. Been handed down to me,” said Maria. She continued: “[I]t’s important to me to be carrying on something that I learned from my mother, that she learned from her mother, and so forth. So that’s real important to me.”

A question about canning and connections, broadly, was asked of all respondents: _Does canning help you feel connected to anyone, or a person, time, or place?_ Many
answers to this question were about respondents feeling connected to women canners in their families. Here are a few:

Megan: Yeah, I mean it reminds me of, of growing up canning with my mom. I definitely do have very fond memories of that and just of growing up on the farm.

Teresa: I think about my grandmother when I can, and all the things that she taught me about food, and she always allowed me to cook with her. …I don’t know just the fact that she canned is like, was like an inspiration to me.

Barbara: Well yeah it makes me feel connected to my grandmas, and their land, and my ancestors so to speak, my roots, my past...because those are activities that I did with them, you know.

In the sweltering heat of canning, some respondents also reflected on how much harder that previous generations of women in their family must have experienced canning. It is as though the physical experience of canning acts as a portal of connection and memory between canners today and (women) canners of the past. While Dottie described her least favorite part of the process of canning—the heat of the stove, only somewhat abated by her air conditioning—she contemplated what canning was like for her “poor mom” and felt “ashamed” to complain about the heat. “[B]ecause our poor moms didn't have all these things to work with” like air conditioning and electric fans; “[she] canned on a coal stove” (Dottie). Understanding what such women endured with canning fosters a close sense of “marvel” (Sue) and respect among their successors:

SP: Does canning help you feel connected to any one, or a time or a place?
Sue: Yes it does. I mean there are times when I’m canning when I think about my, especially if it’s really hot, you know, usually in August when this is happening, and I have the windows open and the fan, you know, fans going, and I’m dripping sweat, and I think of my grandmother. …And her mother, and that whole family that, you know, would do this every summer in a house with no fans. And I believe they wore dresses; I’m usually wearing a tank top with
shorts. And I marvel [laughs] that they remained sane while doing all that, and processing so much more in general than I do.

The feelings of connection to prior generations of women canners in their families were not all imprinted as a sort of muscle memory via actual participating in canning with family members. Several of the respondents quoted above directly connect canning with their mothers and/or grandmothers because they canned side-by-side with them. But others associated canning with female family members and felt a strong “connection to the past” (Sue) even if they did not actually can with them. Sue said “…it’s not something I actively participated in when I was a child, so it’s not an activity that I associate directly with, you know, spending time with her; it’s not that kind of thing, but just an awareness that that was something that she was involved with doing when I was a child.” Likewise for Anna: “I think about my grandmother sometimes when I can, not so much that I canned with her but I can remember going to Sunday dinners and literally nothing on the table was not grown [and canned] right there at the farm…” So some of today’s home canners connect canning with women in their families by indirect reference to the knowledge of their canning practice rather than shared personal experience. Home canning is at once a lived and embodied practice for today’s canners as well as a gendered activity and memory. More general associations of canning with women will be further explored below.

Associations of Canning with Women, Women’s Roles, and Reflections on Gender and Canning by Young Women Canners

As previously reviewed, we have seen in the sociological literature that traditional understandings of gender define women as being responsible for the provisioning of regular meals for their familial households. Also, it has been stated above that there are
more women than men canners in this study and likely in the broader American population as well. While the work of daily meals cannot be seen as optional in the sense that people need adequate nutritional intake (whether such need is met by a home-cooked meal, drive-thru fast food, or caloric intake via other means), the work of canning is optional for most Americans today. This sample contained two respondents who reported that canning was a necessity in order for them to eat throughout the winter; these respondents are one man who had fallen into poverty after a relationship breakup, and one Amish woman who relied on various food preservation methods such as cellaring and canning to keep food throughout the winter for her family without the use of electricity. So if canning is no longer a necessary foodway, what is contemporary home canning? Is canning optional labor in which women and men equally, freely choose to partake? Is it an activity in which they find pleasure and satisfaction? When canning is shared with others, does the social nature of the activity influence if it is experienced more as work or leisure? And does this depend on if female-male couples share the labor of canning in their household?

Twenty-nine respondents share their canning at least some of the time with at least one other family member. Thirteen more respondents usually can alone, including four men. People who can alone are as equally divided as the rest about whether canning is more like work or fun. Some respondents who can alone enjoy it because it is for them a solo pursuit, such as those in Chapter Six who describe canning as ‘therapy’. The sample overall is fairly divided about whether canning is more work or more fun—most described it as a combination. While canning undoubtedly has a work component comprised of the procurement and processing of food through all stages necessary to
preserve it, most canners recognize this as well as the satisfaction of its completion and pleasures of its future consumption. Neither women nor men enjoy canning more than the other, or are more likely to see it as work.

Though these reports of home canning as work or leisure are not gendered, respondents tended to speak about the work of canning in gendered ways. Canning is strongly associated with women, and is still viewed by many as work most appropriate for women as is revealed in some respondents’ offhanded comments. These sometimes surprising comments emerged during the interviews when I least expected gender to be relevant, and demonstrate these middle-aged and older female respondents’ understandings of home canning as a women’s activity. Rita (age 45) reflected on how she has “…learned how to do several traditionally feminine things” including canning from her aunt, who is “not a particularly feminine woman.” Home canning might be considered “feminine,” but it apparently does not make canners feminine. When I asked Dee (age 90) about her entering canned products into a local fair many years ago, she said “It’s been a while. I let the younger girls do it now.” Women tend to can more than men, so it is probably reasonable that respondents would assume that canners are women. (However, home-canned fair entries are not exclusively the work of women; Thomas was quite passionate about his annual participation in the canning division at his local fair.) Dottie (age 93) explained that she had never taught anyone else how to can because “[I] haven’t had any girls around, or any daughters around and of course, my sisters all knew how to do it just like I did”—as though men were not candidates for learning how to can. Brenda (age 63) also assumed that only the women in her family would become canners. She has been giving canned goods to her grandsons, at their request, to take with them
back to college after they visit home. Brenda said that “…hopefully their wives will want
to do it one of these days,” and apparently had no plans to teach her grandsons how to
can. Both Linda (age 78) and June (age 75) offhandedly mentioned that splitting up the
work with “one of my female friends” (June) can make canning more enjoyable because,
as Linda explained, “it’s so much fun to do it with another woman.”

The quotations excerpted above are meaningful in light of the complete absence
of any corresponding comments connecting men or masculinity with canning. But men
do home canning, both by themselves as well as alongside women. The associations of
women with canning, the real or culturally constructed ‘memory’ of a grandmother figure
canning, is so strong that it glosses over or even diminishes men’s involvement. Maria
(age 55) spoke directly at this issue as she described feeling connected to her
grandmothers via canning: “I do think of it as a ‘woman’s activity’ although clearly the
men in my life have helped out in one regard or another…”. There does not seem to be
any relationship between female respondents’ associations of canning with women and
their willingness or unwillingness to involve the men in their lives with canning. Maria
and Brenda are the primary canners in their households but often request and receive their
husband’s participation with canning; Jenni taught her husband how to can, whereas
Stephanie was taught by her husband.

Another gendered way that some female respondents spoke about home canning
connected women’s traditional gender role as primary provisioner for their families with
their motivation to can. While Chapter Six explored many female and male respondents’
interests in knowing what is in their food, preparedness, and various other reasons why
they see benefits in having home-canned foods at the ready, exclusively mothers
mentioned providing their family members—specifically their children—with wholesome foods that they themselves produced. For example, the reason why Anna started canning 25 years ago she said was because “I was pregnant with my first daughter and I wanted, you know, good food in the house.” She canned so that she would know the foods she fed her daughter would be healthy and safe. Jenni said that she would call herself a home canner because “I guess it’s really important to me, like as far as my heritage goes” because she enjoys how canning connects her to her mother, and also because she likes “…being able to take care of myself and my family” by canning food. Her favorite food to can is applesauce because, as she explained, “I just think about like providing for my son, and like he loves it so much.” So Jenni is simultaneously carrying on her mother’s tradition of canning as well as providing for her own child.

Other women also felt themselves in a provider role in terms of feeding their families food that they put up. Even though Fay’s adult children no longer live in her home, she says she experiences “a psychological benefit” from giving them fresh produce from her garden “all the time” during summer and that she “send[s] them home with all kinds of stuff” to eat when they visit, including her canned goods. “I feel good about being able to share with my family…[T]hat just feels really good—a sense of wellbeing.” So even though she is not directly involved in feeding them and providing their meals, she feels a profound sense of satisfaction in knowing that her children have ‘good’ food to eat. Fay can ensure the quality of this food because she herself produces it, and therefore canning helps her achieve satisfaction at the accomplishment of a motherly, provider role.

