

# Exploring a land of jam and honey

■ JAMS  
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Hilary and George Garvaltis are not only the farthest west on our tour, their 55-acre Bear Meadow Farm commands the highest spot — 2,300 feet up the mountain in Florida, just below the Vermont border.

Because of its climate — it can snow seven months of the year there, and only three weeks ago, hail stuck to the gravel driveway like slick, chunky glue — Hilary Garvaltis explains that one of her chief concerns has been getting reliable full and part-time help, people who can make the trek in bad weather as well as good.

Also, she seeks workers who will precisely follow the 40 recipes she uses to make her jams and jellies, as well as mustards, chutneys, relishes, sauces and vinegars.

Hilary explains that she and George bought Bear Meadow less than three years ago from Barbara and Rubin Shay, an older couple who had started selling jams and jellies in 1980. Barbara Shay's recipes came along with the deed to the farm.

Garvaltis says she found herself floundering at the beginning of her takeover because she was involved in redesigning the label, dealing with marketing and sales representatives and getting much-needed help. George, meanwhile, was and has been responsible for "most of the books and running around" in between working part-time for an advertising agency in Williamstown and coaching the lacrosse and soccer teams at Williams College.

Using one or more of the eight burners on the Garland gas range in her jam kitchen, Garvaltis says she is proud of their products' high quality. "Everything is done in small batches," specifically 24 16-ounce jars at a time. "I get as much fruit as possible from local growers, but some, such as raspberries, I have shipped in from the northwest because of their consistent high quality," she says.

She is now producing four times what she was three years ago, and last year she broke even, "which was great."

The Garvaltis have added a big room onto the farmhouse for hand-packing, labeling, storage and office use — although it also boasts a playpen for their son James, 15 months.



Hilary Garvaltis in the kitchen of Bear Meadow Farm, where she produces jams, jellies, vinegars and other condiments and sauces.

Ben Placid McKeown, who heads the order, explains that the abbey is a place where monks live, work and pray. The idea of the monastery is to be self-supporting. We don't live on donations.

To his end, many of the 80 monks in residence pitch in to make 25 different kinds of jelly and jam labeled "Trappist Preserves." They work half days eight months of the year in a small factory-type building that is automated for maximum efficiency.

They produce up to 6,000 jars of jam and jellies a day for distribution throughout the country to all kinds of stores — from Spig's and Stop & Shop to toy specialty shops.

Father Placid says their production had humble beginnings, going back to "1954 or 1955," shortly after the monastery was completed. "I have an image memory of Brother Pat Brown standing over a pot trying recipes and flavors suggested by local friends," he recalls. "We started out with wine jellies in Mason jars with hand-labeled labels."

The abbey invested in automation in 1960 and, since then, "we grew out of like Topy," he says, "we were well received," he adds modestly.

He recalls a jam tasting conducted by fancy food experts a few

used in apples — simply because at the time the order began making jellies, there were too many other people making apple jelly.

Despite the ample supplies, the monks are not allowed to regularly indulge in the fruits of their endeavors. "We make a great deal of putting preserves out only on Sundays and feast days," says Father Placid.

But he adds with a twinkling eye, the monks know where the preserves are stored, and every now and then, one of them will tap a jar or two.

"They'll eat all but the ginger preserves. The ginger they leave alone."

Ed Bref of Bref's Honey Products in Middleton says he and his wife Barbara, have been "doing honey" for about 12 years now.

"I try to stress comb honey, cut right out of the hive, but we also sell extracted honey," he says. Their extracted honey comes in bear-shaped squeezable bottles — 30-ounce Eddy Bears and 24-ounce Honey Bears. The Bref's also sell Honeywackers, plain and flavored honey in plastic straws that people can bite off and sip from without their teeth.

"Joggers like the Honeywackers," he reports.

He says he has more than 100 hives on his two-acre farm and each one gives off between 60 and 100 pounds of honey.

That is to reach every farm stand in Massachusetts," Bref says. That and to encourage others to go into the beekeeping venture.

"It's a fun hobby. If a person has one or two hives, they'll have honey for themselves and enough left over to give or sell. People can even keep bees in high rises if they want."

Bref says he hopes his bees eventually will afford him a comfortable retirement, but in the meantime he is keeping his job as a reading specialist at Shawshen Valley Regional Technical High School in Billerica.

The oldest jam and jelly making operation in the state is at the Green Bear Nature Center and Jam Kitchen in East Sandwich. It was founded in 1903 by Ida Patnam, a woman who needed money to support her aging parents, and taken over by Martha Blake in 1950. When she "retired" in 1970, she turned the operation over to the Thurston Burgess Society.

Blake, now 86, still makes weekly visits to the kitchen to be sure the jams and jellies are being made the same way as when she first began working there in 1918.

A handful of workers produce 28,000 six-ounce jars between mid-May and mid-December. However, it is only during June, July and August that the workers can sun-cook their apricot, peach, nectarine, plum, blueberry and strawberry preserves.

Instead of cooking the preserves in small pots from beginning to end, the jam-makers heat up their fruits and sugar only until the sugar melts. They then transfer the mixtures to shallow enamel pans and put the pans on a shelf under an awning of slanted glass that runs the length of a room adjacent to the kitchen. The temperature in this simple solar oven can reach up to 180 degrees. Within three to five days the sun will "cook" the preserves in the right consistency so that they can then be ladled into sterilized jars.

Unlike other operations in the state, Green Bear jams are available only at the center or through mail-order. There are no retail outlets.



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