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Kitchen Window

by Mollie Cox Bryan

Hunt for Wild Blackberries Leads to Friendship



A love of blackberries brought a writer and her subject closer together. iStockphoto

[Recipes for Mrs. Rowe's blackberry cobbler and jam.](#)

[Readers share their stories.](#)

"Some people have sought adventure in searching for gold. Aunt Millie's gold was a blackberry patch, and she exhibited a similar fervor with blackberries that a miner would with gold."

Carroll Mays

About the Author

Mollie Cox Bryan is a freelance writer and the author of *Mrs. Rowe's Restaurant Cookbook: A Lifetime of Recipes from the Shenandoah Valley* (Ten Speed Press,

NPR.org, August 1, 2007 The wild blackberry, my favorite summer treat, was the key that opened the door to Mildred Rowe. I wanted to write a biography of the 88-year-old owner of Mrs. Rowe's Restaurant and Bakery in Staunton, Va., but she had deflected my efforts to get to know her — until the subject of blackberries came up.

After months of "interviews," we traveled to her hometown of Rich Patch, Va., deep in the Allegheny Highlands. I had a new strategy. If she wouldn't talk to me, I would observe her, listen to her conversations with other family members, and most important, let her know I was not giving up.

She walked the hillsides as if she were 28 instead of 88, with me trailing behind her. Then she plunked herself under a big oak tree at her old family cemetery, and I sat beside her.

As I looked up at the tree, I told her a story about my fear of birds. In it, I was desperate for some huge, wild blackberries that hung like dark purple jewels just a little higher than I could reach. As I reached for one of the larger berries, a mother bird came flapping her wings and pecking at my head until it bled.

"Did you get the berries?" she wanted to know. There it was, a sparkle in her eye — and a connection.

"Yes, bloody head and all. I guess I'd do just about anything for some good blackberry cobbler. My mom makes the best I've ever had," I said.

"We'll see about that," she said with mock indignation.

In the momentary silence, I found my heart beating as I looked out over the rolling, green hills. It seemed a perfect time to launch into an interview. And just like that, she started talking.

"Well, I've run into some snakes, mostly coppers, some rattlers, near blackberry patches, but never birds. Now that's something," she said and chuckled.

On our ride back to Staunton, with Rowe taking intermittent naps and commenting about the flora along the highway, I realized my interview approach had been all wrong. She was a woman of action — sitting down with her one on one was not the way to probe her mind.

2006), a narrative cookbook about the life of the amazing Mrs. Rowe and the history of her 60-year-old restaurant in Staunton, Va., including 175 family and restaurant recipes. Bryan grew up in Pennsylvania, but currently lives in Waynesboro, Va., with her husband and two daughters. She writes a family column for the *Daily News Leader* in Staunton.

- June 13, 2007
[What's a Wedding Without Cookies?](#)

This was an earthy woman who took great joy in the simple act of picking blackberries. Rowe wasn't interested in feminist theories about women in the restaurant business or even discussing food and restaurant trends.

Once I began to ask questions about her berry-picking adventures, though, I also learned about her passion for picking and growing all sorts of vegetable and fruits — and for cooking or baking something good from the bounty. This spoke to the heart of who she was.

Growing up on a struggling subsistence farm, where she learned to garden and forage for survival, Rowe never dreamed of owning a restaurant, let alone one that serves half a million customers a year.

But in 1946, her first husband left her with three small children to raise. With sporadic (at best) child-support payments, and no welfare system yet, Rowe took a chance and bought a restaurant.

Her first roadside restaurant in Goshen, Va., was a success — she paid off her loan in six years and had enough money in the bank to invest in her new husband's failing restaurant in Staunton. She turned it around with her down-home country cooking, intuitive business sense, sassy personality and gardening skills.

Rowe rented a patch of land near the restaurant where she grew everything from green beans to rhubarb — all of which ended up on the menu. What she couldn't grow herself, she got from local farmers, with whom she built solid relationships. And, of course, she helped herself to the wild blackberries growing freely nearby.

Her nephew, Carroll Mays, said some of his fondest memories of his Aunt Millie are of blackberry picking when they lived in Goshen, a quaint mountain village.

"Some people have sought adventure in searching for gold. Aunt Millie's gold was a blackberry patch, and she exhibited a similar fervor with blackberries that a miner would with gold," Mays said.

Other family members and customers also offered blackberry stories. One of Rowe's granddaughters had even written a short story about picking blackberries for her. A vendor for the restaurant remembered how Rowe sheepishly admitted to picking berries at the local golf course — giving the owners fits. Still, she would not abide the waste of letting the berries rot on the bush.

The Appalachian Alleghenies still abound with wild blackberries, which are native to the region. Both Mildred and I probably were picking and enjoying the Allegheny blackberry (*rhubus alleghenienus*) — me in my Pennsylvania woods and she in the Virginia mountains years before I was born. Both of us were participating in a foraging ritual as old as the berry itself.

Later that same summer, Rowe called, summoning me to the restaurant. Waiting for me was a big piece of homemade blackberry cobbler, still slightly warm. She watched as I took my first bite. It tasted like a piece of fresh summer — so delicious it nearly brought tears to my eyes.

"Well?" she said, eyes wide. "Better than your mother's cobbler?"

I chose my words carefully.

"You know, I really couldn't *say* such a thing about my own mother's cobbler..."

"Guess not," she said, laughed, and winked.

Mrs. Rowe's Blackberry Cobbler



Christy Majors

My mother used a different recipe for my favorite summertime treat. But Mildred Rowe's recipe has become a new tradition in my family.