It may be easier for the mothers of older children, like Fay, to actually do any
canning. Two-thirds of the canners in this sample lived in households containing just one or two total members, and therefore the majority of households are childless. So even if some mothers such as those just mentioned above are motivated to do canning in order to feed their children, are people more likely to can if there are not children living in the household? Nearly all of the respondents in this study with young children discussed the difficulties of balancing their everyday responsibilities toward their families and finding time (and sometimes space) to can, especially if they work outside the home. Rita, who is married and has three young children, was one mother in this study who struggled to juggle her roles as mother, primary provisioner, and home canner:

   Rita: …I try to do as big as batches as possible because it’s more efficient that way, and I tend to neglect everything else then because I just want to do that. And the ironic thing about canning is that I feel like I’m doing a great job of taking care of my family, and yet when I’m doing stuff, like I’ll start at 10:00 or 11:00 [a.m.] and by 4:00 or 5:00 [p.m.] and I’m still in the middle of [canning] something, and I’m like, ‘[Husband’s name], just bring some pizzas home for dinner.’ [Laughs] So it’s just really funny because I think I’m doing this great job of feeding my family good food, and yet it becomes take-out food.

   Employed mothers Iris and Chrysta also talked about struggling to accomplish canning and still provide regular meals for their family. The work of meal provisioning and future food production can be difficult to juggle simultaneously on days when canning occurs. Iris said with some exasperation that even while she is canning, “life goes on.” Because she primarily does the work of regular meals for herself, her husband, and three children, she explained, “I may be in the middle of canning but that doesn’t stop the fact that I have to make lunch and dinner as well at the same time [for my family] on one stove.” She said that “it’s different if you live alone and you can just take it on and like life is just what you’re doing,” but for her canning and routine mealwork becomes a “multi-tasking” effort that dampens her enjoyment of canning “…because I
just can’t focus and really get into what I’m doing.” In a similar situation, Chrysta tries to plan ahead with both her canning and regular meal preparation, and so she usually cooks meals ahead of time. She will have a meal refrigerated or in a slow cooker to make time to can and also to reserve room on the stovetop for canning: “…[U]sually in the slow cooker then I make food, or make something else so that we’re not using the stove to cook or do, like to eat lunch or dinner, so I try to prepare as much as I can.” Because as Iris said, “life goes on” and the children need to be fed.

The one father of young children who worked outside of the home full-time, Thomas, did not speak of struggling to juggle canning and regular mealwork even though he usually does the cooking for his wife and two children and cans alone. This may be because he has developed the following series of practices related to his canning. Thomas usually cans very late at night after the children have gone to sleep, or very early in the morning when they are still in bed. He does all his canning in a barn that is physically separate from the main dwelling. And lastly, he spreads out the canning process over multiple days by utilizing slow cookers to heat and cook the initial day or overnight, and then processes the food the following day. So Thomas is able to separate canning and family care by physical space and careful timing, the spatial separation being achieved via his wife’s presumed presence in the house with the children.

While some of today’s home canners with families, like the employed mothers above, may experience home canning as a role or duty perhaps as her grandmother or great-grandmother did, contemporary home canning is also now an arena of gender reflection, gender play, and a site where feminism is enacted for some home canners—especially younger women. Several female respondents under the age of 40 told
interesting stories where they reflected on canning as women’s traditional gendered work, and what that means for them today. They accept the gendered history of canning, even embrace it as a women’s tradition, and re-interpret that into their own lives in ways that are meaningful and pleasurable for them.

Megan (age 35) told a story about summertime canning at a “makeshift” location with a girlfriend, an endeavor that was increasingly “sweltering and kind of miserable.” Then she said, “But we made it fun anyway and got it done even though it was kind of exhausting. Wearing cute aprons helped us feel better about it.” How do “cute” aprons make canning more fun?

Megan: …Wearing aprons, canning, yes, it was a super girly day, yes. We were probably like listening to Aretha Franklin or something, too. …[By wearing aprons we were] I think just like making it like this mini party for ourselves. We’re like alright, this is like we’re, you know, taking this whole day to do this project and we’re going to make the most of it and have it be kind of an adventure in canning.

Aprons could be seen as attire related to women’s oppression via gender roles and enslavement to the domestic sphere and their families via foodwork. However, Megan and her friend wore them as gendered costumes, reminiscent of some nostalgic femininity but obviously apart from their lived realities as single women. As costumes, the aprons became ceremonial or special-occasion attire and redefined the hot drudgery of canning as a “mini party” and “adventure.” The music of Aretha Franklin is widely seen as pro-feminist, with such hits as “Respect” (1967); Megan’s soundtrack was likely about female empowerment, and she and her friend redefined canning from traditional women’s work to “super girly” fun.

Taylor contemplated what it meant for her to do home canning today as a single, 29-year-old, feminist woman. She perceived that one drawback of canning is that “…it’s
pretty gender specific. I don’t know, except for maybe the hunters. But there aren’t, I don’t know very many men who can.” Because Taylor perceives home canning as a relatively single-gender practice, she is afraid that she helps fulfill a stereotype about women and women’s activities. But she said, “I do like the domestic aspect of it. …And so sometimes I’m enjoying it and sometimes I’m like, ‘I am just fulfilling this stereotype that this is what women do’. But part of me is like, okay, who cares? I’m doing what I want and that’s what feminism is all about.” So the ability to freely choose what she wants to do, including to choose to put up food, Taylor interprets as an exercise in feminist action.

Likewise, Stephanie (age 29) was quoted above about her choice to be a “stay at home momma.” She also has “a strong conviction that like women need to be able to live the life they want to live.” And for her, she is happy she chose her current path in life to be a mother at home despite having other options: “And I think because I know that I had that choice like I feel really good about it. And I feel like this is like my feminist statement. Like I choose to not work outside the house, you know, because I don’t want to, and because I don’t have to, you know.” In light of the pressures that middle-class young women face today to attend college and establish careers, Stephanie no doubt feels that her choice to homestead is a radical feminist move. However, like Taylor, she has wondered if she is fulfilling a negative stereotype about women. “…I’ve definitely had those thoughts, you know, like as I’m doing stuff. Like, you know, especially whenever I’m literally pregnant and barefoot in the kitchen. I’m like ‘Oh my gosh! Like, this is me!’ [Laughs] …. [And,] well isn’t this ironic, you know, me with all my big ideas and
I’m just hanging out in the hot kitchen, you know, sweating, you know, fixing supper or whatever.” But in general she says that she is very happy with her choice.

Canning has obviously come a long way since its invention as a Napoleonic war technology. As Chapter Two explored, home canning has been reframed extensively over time both by those who practice it as well as those institutions and organizations that have protected their interests by promoting it. Within a generation or two, canning changed from being women’s wartime duty and display of citizenship (as promoted by the federal government during WWII) to being a feminist statement among some of today’s young women canners. Yet until home canning, and especially the work of domestic meal provisioning, are de-gendered it is unlikely that either will ever promote the liberation of women.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has explored home canners’ roles in the gender division of household labor in routine meal preparation as well as within home canning itself. In accord with existing sociological research on the gender division of household labor, this study has observed women doing more of the work of routine meal provisioning. Women also do more home food production than men via food preservation practice such as canning. Also in keeping with the existing literature, this research observed that the gender division of foodwork seems to be most pronounced in certain kinds of households, most notably those represented by the married mothers of young children who work outside the home. These women are the respondents who seem to face the greatest challenges toward balancing both meal preparation and future food production via canning, and are
least likely to be satisfied with the organization of the work of food generally in their households.

Home canning continues to be culturally associated with women and women’s (food)work even though men are active as primary canners within their households and as secondary participants in home canning. This association of canning with women fosters a gendered nostalgia that connects today’s canners with women canners of the past. The image of prior generations of rural American women dutifully and happily canning everything they could to feed their families throughout winter remains for many canners today a compelling (if falsely nostalgic) vision, so much so that a grandmotherly figure defines what some of today’s canners perceive as a ‘real’, authentic home canner. Many respondents in this study perceive that ‘real’ home canners can out of some sort of necessity, either economic or in relation to eating with the seasons, and they also believe that a true home canner is able to put up a large amount—if not the totality—of the food she or he consumes. Does such a person exist today?

Many societal changes have come about since ‘grandma’ was canning that make home canning today very different than in earlier eras. Canners’ motivations to preserve food have changed over time, as well as the perceived benefits of home canning (see Chapter Two for a discussion of a series of canning revivals in the United States). For example, few Americans today must home can food in order to eat. As discussed in Chapter Six, economic necessity is no longer a primary motivator for most home canners, and so the issue of need is largely archaic. Also, with most women and men today working outside the home in the paid labor force, and with most Americans living in urban contexts, gardening and farming to produce all of one’s food is impossible for
many if not most people and neither would they choose to do all this hard work. Today we have 24-hour grocery and convenience stores, and in some areas such as urban food deserts offer greater access to fast foods than local, ‘slow’ foods. Restaurants, retail outlets, and other food institutions and organizations send to the landfill alarming amounts of food every day. Many Americans are obese due to high-caloric diets, and increasingly suffer from adult-onset diabetes. So it is interesting that home canners today, in the relative land of plenty, compare themselves to canners of past generations, viewed as enduring hardship and scarcity.

