

Batch

The Cookbook Inspired by a Community

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Dana Harrison and Joel MacCharles established three personal goals before they embarked on creating *Batch*, their first cookbook: don't break up (they're a couple); don't go bankrupt; and don't let the work destroy friendships. These rules of engagement say a lot about their values. Those in "the club," the term Dana uses to refer to cookbook writers, know the work is demanding and that having that kind of commitment is essential. In *Batch: Over 200 Recipes, Tips & Techniques for a Well Preserved Kitchen*, which came out in May, Dana and Joel's individual talents are woven together in a cookbook on preserving that is in equal measure practical and beautiful.

It began in 2008 when, on a whim, Dana started a blog called "Well Preserved." She and Joel were looking to find people with similar interests. Joel took over the content in his spare time (by day he's Vice President of Innovation for a large call centre). He identifies as obsessive and proceeded to create a new blog post for 1,500 consecutive days (a bit more than four years). It's no surprise that they built a substantial following, a "non-homogeneous community" as Joel describes it, including everyone from

hunters wanting recipes for jerky to vegans looking for preserves in line with their diets.

Their brand was not an out-of-the-can blog theme. Dana is a graphic designer and her task was to create their look. Well Preserved would eventually become Dana's business, giving her the opportunity to transition from an agency job to a freelance career working with successful food entrepreneurs like Bespoke Butchers and Pristine Gourmet.

In 2012, while doing an annual review of their goals for Well Preserved, their discussion turned to talk of a cookbook. They agreed that it was not financially viable and shelved the idea and any thoughts of contacting a potential publisher. Serendipitously, just ten days later, Random House of Canada sent them an email requesting a meeting with Robert McCullough, publisher of their Appetite imprint. The couple were still ambivalent as they rode the elevator up to his office but by the middle of their meeting, Dana reflects that they knew, without talking to each other about it, that they would be doing a book. They'd have to juggle their day jobs while creating the cookbook.

They still had to pitch the book concept, and Dana's talent was an asset. The quality of her work won her a place at the table where book design decisions were made, and she found a kindred spirit in book designer Kelly Hill. Some of Dana's influence can be seen in details like the turned-down corners marking batch recipes, the seven icons for preserving methods, and the small photo-guide illustrations. (Dana didn't want to apply text to Rena Newman's gorgeous photographs). She learned a lot about book design and said she cried when Kelly asked her to share the design credit on the cookbook's cover.

Batch takes its name from the structure that underlies it. It's a style of preserving that suits Joel, who likes to "make multiple preserves at the same time with the same ingredient" but often using different parts of that ingredient in each preserve. The scale of the recipes is a delight, each yielding about a quart. It's not the all-day canning marathon; it's preserving for an urban DIYer who is ambitious but lacks a cold cellar. In the chapter on peaches, there are five batch recipes including Smoked-Dried Peaches, Canned Peach Slices, and Peach-Bourbon BBQ Sauce. The assumption is that the

reader will choose to make more than one recipe once they're already in the kitchen.

"There are one hundred fifty recipes and seven techniques, each of which has a tested meal," says Joel. The preserving techniques cover more than the usual canning methods; they range from water bath- and pressure-canning to dehydrating, fermenting, cellaring, salting and smoking, and infusing.

Joel's writing is candid and charming, revealing hard-won lessons and tips that he's picked up from chef friends. He's capable of calming even the novice's fears. He likes the concept of "nose-to-tail preserving" – breaking down one ingredient into numerous parts – and devotes time to finding new uses for things like the pits and the skin that most people discard.

"I find cooking stressful and Joel doesn't," Dana says. They grew up in families with markedly different approaches to food: Joel's dad is a hunter, his parents love to cook, and preserving was part of family life. Dana's experience is the polar opposite but, since publishing *Batch*, her mom has made a few recipes from it, including kimchi and sauerkraut. Dana and Joel grew their expertise mostly by doing.