Makes 12 servings

3 cups sugar

3 quarts fresh or frozen

blackberries

1 stick (8 tablespoons) butter or margarine, plus some for top of pastry

Water

4 to 5 tablespoons cornstarch, depending on how juicy the berries are

Unbaked pastry for single crust ([recipe below](#))

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Butter an 8-inch-by-8-inch pan.

In a saucepan, bring sugar, blackberries and butter or margarine to boil. In a separate bowl, add enough water (about 3 tablespoons) to cornstarch (start with 4 tablespoons, adding more if necessary) to make a smooth paste. Remove berries from heat. Add cornstarch mixture gradually, stirring constantly. Return to heat and cook until thickened to a jelly-like consistency.

Pour into prepared pan. Cover with pie pastry and seal the edges of the pastry to the pan. Cut several slits in top of the crust to vent, brush with melted butter or margarine, and bake for 30 to 40 minutes, or until golden brown.

Plain Pie Pastry

"It takes practice," Mrs. Rowe would say about any of her dough. Her light touch took years to master.

Makes two 9- or 10-inch crusts

2 cups all-purpose flour

1 teaspoon salt

2/3 cup solid vegetable shortening (Crisco was Mrs. Rowe's preference.)

5 to 7 tablespoons cold milk

Sift the flour and salt into a bowl.

Cut in the shortening with a pastry blender until it is the size of small peas.

Sprinkle 1 tablespoon of milk over part of the flour mixture. Gently toss with a fork and push to the side of the bowl. Sprinkle another tablespoon over another dry part, toss with a fork and push to the side of the bowl. Repeat with the remaining milk until all of the flour mixture is moistened.

Press the dough together and form two equal balls.

Roll each ball to a thickness of 1/8 inch on a lightly floured surface. Use a light touch and handle the dough as little as possible.

Blackberry (or Raspberry) Jam

When Mrs. Rowe started making her jam, she did not stop until everything was gone. Once, she was preserving in the kitchen of her restaurant when her son, Michael, came in to tell her that the governor of Virginia was there and would like to meet her. She waved him away. "I can't stop what I'm doing now, especially not for some damned politician."

Makes about 3 pints

9 cups crushed and mashed fresh or frozen berries

6 cups (3 pounds) sugar

1/4 cup freshly squeezed lemon juice

Put the berries through a cone-shaped colander or a blender, which takes most of the seeds out and allows you to take as much of the pulp out as you want

Stir the berries and sugar together in a large, heavy pot. Bring to a boil slowly over medium-high heat, stirring until the sugar dissolves.

Boil rapidly to the jelling point, about 20 minutes. As the jam thickens, stir frequently to prevent sticking.

Stir in the lemon juice and boil 2 minutes longer.

Remove the jam from the heat and skim off any foam.

Ladle the hot jam into hot, sterilized canning jars, leaving 1/4 inch of space at the top.

Process to seal immediately according to manufacturer's instructions.

Comments

Just a note to say thank you for the wonderful story about the the wild blackberries.

The story was beautiful in its own right, but you jogged a memory in me of my mother making the best blackberry pie that has ever passed these lips of mine!

My mom is now 83, doesn't "cook like [that] anymore" — but the thought and the memories your story brought back to me of my mother and that blackberry pie of hers was priceless. Thank you so much for that memory, and for the beauty and kindness of the human spirit you brought out in that article.

Sent by Ray Davis | 8-6-2007

I also recall picking wild blackberries with my grandmother in the hot summer of Eastern Mendocino County. She had her bucket and hat with her, and would wade waist-high into the thicket to get at the ripest berries. The golf course episode makes me laugh as [does] a great patch of wild blackberries in a remote corner of our local botanical garden. I, too, could not stand to see them wither on the vine. It's amazing how hard-wired some of us are to foraging.

To see this article this morning was a fun coincidence, as Mrs. Rowe's Restaurant was a topic of conversation at our breakfast table TODAY! My mother and father-in-law are from Staunton, Va., and were recounting their last visit to Mrs. Rowe's, where they took my husband's grandmother to breakfast. Last night the topic of conversation was BLACKBERRIES! I loved reading the article and could not get over the timing.

Sent by Sarah Murray | 8-6-2007

This summer I must have picked at least three gallons or more of blackberries. I've eaten some, but most I have given away. The smile you see when handing someone who can't physically go out and pick them anymore always makes the painful scratches and bug bites worth it.

Sent by Robert Myers | 8-2-2007

Blackberry picking was something we did on grandma and grandpa's farm when we visited in southern Missouri. Now, I take my daughter along at our small county park here outside of Birmingham, Ala., just full of blackberries. People even ask, "Can you eat those?" You bet.

Sent by Jim Collins | 8-1-2007

Blackberries always bring up fond memories for me as well. I remember many happy days following my grandmother, Dora Boring, up and down the hills of Tennessee. I don't know how she ever got enough for a cobbler, since we kids ate so many more than we took home at the end of a long, hot, wonderful day. Thanks for the memories!

Sent by Beverly Sexton | 8-1-2007

I enjoyed your piece on blackberry picking very much. My family is from Mendocino County and we have lots of wild blackberries there. I have been picking them all my life with my grandmother, who is now 90. I picked blackberries the day before my wedding with my mother (who has since passed away of cancer) and my grandmother (then a mere 77) and it is truly one of my most treasured memories. My grandmother and I still pick them every fall — thank you for the tear in my eye and the dreaming tastebuds.

Sent by Rene Hohls | 8-1-2007