The gendered aspect of this nostalgia for the past and what may seem to have been simpler, healthier times, is also nostalgia perhaps for some traditional version of rural American farm life and its corresponding gender roles. Unlike the changing spheres and activities for women and men that occurred during the twentieth century and continue into the twenty-first, women’s and men’s roles within families as well as in public society may seem to have been more stable and clearly organized in the past. People seemed more in control of their own food supply ‘back then’. Today, some home canners (and likely many other citizens at large) yearn for the simplicity, stability, and self-control they romanticize from the past, and glorify positive images of rural life (Willits et al. 1990). Matchar (2013) argues that today’s re-embrace of ‘home arts’ such as canning and knitting, DIY culture, and some privileged young women’s desertion of the corporate job market in exchange for the pursuit of a more meaningful life at home are all part of a trend she names ‘new domesticity’. New domesticity is partly motivated by the contemporary feeling that “[w]e can’t control what’s outside the home, but we can control what’s inside” (Matchar 2013:20)—a new form of the personal as political?
Young women canners today putting up food while wearing aprons, listening to Aretha Franklin, and seeing themselves as making a feminist statement reveal how much the social context has changed since rural farm life was the norm a few generations ago and how much the gendered implications of canning have changed over time.

Home canning still takes place within the domestic realm, but the domestic realm of today is far from the domestic sphere of that past and women’s restrictions on participation in public life. Also, very slowly, gender roles for women and men overall and the traditional gendered division of household labor of the past are somewhat changing. As with gender ‘roles’ and expectations in some other parts of life, gender in the kitchen is changing—again, somewhat, and slowly. Gender ‘roles’ in kitchen are loosening and allowing more room for men (Cairns, Johnston, and Baumann 2010). Men today are doing more housework than men in the past including cooking meals (Bianchi et al. 2000; Sayer 2005). Therefore, it may also be more acceptable for men today to participate in home canning and to identify as ‘home canners,’ especially among younger generations of men.

This research proposes an expansion of discussions of the gendered division of housework, specifically the focus on meal preparation, with the concept of domestic food production. The existing sociological literature on gender and household labor has looked extensively at foodwork and all its detailed components—‘meal preparation’ measures now include the work of meal planning, procurement of ingredients via shopping or other meals, the actual work of cooking, cleanup, and so forth—but not the production of future foodstuffs via home food preservation such as canning. Food preservation and its
related activities are not measured or discussed. Future research on the division of household labor could expand existing measures of meal preparation to include this work.

Domestic food production is distinct from meal preparation or provisioning. Canning as home food production has a different tempo and seasonal patterns, and does not occur as often as the preparation of regular meals. Meal preparation is often daily work, more immediate in its goal and results. Food production is concerned with the creation of preserved foods with the intention that they will be consumed at a later point in time, helping to achieve a variety of goals reviewed in the previous chapter such as food security and preparedness. Food production may become pressing as produce ripens and begins to decay; nature will not wait. Yet unlike the pressing work of finding something to feed to one’s hungry children for tonight’s dinner, home food production requires much more time to complete than regular meals. It therefore commands a heavier weight as it demands more time from one’s schedule. There are no shortcuts with canning, as there are microwaveable meals and fast food or takeout. It also requires more energy, both human energy and fuel for a heat source, and often requires the procurement of necessary specialty items or equipment (such as jar lids). Lastly, and importantly, home food production occurs in addition to regular meal provisioning, often simultaneously with it. As we have seen, the work of both provisioning regular meals and food production via canning can be challenging for some women today, especially those married women who work outside the home and/or have young children. If these women who work outside the home are already working a second shift (Hochschild 1989) within it, is home food production a third shift?
More research is needed on various household compositions and domestic food production. When DeVault (1991) studied gendered household labor and everyday ‘feeding work,’ she found that the primary provisioner who routinely did this work also performed a form of emotional labor, the ‘everyday work of caring’. This work is done—a gendered doing (West and Zimmerman 1987)—in such a way that women’s and men’s roles and identities within the household are re/pr oduced and an appropriately gendered family is accomplished. Obviously heterosexual households and particularly those that contain both parents and their young children, are ripe for gendered analyses of foodwork, broadly speaking, and have been extensively studied by both qualitative and quantitative techniques. However, this study has observed an enormous amount of variation among the way such work is organized within the households of home canners due to such factors as age, relationship status, the presence or absence of children and the age of children in the household, health/disability, and employment status. Meal preparation and domestic food production are organized and accomplished differently, for example, in the households of the single and childless women canners in this study, versus the men canners married to women who work outside the home, and the elderly retirees who still enjoy gardening together. Sociological studies on housework such as that by South and Spitze (1994) have analyzed the importance of household composition in the gender division of housework. More research on home food production in specific households could yield further details on how food production, like the provisioning of meals, may be gendered.
Chapter Eight: Discussion and Conclusion

This dissertation has aimed to examine the contemporary practice of a traditional American foodway and technique of food preservation, home canning, and learn why people are canning today and what home canning means to its current practitioners. This research has also sought to identify patterns in the gender division of household labor in canners’ homes within routine meal preparation as well as canning. This study builds on previous sociological literature on domestic foodwork, gender, and household labor by adding a new area of inquiry—home food preservation, herein conceptualized as domestic food production—and argues that such work needs to be included in future studies of household labor. Contributions to the sociology of food and interdisciplinary food studies are twofold, and include the substantive material contained in Chapter Two comprising a social history of home canning spanning its invention in the early nineteenth century through the start of the twenty-first. A second contribution to these disciplines is the in-depth, exploratory empirical data on home canners’ motivations to do canning today and what its practice and products mean to them (Chapter Six). This research also contributes to the literatures on public health and nutrition that focus on food preservation by providing an up-to-date and detailed glimpse of the actual practices of a sample of today’s home canners.

In the rest of this conclusion, I provide an overview of the research questions that guided this study and a summary of its findings. I discuss how these findings, both empirical and theoretical, contribute to previous literatures related to this sociological
study of home canning. Lastly, I review the methodological and empirical limitations of the current study, and suggest directions for future research.

**Research Questions and Summary of Findings**

This sociological inquiry into domestic food preservation has first aimed to provide a baseline of knowledge about the contemporary practice of home canning including demographic characteristics of a select group of today’s home canners and a basic description of their canning behaviors. The first research question guiding this study is: *Who are today’s canners?* While the intended nature of this qualitative research utilized a sample of volunteers and is therefore not representative of a broader population, this question aimed for a glimpse at a small sampling of some of today’s canners within a limited geographic region. As wide a pool as possible was intended to gather as much information from the most diverse range of home canning practitioners. Indeed, a large amount of demographic diversity was observed within the volunteer sample of 50 respondents, and therefore also a substantial variety of experiences among respondents’ canning histories and current canning behaviors. Thirty-four female and 16 male respondents ranged in age from 22 to 93 years old, with the sample weighted overall toward older age groups; two-thirds of the respondents were age 50 or older. More sample demographic characteristics are reviewed in Chapter Four.

Chapter Five contains findings related to the second research question: *What kinds of experiences have home canners had with canning, and what are their current canning practices?* Most respondents were first exposed to home canning and learned how to can from family members, often their mothers or grandmothers. Fifteen respondents had minimal or no family exposure and had either taught themselves how to
can or had learned from non-familial connections such as through friends or neighbors; most of these were of younger generations and/or grew up in urban areas and later moved to southeastern Ohio. Most home canners in this sample are also home gardeners and therefore tend to put up produce from their gardens—especially tomato products, a variety of pickles, green beans, and jams/jellies—or food they acquire locally, due to concerns about the freshness and quality of produce. Half of the sample regularly cans vegetables, fruit, and jellies or jams; the rest put up some of these items and/or meat. Boiling water (‘water bath’) processing is the most common canning method, with fewer respondents reporting the use of pressure canners. Home canners tend to engage in multiple forms of domestic food production including additional methods of food preservation such as freezing, storage such as cellaring, drying, and fermentation; many also make baked goods, ferment yogurt, process meats, and the like. The canners in this sample put up food primarily for consumption by themselves and their immediate family members, and secondarily for extended family members, neighbors, and friends. A small handful of respondents sell canned products to the public for personal profit.

A theme that emerged from the interviews relates to canners’ investments in and commitments to a canning lifestyle. Respondents described a variety of material and nonmaterial investments required to establish a regular canning practice. They invest varying amounts of money in canning equipment, some of which is necessary like jars and lids and some that is optional but highly valued as specialty tools like jar lifters and pressure canners. Canners make investments of physical space in their homes such as for the storage of canning equipment and jars, full and empty; sometimes they design special kitchens or other indoor or outdoor workspaces at their homes dedicated to canning. They
also invest large amounts of time into canning, which can create a strain on already full personal schedules especially when canners work outside the home and/or are raising young children.

