



DEPARTMENT OF ORGANIC YOUTH

YES, WE CAN

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Photography by [Max Elliott](#)

The Tuesday morning harvest is in and the temperature continues to rise, but in the shade of the oak trees, a group of teenagers barely notices. They stand around a white rectangular table listening as cooking-class instructor James Buratti explains the various fruits and vegetables he'd previously preserved and brought for the farm interns of the Urban Roots program to taste.

Each of the jars is received differently: pickled tomatoes and onions raise skeptical eyebrows; peach jam garners smiles; jalapeño jam elicits sideways glances; dilly beans and pickled cucumbers evoke shrugs and mustang grape jelly gets interested smiles—only after Buratti's enthusiastic introduction of it. Lids are twisted off and the group sweeps in, eyes wide, tortilla chips in hands—youthful metabolisms and appetites kicking.

As the group eats, Buratti and his wife Jennifer prepare the stations for food prep. The pair owns [Bohemian Bounty](#), an organization based out of San Marcos that's dedicated to helping Central Texas residents grow their own healthful, organic and low-cost food. They specialize in vegetable and herb garden installations, maintenance and design, as well as offer classes on cooking, composting and canning.

The invention of canning was, like a number of innovations over the years, sparked by necessity. In

order to successfully and safely feed troops during the Napoleonic Wars, a French newspaper and the French government offered a cash prize to anyone who could come up with an improved method for preserving food. Nicholas Appert answered that call by precooking food inside a jar, stoppering it with a hand-cut cork, sealing it with a special mixture then boiling it in a hot-water bath. In the following decades, intrepid inventors improved upon Appert's method and, come the Civil War, people were sealing glass lids to jars using rubber rings.

This canning workshop is a first for the Urban Roots crew, but not out of character. Urban Roots, a youth development work program of YouthLaunch, uses sustainable agriculture to transform the lives of young people and increase access to healthful food in Austin. The 30 teenage farm interns, all Austinites from varied backgrounds, have been digging their hands into the soil since Valentine's Day, working to harvest over 45,000 pounds of produce. In addition to the farmwork, the interns have put in time at a few kitchens around town, including those of volunteer cooking instructors Brian Hay of Austin Community College and Madeline Pizzo, at restaurants Z'Tejas, Zoot and La Condesa and at the hunger-relief organizations Caritas and Meals on Wheels and More.

By the final week of the 25-week program, their farm skills and vegetable knowledge cover a myriad of crops and a number of tasks, including harvesting and bunching collards, thinning carrots, moving, connecting and repairing drip irrigation, trellising tomatoes and—in the heat of July—donning long sleeves and gloves to pick the devastatingly itchy okra. Now, in the (relative) cool of the shade, the harvest will become ingredients for snacks and spreads that won't be eaten for weeks, if not months.

Before being unleashed upon the okra and cutting boards, the group learns about food safety. Buratti talks about the work he has already done to properly sterilize the jars and lids. He rightfully scares the group about botulism, stresses the importance of washing hands and gives instructions about safe knife handling. After these necessary steps are taken, the interns load the okra onto their cutting boards. In pairs, they take turns chopping off okra stems, slicing garlic and chopping hot peppers. Max Elliott, the Urban Roots farm manager, co-founder and co-director, gives a warning about being too cavalier with the hottest peppers. His story about losing a night's sleep because his hands burned from cutting fresh habaneros without protection leads most of the interns to dive for the box of latex gloves.

The soundtrack of bantering co-workers and friends plays throughout the process. "Be aggressive. Be, be aggressive," sings Demetria. Chopping turns into jar-filling as okra, garlic and then hot peppers are added. "Two serranos? Whoa!" exclaims Fille as she watches Zach and Demetria eagerly decide to turn up the heat in their jars. Garyon asks if they're allowed to add more than one garlic clove to their jars. When he's told he can, he responds with a testing-the-limit grin: "Great. I'm going to put in eighteen." After a brief discussion with his partner, though, he compromises on two. "Mine's the prettiest jar," says Vivian, matter-of-factly, as she holds hers up to examine. "Let's have this jar be a tribute to Michael Jackson," one intern announces. "How is it a tribute?" another asks across the outdoor kitchen. "I dunno." Everyone, including the Michael Jackson fan, laughs.



The group watches as James and Jennifer pour the warm brine of vinegar, salt and water over the rows of jars. Next, they carefully lower the jars into the boiling water bath. Bohemian Bounty has brought a heavy-duty, outdoor, dual-burner stove, and when it's attached to a propane tank, it's good to go. Their only other addition is a makeshift jar rack made of wire that keeps the jars from touching the bottom of the big pot. After 10 minutes of boiling, they're pulled out and left to cool. Soon, the beautiful sound of lids popping signals that any accidental sins during the process have been forgiven.

But pickled okra is just the first half of what Bohemian Bounty has in store for Urban Roots. The second act is titled "Jalapeño Jam," but it's actually a combination of all sorts of green, yellow, and red hot and sweet peppers: habaneros, jalapeños, Lipstick, Hungarian hot wax, serranos and sweet bells. This process is vastly different and the instructors introduce the group to new ingredients, like pectin, and explain their uses. After they finish the chopping for the jam, the interns wait for the final pour into the jars and, subsequently, the cooling to commence. Meanwhile, their eyes wander back to the tasting table and their feet soon follow. Few interns feel lukewarm about any of the samples now.

I don't think about ol' Nicholas Appert and his hand-made corks while I watch these young people learn to preserve their food. There's an energy to this; a different feel than the urgent necessity to safely preserve food that was present during Napoleon's era. After lunch, the jars have all cooled and the group swarms back around the card-table now buckling under the weight of the jars. Hands grab jars and eyes strain to identify whose is whose by the ingredients used and the stuffing pattern. Some interns find theirs; some give up after determining they all look pretty similar. Permanent markers come out and initials are scribbled on lids. Jars claimed, ownership stated, food techniques from centuries ago passed on.

[Click here for The Bohemian's Pickled Okra recipe.](#)

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