I interviewed them in a favourite café in their Queen Street East neighbourhood in Toronto. Joel brought some preserves for me to taste, all recipes from the book. He twisted the lid off a jar of Sauerkraut in which pieces of bright red chile pepper had been fermented with the cabbage, punctuating the pleasing sourness with fiery heat. I longed to heap it on Polish sausage on a bun. The addition of brandy and peppercorns to Raspberry Jam gave it a savoury essence and pieces of berry and lots of crunchy seeds were suspended in the soft ruby gel. In the book, the recipe serves double duty when stirred into a meaty reduction served with moose or venison. There was honey-sweetened Curry Cucumber Pickle, a fabulous riff on the classic bread-and-butter pickle. Charred Pickled Beets were packed with caraway seeds and the brine had a subtle acidity from white vinegar tempered

with balsamic. I made their Awesome Relish, which lives up to its name and is fantastic stirred into egg salad.

The pair reached out to their Well Preserved community to test recipes. Joel surveyed participants to find out who had special diets, whether they hunted, owned preserving equipment like dehydrators or pressure canners, where they lived. (It was helpful having recipe testers in Australia when ingredients were out of season in Canada.) When he was finished planning his strategy the Excel spreadsheet it was on took sixty legal-size pages to print.

Dana and Joel met in a high school computer class in Markham in 1988. Dana poked fun at his smarts, calling him Einstein. Their paths crossed several times after that, but it wasn't until they were in their early thirties that they came together as a couple. Joel says, "our story is romantic." In business, as in life, they complement each other. She finds cooking stressful; he doesn't. He's an extrovert, the public face of Well Preserved, while she's happy managing the behind-the-scenes details that make them look good.


According to Dana, one of the myths surrounding the book is the perception that they worked on it together when, in fact, "98 percent of it was done in isolation." It was one of the unexpected hardships they faced as a couple. When Joel was busy with recipes and writing, Dana would have down time. Then he'd be off at markets or having fun with friends while Dana was dealing with design matters. In the two years it took to complete the cookbook they each went on separate vacations. Dana says there were times when she was suffering from "serious FOMO" (fear of missing out). At the outset, they believed they could still carry on with their blog but the demands of the project soon nixed that idea.

Alison Fryer, the former manager of Toronto's sorely missed Cookbook Store, was a mentor in the process. She told them that when the book was submitted, they'd only be about a third of the way in their journey. They laid ambitious plans for promotion.

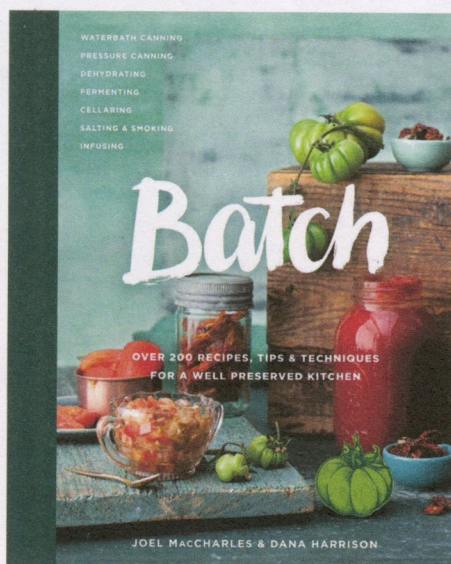
Dana sensed the merchandising opportunity and set about making t-shirts and prints of her stunning original images. On the streets of Toronto, you can spot people wearing their Drop the Beet t-shirt. The book has been a "big giant ticket to meeting interesting people," Dana enthuses. Over the summer they toured Etsy headquarters in New York, presented Mitchell Davis of the James Beard Foundation with a copy of their book, and they're in conversation with *Oprah* magazine to contribute to the December issue.

It's been "largely an egoless project," says Dana. Right now she loves meeting their fans at their stand at events or at the Leslieville Farmers' Market on Sundays. They both get a thrill seeing photos of preserves people have prepared and posted on social media. The biggest pleasure of all is the book's permanence – seeing it on a shelf at the library or as part of a bookstore display.