One of the most notable aspects of home canners’ experiences of the activity of canning are their stories about embodiment and the physicality of canning. Canners describe the process of canning as a full-body, sensory experience tinged with an element of danger and threat of physical harm. As most canning involves laboring over a stove with large vats of boiling water, they endure heat, steam, and burns. They relish the sound of lids sealing onto jars with a satisfying ‘pop’ indicating successful processing—an auditory experience named by many canners as their favorite part of the process of canning, and one that fills them with a great sense of accomplishment. Canners use the sense of smell to identify whether a jar of canned foodstuffs has spoiled or if it is safe to eat, and also to enjoy the aromas of foods being cooked in preparation for processing. Lastly, many canners enjoy gazing upon their finished jars upon the storage shelf; such a sight instills a sense of satisfaction and pride in one’s hard work and, for some, a sense of food security via the knowledge that the preserved food will last until they need it.

A final emergent theme presented in Chapter Five is that of the creation and reinforcement of social connections through the sharing of food and canning resources. Most respondents in this study usually share the work of canning with at least one other person, commonly a spouse; just 13 usually can alone. Canning can thereby directly foster social connections between and among the people who can together. The practice of canning also promotes a sense of social connection through nostalgia and memory—both real and imagined—especially of one’s past family members who canned and shared
their knowledge with today’s canners. Home canning can also further broader social connections, such as feelings of belonging to a wider community of canners and also being connected to other participants in the local foods economy. They may come to know local farmers and food distributors due to canners’ interests in preserving only the freshest, highest quality foods available. Among themselves, they may share advice and information as well as canning equipment.

This study also observed an extensive amount of informal exchange of goods and information valuable to home canners within their local communities. This exchange of goods often involved the sharing, gifting, or bartering/trading of raw produce, meat, and canning equipment (especially of jars and pressure canners). Persons known within their communities as avid home canners sometimes receive word-of-mouth notifications from friends or neighbors about the availability of fresh food that they might put to use via canning so that such food will not go to waste. Canners embedded in a tightly woven web of community and familial bonds especially value reciprocity, and when they receive a gift or favor they make certain to give back in turn. Several canners in this study specifically put up foods to share with neighbors, friends, and family members. With a very few exceptions, most canners in this study are extremely generous with sharing the canned foods they produce, especially when they can help someone in need. This circle of exchange and the sharing of food and other resources can bolster social ties within one’s family, neighborhood, and community.

A third research question addresses contemporary home canners’ motivations to do canning: Why are people home canning now and what does canning mean to its practitioners? This question broadly addresses why individuals are home canning now,
the benefits they perceive as resulting from home canning, and the meanings and ideologies they connect to canning and use to make sense of it. Select findings related to this question are discussed in Chapter Six. This study found that canners are motivated to do canning by an array of practical and ideological concerns, personal interests, and values; no case could be summarized as having a single dominant motivator, and yet these themes cut across and connect diverse groups of canners. Home canning fulfills many goals and offers a variety of benefits to its practitioners. Sometimes canning achieves a goal in itself, such as eating great-tasting food and enjoying the companionship of one’s canning partner. Canning can also be a means to another end, such as pursuing a state of personal food security or lifestyle of self-sufficiency fostered by the knowledge that one has plenty of healthy, preserved food on the shelf.

The themes of preparedness and self-sufficiency were most often mentioned by respondents. Like ‘doomsday preppers’, many home canners demonstrate a lack of trust in dominant social institutions and industrial foods and seek, for a variety of reasons discussed in detail in Chapter Six, to take control of their own food supply by taking it into their own hands. Canning is widely seen as a survival skill that promotes feelings of food security, especially during times of disaster (social or natural) or financial need. In reality, however, few canners in this study actually put up enough food to feed themselves and their family members for any extended period of time. Regardless, knowledge of how to can promotes feelings of readiness and preparedness—just in case one might ever need to know how to do it. It also promotes the value of self-reliance and personal responsibility many respondents hold, and the belief that individuals should work hard to provide for themselves. Many canners, especially those of older
generations, have a strong personal ethic of self-reliance and do not find it acceptable to rely on others or government assistance to meet their needs; they value hard work and independence.

Canning is also considered a beneficial practice by those who are interested in self-sufficient lifestyles because they perceive it assists the pursuit of environmental sustainability. Eating locally and preserving food they grow themselves are lifestyle choices that help such canners reduce their reliance on nonrenewable petroleum products and become less dependent on the industrial food system. Home canners generally perceive canning as the most reliable and efficient technique for food preservation due to the minimal amount of energy input required for long term preservation as well as the reusability of jars and consequential reduction of packaging waste—though a few more radical environmentalists among them argue for the benefits of solar drying and root cellaring, which require the use of only renewable energy sources or none at all. Since electricity outages are common in southeastern Ohio and thereby threaten the stability of foods preserved by refrigeration and freezing, canning also offers the practical benefits of preserving shelf-stable foods and the conveniences offered by having such foods on hand at home.

Benefits to human health and closeness to the sources of one’s food are also strong motivations for many of the canners in this study. Most said that home-canned foods are ‘better’ than store-bought foods in a variety of ways. Many respondents expressed their distrust or even disgust with commercial agriculture and multinational food corporations and said that they do not perceive foods from such sources are safe, healthy, or clean. Home canners can control what substances go into the foods they
produce, and can thereby avoid unwanted preservatives and other chemical additives commonly found in commercial food products. Respondents also expressed great interest in generally knowing the nature and origins of the foods they eat, such as how it was grown, harvested, and handled. As aforementioned, most canners in this study grow home vegetable and/or fruit gardens and many said that they garden as close to organic guidelines as possible; they want to avoid eating synthetic chemicals such as pesticides, growth hormones, and GMOs. If they grow and preserve their own foods, then they know exactly what is in it and where it comes from, as well as how the food was handled all the way through the process from seed to jar. This specific connection to the origins of the food one eats can also foster in some canners a broader feeling of connection to the natural environment and the Earth.

More than two-thirds of this sample of home canners said that home canning saves money; however, with some further probing and reflection, the sample was fairly split as to whether this general belief is true in practice. It can be very costly to begin canning, as the investment in canning equipment discussed above can be expensive; therefore the potential cost-saving benefits of home canning are expected as a result of long-term canning over years. Several food ethics regarding the value of food, specifically, frugality and a belief in the value of not wasting food, motivate some canners to do canning. Putting food to use and not allowing it to go to waste are values that sometimes cause canners to define canning as a ‘necessary’ action, even though only two respondents at time of interview were canning in of situations of physical and financial necessity in order to eat through the winter. In contrast, others felt that canning was necessary for their chosen lifestyles of homesteading or self sufficiency. Home-
canned foods are highly valued because they must be produced at home; they are therefore seen by some canners as unique and priceless products that cannot be purchased, therefore making the point of saving money irrelevant.

A final emergent thematic set of motivations and perceived benefits of home canning reflect on canning as an end in itself and the pleasures some canners experience from doing canning. First and foremost, the canners in this study tend to be very proud of their abilities to preserve food and experience a strong sense of accomplishment from their production of canned goods. Several younger, female respondents expressed a feeling of empowerment instilled via the knowledge that they can secure one of life’s basic necessities, wholesome foods, for themselves and/or their family members. Most respondents explained that they experience the process of canning as a combination of work and fun; however, a few canners truly enjoy the work of canning and see it as a leisure hobby or entertainment. This is especially so among those who share the process of canning with close friends or family members and enjoy the time spent socializing with them while engaged in a mutual activity. Lastly, a very few explained that they experience the actual process of canning as relaxing or meditative and thereby mentally or emotionally therapeutic and personally beneficial.

The fourth and final research question guiding this dissertation looks at home food preservation in the broader context of domestic foodwork and the gender division of household labor: What role(s) do home canners perform in providing food and regular meal preparation for the household in which they live? These findings are presented in Chapter Seven, first looking broadly at the gender division of meal provisioning in canners’ household, and then second considering gender and the process of home canning.
specifically. Home canning is conceptualized as a form of domestic food production, described as related to but distinct from meal provisioning, and arguments are presented for the inclusion of domestic food production in future studies of household labor.

Findings to this question also address broader questions about gender as well, such as the association of canning with women and its reinterpretation as a feminist statement by some young female canners.

Half of the home canners who volunteered to participate in this study act as the primary provisioner of regular meals for their households; this percentage becomes even greater when represented households with only one adult member are excluded. In households where respondents described the work of planning, preparing, and cleaning up after regular meals as being shared with an adult spouse or partner, the female partner often appeared to do more than half of this work. Factors such as age, pursuit of homesteading or farming lifestyles, and occupational status were observed to influence the gendered division of labor within respondents’ homes. Women with young children, especially those who work outside the home, had the most difficulties balancing meal provisioning and home canning and reported the least satisfaction with the unequal division of housework between themselves and their male partners.

