

Behind the Scenes of a Monastery Kitchen

By Aline Lindemann



Photos of Sister Angela Graham and her chutneys and preserves, courtesy Community of Jesus.

A soaring limestone bell tower draws visitors and faithful to the Church of the Transfiguration on the shores of Rock Harbor in Orleans for worship, guided tours and musical performances. The serene ambiance of the Priory Gift Shop on the same property welcomes all who desire an opportunity to browse the wide selection of books, music, hand-crafted soaps and homemade foods in beautiful, soothing, friendly surroundings. Another good reason to stop by is to

sample jams, jellies, mustards and chutneys.

“Mom, what’s chutney?” my daughter asked during one of our recent visits. Not sure how to answer, I told her not to bother with it. I said it was sort of like jam but not really and that she probably wouldn’t like it anyway. We passed over the chutney and plunged into the colorful array of jars set out for tasting without a thought. Until...

Some weeks later I’m treated to a tour of the kitchen. Head chef Sister Angela Graham proudly showed off the ample, gleaming

stainless steel space and as I spotted a rack of jewel-toned jars waiting to be labeled, she was sure to tell me that they create the contents of each jar by hand, the same way a home cook would put up jam “the old fashioned way”. She is certain this is the reason their jam (and mustard and fruit butter and chutney) tastes better than other varieties that bear homey-looking labels, but are actually processed with more efficient, albeit less hands-on equipment. Dozens of luminescent peach and cranberry-apple concoctions are lined up on cotton dish towels awaiting labels, and tubs full of freshly-picked plums line the walk-in cooler shelves waiting to be prepped, but it’s time to sit down and chat.

We settle into comfy, freshly-upholstered chairs in a bright, cozy sunroom in a guest house adjacent to the church. We are together to discuss Benedictine hospitality and all things culinary happening at the Church and surrounding Community of Jesus. Church docent Blair Tingley joins us and together these longtime community members tell me about the bounty grown and nurtured on this property, formerly part of an asparagus farm. They grow plum, peach, nectarine, apple and pear trees along with rhubarb, tomatoes, pumpkin and eggplant, and then there are the grape vines. The list is endless and varied, and every bit of the harvest ends up on the table or in a jar. Saturdays are spent as a beehive of adults and children peeling, paring, boiling and baking to fill the pantries of the homes on site and ample supplies for guests and visitors. Lest Genesis-esque images come to mind, Sister Angela runs through the numbers. “We do 100 to 180 jars of jam every week, 72 mustards every week and 72 chutneys—those are more labor intensive.” Granola is fed to retreat guests and sold by the 1.5-pound containers in the gift shop—they produce close to 200 pounds of granola every week.

“This community has always been this way,” Blair Tingley tells me. “Back when this community was much smaller and visitors would stop by to listen to the founding women speak, they would be fed with whatever was on hand.” But that doesn’t mean guests got their bellies fed with a quick PB & J or a can of soup. Not while the original head chef Sister Irene had any say in the matter. As Sister Angela and Tingley explain very simply and matter-of-factly to me, “We do all things for the glory of God, so there is the belief that the food we serve should be beautiful and lovely.”

It’s about hospitality.

As a community of laypeople, sisters and brothers, this group, like other monastic orders, aims to maintain a harmonious structure in the tradition of St. Benedict. St. Benedict wrote prolifically about the way faithful communities ought to live, and one of the most prominent and central aspects of Benedictine living is hospitality. The modern day interpretation of the word conjures visions of sweeping and primping and folding napkins just so—perfecting our surroundings so that our guests will feel comfortable, if not a little bit impressed. But Benedictine hospitality extends more deeply than that. It is to offer whatever you have—whether it be a chair, a compassionate ear, a cup of tea, or simple food made from the best quality on hand—as long as the gift is extended with compassion, sincerity and no expectation of anything in return.

Years ago when this community first planted roots near Rock Harbor, the community hosted teas. Several dozen people from all parts of the Cape would come for tea and fellowship on the patio. “We’d also have sticky buns and cookies and pretty soon people kept asking where they could buy more,” boasts Tingley. Baked goodies grew to include pie and jam and a subsequent and loyal following.

“We have one fellow who buys about a dozen containers of granola every couple of months, and when he’s through he brings back the empty containers for us to fill right back up again.”

And yes, they come for the chutney.

“It’s a rather old-fashioned food, yes?” I ask, hoping I’m not offending. Sister Angela described the typical inclusions: apricots, cranberries, apples, carrots, red pepper, cinnamon, shallots and the complex balance of sweet, spicy and savory that is in every single jar. What really got me was the way she slowly described one of her favorite ways to eat chutney—spread on a melted ham and cheese sandwich with a touch of Dijon. Is your mouth watering yet?

Among my other purchases from the Priory Gift Shop, where Monastery Kitchen foods are sold year round, I eye the apple-carrot chutney and that old skepticism returns. I bring a jar home and wonder what to do with it. I spotted a small rind of Brie in the fridge—maybe I could do a little something with that...

One bite and I’m a chutney lover for life. Who knew that fruit combined with carrots, pepper and spices could be so delectable? I feel like I’ve discovered something that no one else is privy to—the dark little mixture with the very unpoetic name has me licking my fingers. And my plate. No one saw me, right? Please don’t tell Sister Angela.



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The Community of Jesus and Church of the Transfiguration hosts retreats, theatrical performances, musical concerts and guided tours.
5 Bay View Drive, Orleans.
www.communityofjesus.org
Priory Gift Shop Hours:
Monday-Saturday 10:00 AM-6:00 PM (closed Wednesday);
Sunday following morning Eucharist.
508-247-3194

To read more about modern interpretations of Benedictine hospitality, pick up one of many books published by the Community’s publishing house, Paraclete Press.
www.paracletepress.com

An Elegant Afternoon Tea

Enjoy Holiday Teas at Bethany Guest House overlooking Rock Harbor in Orleans. Friday to Sunday, December 7-9th at 3:00 PM. Enjoy an afternoon with a delicious assortment of savory sandwiches, a choice of fine teas and a sumptuous dessert selection followed by a service of Advent lessons and carols. \$18 per person. Reservations recommended. 508-240-2400