Right now they're celebrating the second print run of the cookbook. Thoughts of another book are not up for consideration for at least another season. "Ideas are never the problem," Dana advises, and they'd like to explore subjects outside of preserving. If *Batch* is any indication of the quality of what's to come next, we can all anticipate a delicious treat. When they have their New Year's conversation about their goals for Well Preserved in the coming year, Dana says they'll try to discern "what this thing wants to be; what do our people want next?"

***Batch: Over 200 Recipes, Tips & Techniques for a Well Preserved Kitchen*, by Joel MacCharles and Dana Harrison. Published by Appetite by Random House, © 2016. The following recipes reproduced by arrangement with the publisher. All rights reserved.** 

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PICKLED DILLY CARROTS

(Ferment)

Yield: 1 quart

Eat: After 1 month and within 1 year

- 1/4 cup snipped fresh dill
or 1 tbsp dried dill seed
- 3 cloves garlic, peeled
- 6–8 medium carrots, peeled
and sliced into coins
- 2 tbsp coarse salt
- Filtered water

Add the dill and garlic to a one-quart standard Mason jar and top with carrots (they won't float so don't be worried about packing them in). Add the salt, cover tightly with a lid, and shake to distribute. Top with enough water to make sure everything is submerged. Cover loosely with a clean towel or coffee filter and let sit on your counter overnight. Taste on day 3 (and every one or 2 days after). As with any ferment, check daily and remove any sign of foam or mold. This generally takes 5 to 10 days depending on your taste preference. (Keep in mind that this will take less time in a warm room.) Place a cap on the jar and store in the refrigerator.

FISH TACOS WITH PICKLED CARROTS

Servings: 2 to 3 (4 medium or 8 small)

Yogurt Sauce

- 3 green onions, thinly sliced
- 1 Thai chili, thinly sliced
- 1/4 cup chopped cilantro (fresh coriander)
- 1 cup plain Green yogurt
- 3 tbsp lime juice (about 1½ limes)
- 1 tbsp olive oil (optional)
- Salt, to taste

Quick Slaw

- 1 cup cider vinegar
- 1/3 cup liquid honey
- 1/2 green cabbage, shredded
- 1/2 Spanish onion, thinly sliced
- 1 apple, peeled, cored,
and julienned (cut into very thin
slivers)
- 3/4 cup diced pickled carrots (recipe at left)
- Salt, to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper,
to taste

Tacos

- 1/2 cup all-purpose flour
- Salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 2 eggs, lightly beaten
- 3/4 cup cornmeal or polenta
- 2 tsp ground cumin
- 1 tsp chili powder
- 3/4 tsp salt
- 1/4 tsp freshly ground black pepper
- 1 pound white fish, portioned into 8 to 12
pieces (I like thin fish, such as
perch), rinsed and patted dry
- Oil for frying (I like coconut oil)
- 4 medium or 8 small taco shells
- Lime wedges and hot sauce

Make the yogurt sauce: In a small bowl, stir the green onions, chili, cilantro, yogurt, lime juice and olive oil (if using) together; season to taste with salt.

Make the slaw: In a large pot over medium heat, bring the vinegar and honey to a boil. Add the cabbage and onion and stir continuously for one minute. Remove from the heat and stir in the apple and pickled carrots. Add salt and pepper to taste; set aside.

Prep the tacos: Place the flour on a medium-sized plate and season liberally with salt and pepper. Place the eggs in a bowl large enough to hold one piece of fish. On a medium-sized plate, mix together the cornmeal, cumin, chili powder, salt and pepper.

Working with one piece at a time, dip the fish, to coat, in the flour, then the egg, and then the cornmeal. Place in a single layer on a plate or baking tray. Heat a frying pan over medium-high heat. Add enough oil to cover the bottom of the pan with at least 1/8-inch of oil. Cook the fish for 3 minutes, flip and cook until deep golden, 2 to 3 minutes.

Line each taco shell with yogurt sauce, add the fish, and top with drained slaw. Serve with lime wedges and hot sauce.