Within the process of canning itself, women and men were equally likely to do any of the tasks involved with canning and therefore no general trends were found to indicate a gendered division of labor in home canning itself; there are no female- or male-typed tasks within canning. In fact, in a few households where a traditional gender division of household labor was observed regarding the everyday preparation of meals, women and men might diverge from their usual patterns to equally share the work of
canning. Most of the respondents in this sample identified themselves as their household’s head canner—the household member most likely to initiate and conduct canning projects; therefore, this study observed that the household member doing most of the canning is also likely to be their household’s primary provisioner of regular meals as well. Curiously, not all home canners in this study would say that they would identify themselves as ‘home canners’. Fifteen respondents said that they would not call themselves ‘home canners’ due to perceived personal insufficiency of experience with canning over the individual respondent’s lifetime, insufficient volume of foodstuffs produced annually, and/or because they lack motivation by financial necessity; this finding did not reflect a gendered trend.

However, one prevalent gendered theme is the association of home canning with women. In the United States, home canning has traditionally been the work of women and thus has been passed down through family generations via women. Twice as many women as men volunteered to participate in this study, suggesting that more women in the population are canning than men. Many of the canners interviewed for this study expressed a feeling of connection to past family members or ancestors that they experienced while canning, knowing that they were continuing a traditional foodway; some female respondents felt a specifically gendered nostalgia about canning and connection to their female predecessors. While gender scholars have interpreted gender roles and specifically women’s responsibilities in domestic kitchens in the past as reinforcing women’s subservience to their husbands and duties in feeding their families (Charles and Kerr 1988; DeVault 1991; Hochschild 1989; Murcott 1983; West and Zimmerman 1987), a few of today’s younger female canners interviewed for this study
actually feel that home canning can be a feminist statement expressing women’s empowerment: the choice to be stay-at-home mothers, the freedom to do what one wants, and the knowledge and ability to embrace and respect traditional ‘feminine’ work.

**Contributions to Scholarly Literature**

This dissertation provides an exploratory sociological analysis of the contemporary practice of a traditional American foodway, home canning. The qualitative data gathered from interviews with home canners residing in Appalachian Ohio offer a unique depth and breadth of data on canners’ histories of involvement with canning and how they learned about it, the overall nature of their current canning practices, why they do home canning, and what benefits they perceive home canning offers its practitioners and consumers of home-canned food products. As an initial effort toward developing a sociology of food informed by considerations of food preservation practices, this dissertation conceptualizes home canning as one form of domestic food production and argues for its inclusion in future studies of household foodwork.

This research contributes to the sociology of food and interdisciplinary field of food studies by providing a first in-depth look at a sampling of home canners’ motivations to can and the meanings and values embedded in its practice. Previous sociological literatures on food have largely been based upon the work of social anthropologists such as Malinowski (1935), Levi-Strauss (1966; [1969] 1983) and Douglas (1966; 1975; 1984) and their empirical work on the foodways of various societies and efforts to theorize broader understandings from them. Perhaps due to foundations in these structuralist anthropological theories, much of the recent sociological literatures on food utilize macro perspectives and privilege public realms of
food and eating at the expense of private and unpaid food production and consumption. Such work tends to emphasize theoretical advancements, and often focuses on public acts of food consumption, at the expense of individuals’ understandings of the food they produce and the qualitative meanings of food within private contexts. An important exception to these trends is the ongoing work on gender, housework, and the preparation of routine meals, as will be discussed below.

This dissertation’s focus on home canners counters these broad trends by employing qualitative research methodology to study domestic food preservers; it therefore provides unique empirical accounts of home canners’ relationships to food and the social relationships they sustain via food preservation. No other known study has captured the depth and breadth of canners’ motivations to preserve food and what it means to them. For example, while the study by Baer et al. (1992:92) involved an ethnographic component including 60 interviews with users of a Florida community cannery, the resulting data on canners’ motivations were coded for statistical analyses and the study report offers only the following categories as motivations for why participants canned at the cannery: to save money, convenience, “recreational purposes,” and health advantages. Building from Baer et al. (1992), this dissertation updates and expands the range of experiences observed among contemporary home canners and the meanings canning holds. My research has found that home canners’ motivations to do canning and what it means to them are exceptionally diverse and traverse a variety of sociological themes such as the social construction of gender, issues of social class, food security, cultural identities and regional foodways, environmental activism, and so forth. Also, a great range in the functions that canning performs, goals it helps achieve, and
values upheld by home canning have also been presented. As an end in itself, canning provides pleasure, leisure, and companionship to its practitioners. As an end to other means, canning helps its practitioners pursue such goals as preparedness, food security, self-sufficiency, and feelings of connection to their food, the Earth, and past generations of women canners in their families. These observed themes offer numerous opportunities for further sociological inquiry.

In addition to this study’s empirical observations on contemporary home canners, it also contributes to the sociology of food and to food studies an historical analysis of American home canning from World War I through the present day. This material is contained within Chapter Two, and is the result of library and online research. This chapter’s major substantive contribution is the notion of a canning revival and the historical and cultural factors that characterize each of a series of canning revivals throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Far more than a utilitarian method of food preservation, we have seen that canning has been political since its invention—it was created as a technology of war, a tool to strengthen Napoleon’s military and expand the range of his empire. Over time, numerous social groups, institutions, and organizations have reinterpreted and reframed the meanings of the practice of home canning in ways that best support their interests and agendas. In this way, home canning demonstrates how foodways are actively and continually socially constructed and yet can maintain a touch of the traditional, the authentic. The Mason jar is a powerful and endurable symbol because, ironically, it has been a persistently flexible icon reflecting the ongoing social reinterpretation and politicization of home canning.

This dissertation also seeks to contribute to the sociological research on gender
and the work of meal provisioning. Extensive sociological research has focused on the
gendered division of household food labor including measurements of domestic food
preparation and other aspects of provisioning such as grocery shopping and meal
planning. Previous quantitative and qualitative studies have compared women’s and
men’s contributions to household labor and found that women overall do more hours of
housework, including meal preparation, than men (Bianchi et al. 2000; Charles and Kerr
1988; DeVault 1991; Hochschild 1989; Murcott 1983; Sayer 2005; South and Spitze
1994; Warde et al. 2007). Remarkably, this trend has been found true in a variety of
household compositions, even when women and men live alone (including widows,
widowers, and the never married) and those living in their parental home (South and
Spitze 1994). Thus women spend more time than men preparing meals regardless of
marital status, though the gap between women’s hours and men’s hours has been
consistently observed to be greatest between married women and men. This dissertation
has explored if the gender gap in the everyday work of meal preparation also applies to
the domestic production of food such as through home canning.

While this large body of previous research has shown who is responsible for
cooking most meals at home, the literature does not include other aspects of home
foodwork, such as food preservation practices and home gardening. These latter two
activities are currently experiencing a revival of popularity and increased importance to
many Americans and various contemporary food movements. Is there a gender division
of labor among these activities? This dissertation contributes the concept of *domestic
food production* for consideration in future sociological studies of household labor.
Adding to the preexisting data on who does the daily tasks of meal planning, grocery
shopping, cooking, and kitchen clean-up, this study offers a baseline of data on who is doing home food production in the form of canning, how much time and labor it consumes, when canning occurs, and what its practitioners think about it.

This dissertation has found that home food production activities often occur in conjunction with daily domestic work such as meal preparation, and the findings of this study suggest the two are similar in several ways. Like the previous finding that women tend to do more of the work of regular meal provisioning including the physical work of meal preparation as well as the emotional care work entailed in producing meals for one’s family (DeVault 1991), this study has found that women tend to do more home food production than men, at least in the form of canning. As with DeVault’s concept of a ‘primary provisioner’ of regular meals, this study found that most households tend to have a primary canner who initiates and leads the work of canning; one person in a household tends to fill both these roles. And like the primary provisioner of regular meals, this dissertation has found that the primary canner is more likely to be a woman than a man.

Home canning is also an activity that we can see as being distinct from regular meal preparation, though the two have not yet been distinguished in the housework literature. While daily meal preparation is usually immediate labor with an immediate goal, home canning is work invested in the production of future food intended to be consumed at a later point in time. Though no conclusive statements can be made regarding the meaning of regular meals as this study did not inquire into this area, it can be suggested that some of the meanings of meal provisioning and the meanings of domestic food production differ for the people who make and consume them, at least in
this temporal aspect. Domestic food production is extra labor that occurs in addition to regular housework and meal preparation. In the households of working mothers with young children, this study has observed that canning often coincides with routine meal preparation and increases canners’ responsibilities toward caring for their families, often with stressful results.

Like most domestic housework and foodwork especially, home canning is associated with women and considered to be a traditional women’s activity. However, traditional gender roles in canning as in domestic foodwork generally appear to be changing slowly over time. Previous comparative studies have shown that women and men are both spending less time on housework than women and men in the past, and the gender gap between women’s and men’s time spent on mealwork is shrinking (Bianchi et al. 2000; Sayer 2005; Warde et al. 2007). The youngest male canners in this study were observed to be more likely to be their household’s primary provisioner and primary canner than the middle-aged and older men in the sample. This finding support’s Cairns, Johnston, and Baumann’s (2010) observation that gender roles around food are changing and that there is more cultural support today for men to find active roles in kitchens, both domestic and professional, and to identify as ‘foodies’. Also, some of the youngest women in this study experienced canning as a form of female empowerment. Proud to have the knowledge and skills to feed themselves and/or provide for their families, these young women embraced the traditional femininity of canning and reinvented it as a freely chosen, feminist act. Their accounts were radical departures from the stories I also heard about other respondents’ grandmothers or great-grandmothers growing up in poverty and canning in order to eat through the winter. The contemporary notion of canning as a
feminist act is also a striking contrast against the U.S. government’s exhortations during World War II that defined and promoted home canning as women’s patriotic duty and social responsibility.

