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From Law to Jam: Local Attorney Gets "Best in Show" At State Fair

By Sophie Braccini



Joan Edelsohn in her kitchen preparing to jam Photo
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Joan Edelsohn is an attorney defending insurance companies during the day, but come the night she trades her business attire for a chef's hat. Standing over her stove, she brews new jam recipes. One of the latest, an Apricot Amaretto jam, recently won the "Best of Show" award at the California State Fair. As far as canning recognition is concerned, you can't get any higher.

"I was shocked," says the Moraga mom, "my jam first won the 'Best in Division' (Jams) and it was already a great honor. I didn't even stay long enough to hear the final results and heard I had won "Best in Show" two days later."

The idea of competing with her cooking came to Edelsohn after her daughter Sienna was invited to present a wood table she had created, in Campolindo High School, at the State Fair. "I've always liked to cook and we make almost everything from scratch in our family," says Edelsohn, "I was interested in canning but really didn't know how, so I taught myself with books and particularly experimented with jams." She confesses that her favorite breakfast is toast with butter and jam, and she has about ten different varieties of homemade concoctions from which to choose. "I like the whole process," she adds, "but it can be very time consuming preparing the fruit when you want perfection."

To make her blackberry jam, she removes all the little seeds from the fruit and to make marmalade she makes sure to remove any part of the outer and inner skin of the citrus. Edelsohn enjoys the alchemy of jam-making as well, "You can never be completely sure that the jam or marmalade will 'take,'" she says, there is always an element of surprise."

Edelsohn believes that the secret of her success is the quality of the ingredients she uses. "I enjoy shopping at the Moraga Farmers' Market on Sunday morning," she explains, "I can taste the produce, and that's how I select it: I close my eyes, I taste and if I feel that it's one of the best fruits I've ever had, then I buy it for jam." She believes that only perfect fruit can become amazing jam. She gets base ingredients from friends and colleagues as well. "My husband works in the Central Valley, a lot of people have a lot of fruit there," she says, they give us fruit and in return we give them jam." Edelsohn confesses that if the fruit does not pass her taste test it will not be processed into jam.

For recipes, she started with the basics and then added items culled from different cookbooks, listened to friends' suggestions and tried out her own ideas. "The simplest way to start is to follow the recipe that is found on the package of Sure Jello Pectin," she explains, "when it comes to jam-making you have to follow the proportions to the letter." She confesses that her first year she made a lot of ice cream sauce, but not much jam that took. Now that she has been 'jamming' for three years she is experimenting with such personal creations as blueberry-lemon jam, blackberry Cabernet Sauvignon jam and Bing cherry marmalade.

Edelsohn's kitchen is very large; it can accommodate many cooks at the same time and contains all of the utensils and apparatus necessary for good processing. Joan's passion has infected the entire family. Her three children, now all in college at UC Santa Cruz, participate in the family endeavor and all had entries at the last State Fair; their father David, an anesthesiologist by day, entered his homemade biscotti.

Edelsohn cooks full batches at a time, which means that for one recipe, such as apricot jam, she will make 14 jars and she produces 20 to 24 batches a year. She does not sell her creations, they are solely for gift giving and private consumption. "When my kids leave for college I make sure to add a few jars of their favorite jams in their luggage," she says.

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