

We eat quite a lot of fast food. It does not start out that way, of course. And, actually, no fast food starts out in that manner. But, our quick meals don't have any connection with the establishments that are purveyors of Big Macs, Whoppers, or any of the other icons of modern America.

Still, there are times when it is necessary to make a meal in a hurry. So, to meet those needs, I am slowly preparing the ingredients for our homegrown fast food.

It takes time. Every June, I look in the freezer and on the shelves of the fruit cellar. I see big, empty spaces in the deepfreeze, and rows of empty Mason jars in the fruit cellar. Gradually, over the summer, the space fills up and the glass jars are taken from the shelves, washed, and filled again. The colors of fruits and vegetables themselves speak of nutrition and fulfillment.

Some of these jars and packets contain ingredients for meals that don't take much time to get table-ready. Desserts are the easiest of all. The jewel colors of fruits, either frozen or canned, speak loudly, promoting themselves as worthy candidates to end our meals. And, it is true—canned or frozen fruits provide most of our desserts. And it is quick to grab a jar of peaches, pears, or plums from the shelves and bring it up to fill the small glass sauce dishes.

There are other fruits that are there to provide fillings for pies, toppings for ice cream, and the makings of apple or blueberry crisps. Most of these dishes don't take much time to prepare—once they are in the freezer or fruit cellar.

Sometimes, though not often, I can small potatoes. It is not that we don't have storage room for fresh potatoes, and we eat them nearly every day, but once in a while, if I have been out on my skis or we have had an errand that took us from home, I want to make a substantial meal in a hurry. A jar of canned potatoes, one of home-grown beef or chicken, and a jar of string beans—a meal in just a few minutes.

Getting food in shape for quick meals is another matter, though. And, that is the time-consuming job of summer and fall. Peaches and pears don't can themselves. Strawberry hulls don't fall off automatically, beans don't snip off their own ends, and peas hold their pods until we shell them. Cabbage heads need a lot of slicing and shredding before they can be packed in crocks or jars with salt that, along with time, turns them into sauerkraut. Beets must be cooked and skinned before they can be pickled. All of the processes involved in preparing food for the three seasons during which it is not available "fresh" in our climate are time-consuming.

That does not mean that it is either boring or unpleasant work. I like getting food ready for winter. In fact, I would be in a state of panic if we did not have our food supply in storage—just as I would be unable to sleep if we did not have feed enough for our livestock in the barns before cold weather set in.

So, on this day, it means the fragrance of tomatoes steaming in the kettle. I will push the softened fruit through a cone-shaped sieve—a sixty-year old implement my mother used. I will add herbs and onions and cook the mixture into a thick sauce that I will can and use this winter as sauce for pasta.

As the day goes on, I will find time to go to the garden—where all of the tender plants have already suffered from our frosty nights—and, I will bring in cabbage, carrots, and onions that I will use, along with garlic and hot peppers, to make some spicy kraut or kimchi.

So, day after day, week after week, we pick, clean, assemble, cook, can, and freeze the products that our garden produces. We will be prepared for the “fast food” days of winter and spring, when an extra hour in the woods on skis, or a day spent mostly in the lambing shed as ewe after ewe has her young is preferable to cooking “from scratch.” After all, we’d already done that at the end of summer. We would be ready to enjoy the fruits—and vegetables—of our labor.