This dissertation also contributes to the sparse, diverse literatures that have specifically focused on home canning. While there are a few scholarly historical works on food preservation and home canning (briefly reviewed in Chapter Three), little research has been conducted on home canning since WWII. The findings of this study suggest that the meanings, motivations, and interests of home canners today are likely quite different than in the past, yet there is very little scholarly literature that directly addresses home food preservation generally, or canning specifically. This research contributes to the various, brief literatures that have focused food preservation by providing a much-needed updated look at some of today’s contemporary home canners.

Data regarding the recent practice of home canning in America has been acknowledged by several scholars to be very limited (Baer et al. 1992; Click and Ridberg 2010). In a conference presentation available online, Garner, Andress and Sweaney (2002) review three unpublished quantitative studies from various time points between 1975 and 2001 about home canning with a broad focus on canners’ demographics and safety assessments of their canning procedures. While the shortcomings of this report are numerous, including a lack of consideration of why individuals pursue canning or even a report of the gender composition of the combined samples, Garner et al. (2002) come to the important conclusion that home canners’ reports of limited use of scientifically tested canning procedures and recipes is cause for concern and warrants greater attention.
The findings of this dissertation support this health concern as well as the call for more research. Updates to USDA recommendations for canning procedures tend to address the decreasing acidity of raw produce by: (1) increasing the acidity of canned products through the prescribed addition of agents such as lemon and lime juices or vinegar, and (2) increasing the amount of heat applied to foods during processing by increasing recommended processing times or requiring use of a pressure canner. Respondents in this dissertation research reported greater use of the boiling water bath technique for processing jars, occasionally for low-acid foods that should require processing in a pressure canner as described by current USDA recommendations for safe canning. Even though manufacturers of home pressure canner units have made many changes to ensure the greater safety of such equipment, many respondents in this study said that they felt pressure canning was in itself dangerous and that they were less afraid of water bath processing. Twenty-one respondents exclusively use the boiling water processing technique, seven exclusively pressure can, and another 21 alternate between both water bath and pressure canning depending upon the nature of the specific food product to be processed. While the home canners interviewed for this research expressed that they were aware of the health risks of home canning as well as today’s recommended procedures for safe canning, a handful of respondents reported canning via processes now considered to be unsafe such as oven canning and the inversion method.

The food preservation experts at the University of Georgia and the USDA’s collaborative organization, the National Center for Home Food Preservation, have recently made great efforts toward the promotion of safe canning practices. The center launched an educational website with scientifically-tested recommendations for home
food preservation processes, recipes, and access to online publications and books about canning for download, all for free to the internet-accessible public. Yet as this research has found, home canners often value traditional knowledge over the scientific, even though grandmother’s canning methods may no longer be scientifically sound today.

Another ideological belief identified by this dissertation that may encourage some home canners to take health risks in canning is the interest in ‘saving’ food from spoilage. The belief in not wasting food may motivate some canners to engage in risky behaviors such as canning food in an imperfect physical condition or saving and consuming canned goods long past the recommended one year maximum storage time. In these ways, this qualitative research has identified some of canners’ beliefs and motivations that may promote unsafe canning practices. This study therefore isolates some of the social and cultural roadblocks nutritionists and other professionals concerned with food safety must address to effect positive change toward ensuring public health.

Lastly, the findings of this dissertation inform an existing discussion about the possible political implications of domestic food production. Several popular and academic writers have put forth the interesting notion that the practice of home food preservation contains the ability to instigate social revolution and even overthrow capitalism through the connections it fosters between canners and other individuals, among their communities at large, and the environment (Click and Ridberg 2010; Houston 2006; Moskin 2009). In an online article subtitled “A Cultural Analysis of Homemade Jam in the Twenty-First Century,” Houston (2006:11) describes contemporary home jam-making as “…an act of defiance” and that it “…is counterculture and radical if it seeks to resist the heavily advertised and marketed brand
name jams and provide the consumer with a sense of agency and control over the
processes of production.” Similarly, Click and Ridberg’s (2010) research counters the
dominant individualist discourse frequently used by contemporary food movements
which asserts that consumers exercise a form of political power by making food
purchases. Click and Ridberg (2010:310) found that food preservation practices promote
“…a deeper connection to food production, humanity, and the earth” that they claim has
“…the potential to subvert the capitalist logic of the global agro-food industry” (Click
and Ridberg 2010:316).

Many canners in the present study expressed a lack of trust in a variety of social
structures, ranging from the public utility grid to the federal government, and dismay at
the state of American (consumerist, capitalist) culture. Because many canners in this
sample could be rightly called anti-corporate, anti-consumerist, and even anti-
government in some cases, home canners in southeastern Ohio may broadly be seen as
part of a subculture, or a counter-culture. The values that they express through canning—
waste not, frugality, hard work, ecological responsibility, and so on—are often the
antithesis of the values promoted by mainstream American culture. Home canning can be
very empowering to its practitioners, who take food production into their own hands and
therefore out of the pockets and profits of food corporations (except those corporations
that manufacture and sell canning equipment). Like Marx’s alienated workers reacting
against exploitation, today’s canners feel far removed from commercially manufactured
and retailed foods and seek to take control over the processes of food production and take
pride in their knowledge and ability to independently provide for themselves and their
loved ones. They refuse to become alienated from the origins of their food, and so they
work hard to produce it themselves. They find satisfaction, pleasure, and meaning in this work as well as in sharing the finished product with others or consuming it themselves.

Contrary to Marx’s predictions and the notion that home canning potentially “thwarts global capitalism,” (Houston 2006), this study found little evidence that home canning or food preservation in general can, or is likely to, upset any existing social structures. In fending for themselves and their families, today’s canners may be more likely to opt out of conventional food economies than revolutionize them. This research has observed that the social connectedness experienced by home canners occurs on a much smaller, local scale. The canners interviewed do canning for themselves and their close family members and friends, and they can for personal reasons like ensuring their well-being and striving for a sense of control and self-determination. They act on a mostly private level including their gifting of canned goods. The circle of giving and receiving described in Chapter Five powerfully connects home canners to the recipients of their gifts and the importance of home canners’ relationships within their local and personal communities should not be diminished. However, because canners’ circles tend to stay very close to home and mostly within the private realm rather than the public realm, the connections fostered by home canning are therefore limited in their potential for any broader societal impact.

These contemporary descriptions of home canning as counter-cultural, radical, and subversive are especially interesting because during a revival of cultural interest in home canning not so very long ago, during the era of World War II, the U.S. federal government engaged in a contrary discourse which claimed that home canning was a method for the patriotic support of existing capitalist social structures. While many of
today’s counterculture or radical values and lifestyles are supported by the practice of home canning, many more jars of preserved food would need to be produced and freely shared if this form of food preservation were to effect any broader social change. A small group of individuals opting out of retail food will not create change the global food industry; the current corporate food chain will only change if consumers actively demand that it do so and if existing food systems are dismantled and replaced with new institutions and new practices.

**Limitations of the Current Study**

While this dissertation makes numerous contributions to various scholarly literatures, there are some limitations to the findings of this study due to the research methodologies I employed. First, I will review the limitations related to sampling, and second, the limits of qualitative interviewing methodology.

The foremost area of limitation affecting this research relates to sample composition. As there is no known national listing of home canners from which a representative sample of American canners can be drawn, other research methods must be employed to study home canning. This study aimed in part to learn about contemporary home canners’ motivations to do canning and what canning means to them, and thus a qualitative research methodology is appropriate to gain this depth of data. One-on-one, in-depth interviews were conducted with volunteers. Respondents were not offered any form of material compensation. A known limitation of such a sample composed of free-willed volunteers is that home canners who are self-motivated to participate in a research study may be different from those who did not volunteer. For example, I discussed above that most but not all participants in this study identified
themselves as their household’s head canner; a few individuals who did not identify as such had been recommended to me by other respondents, and I had successfully cold-contacted them requesting an interview. Such respondents might have not been as likely to participate in the study if I had not personally invited them.

Similarly, snowball techniques were employed and information about other potential interviewees was requested from respondents. Respondents were also encouraged to inform other members of their social networks about the study. These efforts were generally successful, and numerous interviews were obtained in these ways. A limitation of snowball sampling is that respondents may be more similar than dissimilar from each other if they are members of the same social networks, and whatever common characteristics such individuals may share might bias the study findings in such a direction. This risk was acknowledged and accepted at the start of research due to two unavoidable factors. First, the predominantly rural region in which this research was conducted is somewhat sparsely populated and many residents are familiar with each other. Second, home canning is now a distinctive activity and practitioners of canning were expected to be known as such within their local communities, and to be known to each other. These factors held true, as proven by the end of recruitment in that several individuals had been repeatedly recommended to me by associates both near and far. However, the recruitment procedures for this study were designed to reach various audiences and gather as diverse a sample as possible. As the demographic variety of the volunteer sample is generally strong, these efforts were overall successful even alongside the snowball sampling techniques.
Much could be learned about the contemporary practice of home food preservation if sampling of home canners could be done in such a way as to reach a variety of age groups, marital and cohabitation statuses, socioeconomic statuses, and the like. While attempting to draw conclusions about the gender division of household labor related to food, this study is limited by the small number of certain types of household composition. Most households represented by this study did not contain young children, therefore there is a notable lack of nuclear families with children. Interestingly, much of the existing literature on the gender division of household labor has focused on nuclear, heterosexual couples with children present in the household.

The second most notable features limiting the findings of this study are those related to the qualitative interviewing methodology employed to gather data. While the strengths of qualitative interviewing are numerous—such as the level of detail of the data acquired and the ability of interviewers to clarify questions and probe for depth of answers from interviewees—this research method also has its weaknesses. Time and budget constraints of this research limited the opportunity for interviews to one session per respondent. Thus, the data provide a singular glimpse in time in the lives of each respondent; no secondary follow-ups were conducted. An individual’s life is dynamic and constantly in flux, but respondents’ words from a single conversation have been fixed by this research. The interviews often called on subject matter about which interviewees often said they had never intentionally contemplated, and if given the opportunity for a follow-up conversation their responses to some questions might have been different. Another similar potential limitation of qualitative interviewing is that respondents may not accurately or completely remember events from the past which they may attempt to
recall and describe; probing questions were asked to promote greater detail and accuracy of distant memories.

Only one member of a household was interviewed. Therefore accuracy of accounts, specifically regarding the gender division of household labor, was not verified with any other household member. This study observed variations in the ways the work of meal preparation and food production are organized within canners’ households based on such factors as age, marital status, presence or absence of young children, and employment status. Housework researchers have utilized various techniques such as interviewing multiple household members and requiring respondents to fill out time diaries to record time spent in various domestic activities through the day. These techniques may increase reliability of accounts, particularly regarding issues that may be sensitive to some respondents such as gender and housework.

While this research has inherent limitations due to methods of sampling and the qualitative interviewing techniques employed, these limitations do not prevent the production of valid and important findings. The research methods utilized have produced data that are rich and valuable for informing readers on this topic. The findings of this study also help refine avenues for further inquiry.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This research into home canning has sought to contribute a foundation of knowledge about the contemporary practice of a traditional foodway among home canners in southeastern Ohio. Due to its exploratory nature, this research provides an initial look at contemporary home canning and has identified numerous areas and questions on which future studies could focus. In this section I will suggest specific
directions for future research including both substantive questions and the methodological approaches that might best address them.

One goal of the current study was to explore home canners’ motivations to do canning and what its practice means to home canners. This study encouraged open-ended answers to the following important question that was posed to all respondents: Why do you can? Most interviewees replied with a list of reasons, but such lists were not necessarily ranked in order of importance. A recommendation for further research on what motivates people to do home canning is the utilization of a ranked scale or mixed methods combining survey data with interviewing so that respondents can indicate what concerns motivate them to do canning and how important certain outcomes of canning are to them. Researchers could thereby determine canners’ top priorities versus secondary and tertiary concerns, and analyze these ranked motivations by demographic characteristics in a systematic way. For example, are home canners with college degrees more or less likely to be motivated by concerns regarding self-sufficiency and environmentalism than home canners with less educational attainment?

Other questions related to home canners’ motivations to do canning could also be analyzed in a larger, quantitative survey that could pursue representative statistical analyses of canners’ motivations (ranked, or listed) and demographic characteristics. For example, future research could look at home canners’ motivations by income level. In their analysis of users of a Florida community cannery facility (who may differ from canners who do not use such facilities), Baer et al. (1992) report that low-income patrons (as defined by the study as earning less than $1,146 per month for a family of four) were motivated to save money, whereas high-income patrons were motivated by ‘recreational’
concerns and spending leisure time. In Quandt et al.’s (1994) study among the rural elderly in Kentucky, individuals with lower incomes were less likely to tend home gardens and were also therefore much less likely to preserve food at home than individuals with higher incomes. Is the distinguishing factor between these two studies the fact that the canners in Baer et al.’s (1992) study used a community cannery to do their canning while Quandt et al.’s (1994) respondents did not use such a facility? Or is it age? Is the likelihood of saving money via canning a more powerful motivator than recreational pleasures?

While great insights can be made by focusing on a homogenous group, such as Quandt et al.’s (1994) study of the rural elderly in Kentucky, my research suggests that provocative findings can be made by comparing different demographic groups. For example, I found that age can have a powerful influence on canners’ experiences with canning and the meanings they ascribe to it. A larger quantitative study could also examine home canners’ motivations to do canning by income level, for example, or examine how socioeconomic status is related to today’s home canners’ family histories of canning or the types and amounts of food that they preserve.

There is still much to learn about gender and home canning. In this dissertation I have argued for the inclusion of *domestic food production* in future studies of housework. A quantitative study utilizing a larger, representative sample to analyze the gender division of household labor could include, alongside meal preparation, measures of canning and other forms of food preservation as well as gardening to ascertain any trends of women’s and men’s participation therein. Time diaries could be recorded by respondents to achieve accurate accounts of how much time is spent performing each
activity. If a ranking of motivations to do canning were included, such a study could also compare and contrast women’s and men’s motivations to do home canning to determine if home canning assists in the accomplishment of gendered goals or roles.

Additionally, such a quantitative study could also explore deeper into the relationship of household composition and domestic food production by sampling from targeted groups such as those who live alone and in nuclear households with children. Are married persons more likely to can than those who are single? Are men who live alone less likely to do home canning than women who live alone? What are the effects of the presence of children in the household on the practice of canning? Is there a relationship between female canners’ associations of canning with women and their willingness or unwillingness to involve the men in their lives with canning? Data on such questions could contribute to our understanding of domestic food production as a gendered phenomenon.

This dissertation was inspired by the current cultural revival of interest in home canning and gardening, and yet has only been able to study a small part of this broad social trend. Future qualitative studies of contemporary home canning could focus on canners in other regions or locales of the country. The present study, which largely focuses on rural canners within southeastern Ohio, could be contrasted with a future study of urban home canning. Interesting questions such a study might pose include: Are urban canners more likely than rural canners to feel that they are part of a social movement? Are they members of online canning communities or do they blog about their home canning activities? Do they have any family history of home canning? To what extent do they see themselves as participating in a cultural trend? Are they more likely to
identify as ‘foodies’? It would be particularly interesting to know if urban canners are motivated to do home canning for different reasons than rural canners, and the benefits that they perceive canning offers to individuals and society. Also, how do rural or urban locations encourage or discourage gardening? Is there a gardening ‘revival’ underway, and if so, who is leading it—women or men, rural or urban residents?

A final area on which future research is much needed is that regarding home food preservation practices and health implications. This study observed that home canners are often aware of recommendations for safe canning techniques such as those published by the National Center for Home Food Preservation and the USDA, but they do not always follow these official guidelines. The findings of my study suggest that there are ideological beliefs and cultural traditions that underlie respondents’ unsafe canning practices. For example, they may feel that grandma’s techniques are more time-tested than today’s scientific recommendations, and therefore canners perceive grandma’s recipes are guaranteed to safe. Such canners are likely uninformed, however, about the scientifically-verified changes in plants and microorganisms over time like the decreasing acidity of many popular plants such as tomatoes and the proliferation of foodborne disease-causing organisms especially on meats. Would the public dissemination of such information motivate them to learn how to conduct their canning in accord with today’s scientific standards? How might today’s numerous ‘foodie’ blogs and cookbooks promote personal interpretations of canning recipes in association with the spirit of freelance cooking attuned to one’s own taste preferences, or the notion of food preparation as personal expression or art? Future research could try to further identify
obstacles to home canners’ utilization of up-to-date canning safety guidelines and recommend how such obstacles might best be addressed and overcome.

**Chapter Conclusion**

This sociological inquiry into home food preservation has shown that home canning provides an insightful lens into the lives of the present-day knowledge-keepers of a traditional American foodway, one that has changed over time to reflect the political, cultural, and economic trends of many eras during the past two hundred years since its invention by a Frenchman. This research contributes a new area of study—food preservation—to the sociology of food and interdisciplinary food studies. It has presented unique, in-depth empirical data on the experiences and understandings of home food production and consumption among a group of contemporary home canners. The emergent array of meanings canning holds for its current practitioners and the variety of goals that canning fulfills for them are lengthy and complex. Unlike previous survey research on home canning, this qualitative study observed that canners’ motivations to do canning and the perceived benefits of home canning widely range from practical concerns to the ideological. Lastly, this study calls for an expansion of gendered housework measures to include domestic food production activities like home canning and gardening in future research on the gender division of household labor.

Overall, the canners in this study seek health and safety through domestic food production, a set of activities which confer empowerment and produce some degree of food sovereignty. Home canning is one way individual members of an increasingly unpredictable, insecure society retain a form of control and self-determination. The Mason jar today is, as always, a powerful symbol and tool, a nostalgic icon that connects
home canners of the present to those of the past—‘ancestors’ both real and imagined—and is itself brimming full of promise and hope, offering a taste of security, simplicity, authenticity, and the meaningfulness of time-tested tradition preserved by those who put canning jars to use.


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Appendices

Appendix A. Interview Guide

Introduction
Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research project. I am studying home canning, and am interested to learn who is involved with canning, how they learned about canning, why people are canning today and what they think about it. In the first part of the interview, I will ask about your previous experiences with canning, and whether or not you are currently canning. Then I have some general questions about food and meals in your household. If there are any questions that you don’t want to answer, you don’t have to. Your participation in this study is voluntary—thank you!—and our conversation will remain confidential. Are you ready to get started?  <Respondent answers>  Ok, great! Thank you!

Part 1: Canning Experiences, Past and Present

Part 1a: Canning History
When did you learn about home canning?

Can you tell me about your first experience with canning?
   Who was there? What did you/they do? Where/when was this?
   How did you feel?

Has anyone else in your family done any canning?
While you were growing up, did your parents or grandparents can?
   If “yes”: Who was involved? Why did they can?
   Do you use similar techniques now?

Part 1b: Current Canning Behavior
Are you currently canning or planning to can food this year?
   If yes: How often do you can?

What do you can? Why do you put up these foods as opposed to others?

What do you do with the foods you can?
   Do you give away any of the food you preserve?

Do you ever can with anyone else?
   If “yes”: Who? Are they members of your household?
   How do you divide up the process?
   Do you share the food you have canned?

Can you tell me a story about some recent canning that you did? What made this particular day/event memorable?
Have you ever taught anyone else to can? Any children [if any], or other family members? Have you ever taught a class or workshop about canning?

Have you ever created your own canning recipe?
   Where do you get most of your recipes? A family member? Book? Internet?

Would you call yourself a ‘canner’?

Some people like to share their canning projects with others, and even take pictures of the process to share. Do you talk to other people about your home canning? If so, who? What do you share: stories, recipes, the food, pictures, etc.?

How do you experience canning… Is it like work? Fun? Something else?

**Part 2: Motivations and Meanings of Home Canning**

Why do you can?

Why canning, specifically? Do you also freeze food or use other preservation techniques?
   How do you decide what process to use for a particular food?

Do you feel that canning is a necessity? Do you feel required to do it?
   What would happen to you or your family if you did not can food?

Do you think you save money by home canning?

Do you think you will can (regularly) throughout the rest of your life?

What are the benefits of canning? Who (or what) do you think benefits?
   What are the drawbacks of canning?

**Part 3: Household Context**

I’d like to ask you some questions about food and regular meals and eating in your home.

Do you share a household with anyone else?
   If not living alone: With whom do you live?
      Do you have a spouse or partner?
      Do you have any children?

Do the adults in your household work outside the home?

How often are meals shared among the members of your household? (or, “How often do you eat together?”)

How are meals planned and prepared in your household? Who does this?
   How do you feel about this?
In addition to canning, do you make, grow, or raise other food for your household?
   Do you grow a vegetable or fruit garden?
      If ‘Yes’: Is it located at your own home?
      What plants do you grow?
      Does anyone help you with the garden?

What are your general concerns about food?
   How do you think these concerns affect how you and [if any] the other members of your household buy and/or create the food you eat?

**Part 4: Demographic and Background Information**
I’d like to clarify some information about you that we may not have talked about yet.
How did you hear about this study?

Do you live in town? -or- Where do you live? [Record as: Rural, Suburban, or Urban]

What is your age? Gender? Race/ethnicity? [May be assessed visually by the researcher.]

How many people live in your household? Are you related?

How would you rate your overall health: Excellent, Good, Fair, or Poor?

What is your occupation? -or- Do you do any paid work?

Do you practice a religion or hold any religious or spiritual beliefs?

**Conclusion**
Well, we have covered all my questions… Did we miss anything?

Do you have any questions for me? Or anything you want to add to or clarify?

If you have any, at this time I’d like to ask for your final thoughts on canning.

Thank you!
Appendix B. Recruitment Materials

Appendix B1. Printed Recruitment Flier

Hello! My name is Suzanne Pennington and I am a graduate student conducting research on home canning, the form of food preservation also known as ‘putting up’ food. This study will explore why people are canning now, and what it means to them.

I am interested in talking with people who currently can or who have recently been involved with home canning, including: newbies to canning, oldies, in-betweens, those who have returned to canning after a ‘pause’, gardeners, hunters, jammers and jelly-makers, and the like!

Volunteers will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview, lasting approximately one and a half hours. Our conversation will be kept confidential.

If you are interested in participating in this research, or would like more information regarding this study, please feel free to contact:

Suzanne Pennington
spennington@albany.edu or pspenn@gmail.com
740-707-5227

Dissertation Advisor: Dr. Glenna Spitze gspitze@albany.edu

Thank you!!

[I inserted on the bottom edge of this printed flier a series of vertically-aligned tear-off tabs with my contact information for prospective participants to take away.]
Appendix B2. Electronic Advertisement Text

Home Canners Sought For Interviews
My name is Suzanne Pennington and I am a graduate student in sociology studying home canning, the form of food preservation also known as ‘putting up’ food. My study aims to explore why people are canning now, and what canning means to them. I am interested in talking with people who currently can or who have recently been involved with home canning. Volunteers will be asked to participate in a confidential interview lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. To volunteer, or for more information, please contact:

Suzanne Pennington  spennington@albany.edu  740-707-5227
Dissertation Advisor: Dr. Glenna Spitze  gspitze@albany.edu

Thank you!

Appendix B3. Alternate Electronic Advertisement Text

Home Canners Sought For Interviews
Do you can food at home to preserve it, or do you know someone who does? I am conducting a study on contemporary home canning to learn why people preserve food this way and what canning means to them. If you or someone you know cans food at home and would like to volunteer to be interviewed, please contact Suzanne Pennington by email spennington@albany.edu or phone 740-707-5227. Thank you, and happy canning!

Dissertation Advisor: Dr. Glenna Spitze  gspitze@albany.edu
Appendix C. Consent Form

Making Sense of Mason Jars: A Qualitative Exploration of Contemporary Home Canning

Project Overview & Description of Voluntary Participation:
I understand that by signing this consent form, I am agreeing to participate in a research study entitled “Making Sense of Mason Jars: A Qualitative Exploration of Contemporary Home Canning”. This study will be conducted by Suzanne Pennington, a doctoral student at the University at Albany, State University of New York. I understand that this research is designed to investigate the experiences of adults aged 18 years and up who can food (preserve) at home.

As a participant in this study, I agree to take part in one interview conducted by Suzanne that will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes. During this interview, I will be asked questions about the types of canning experiences I have had and how these experiences are meaningful to me. I acknowledge that Suzanne has asked for my permission to audiotape the interview and that I may refuse to grant permission at any time. The audio recording of my conversation with Suzanne will be destroyed after it is transcribed. My participation in this study is voluntary. Even after I agree to participate in the research or sign the informed consent document, I may decide to leave the study at any time without penalty; if I withdraw from the study, any information about me will be excluded from analysis and will be destroyed.

Confidentiality & Risk:
In order to protect my identity, I understand that my name will not be included in any reports or publications resulting from this study. Instead, a pseudonym will be used on all subsequent materials. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In addition, the Institutional Review Board and University or government officials responsible for monitoring this study may inspect these records. Although I may not receive direct benefit from my participation in the study, other may ultimately benefit from the knowledge obtained from this research. There are no anticipated risks associated with my participation except that I may become uncomfortable answering some of the questions. The researcher is not liable for any physical harm sustained by my participation in home canning activities before, during, and after this study, or resulting from the consumption of any food products.

Contact Information:
If you have any questions about this study, please contact the Principal Investigator, Suzanne Pennington at 740-707-5227 or spennington@albany.edu and/or her faculty advisor, Dr. Glenna Spitze at 518-442-4667 or gspitze@albany.edu. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.
Your Rights as a Research Participant:
If you have questions concerning your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University at Albany, Office of Regulatory Research Compliance at 518-442-9050 or 800-365-9139 or via email at orrc@albany.edu.

I have read, or been informed of, the information about this study. I hereby consent to participate in the study.

Name _________________________ Signature __________________

Date __________________________

Please sign below if you are willing to have this interview audio recorded. You may still participate in this study if you are not willing to have the interview recorded.

Name _________________________ Signature __________________

Date __________________________