

## Fruitful business helps preserve Trappists' tradition

By Peggy Weber  
Catholic News Service

SPENCER, Mass. — It's a gooey, sticky business. But these monks know how to do it.

During the holiday season, many people will give or receive Trappist preserves made and packed by the monks of St. Joseph Abbey in Spencer.

The 75 Trappists own nearly 2,000 acres in rural Spencer. Most of the buildings are made of stone, built by the monks who came to the area in 1950. The manufacturing facility contains the cooking, bottling, packing and shipping areas for Trappist Preserves.

For about five and a half hours on most days, a dozen monks are involved in production of the jams, jellies and marmalades, with another eight helping with the packing of orders. The monks make the preserves 10 months out of the year.

"Last year we sold about 95,000 cases of preserves," said Father Dominic Whedbee, director of Trappist Preserves. Each case holds a dozen 12-

ounce jars or 48 three-ounce jars.

On one early November day, the monks were making 600 cases of seedless red raspberry jam — one of the most popular selections. Other favorites are strawberry and blueberry preserves and red raspberry jam.

For those unfamiliar with the distinctions among different spreads, Father Whedbee explains: Preserves are made with whole fruit, jellies from the juice of fruits, marmalades with fruit juice and peel, and jams with pureed fruit. The monks also make conserve from whole fruit, raisins and walnuts.

The jam was being prepared under the watchful eyes of Brother Francis Mohr, director of quality control, and Brother William James, head cook, who has made the preserves since 1963.

"He hovers over each batch as if it were the first he ever made," said Father Placid Sweeney, director of public relations for the Trappists. "It is this kind of quality and care that makes our preserves so good."

"Each batch is made with no preservatives, artificial colorings nor artificial

flavors," he said. "A while back our strawberry preserves won an award from a cooking magazine and the judges said that it was unfortunate that artificial coloring had to be used. They couldn't believe that such good color could be attained naturally. But it is."

The Trappist monks were not always in the preserves business. Father Sweeney said it was Father Patrick Brown's stovetop operation of making wine jellies that got the abbey involved.

Father Whedbee recalled that Brother John Berchmanns grew a lot of mint in the garden and made mint jelly for a neighbor. The neighbor was surprised that the jelly was not cloudy and asked for more.

Soon it was being sold at the abbey. From that the business mushroomed and now includes 31 flavors — 25 fruit and six wine.

The abbey's business was automated in the late 1950s by the Hubeleine Company. Then a variety of distributors picked up the Trappist Preserves. They also are sold through the mail and at the abbey's gift shop.

"We export to Japan and Canada and have customers in all of the United States, but most of our business is on the East Coast," said Father Whedbee, noting that the nature of the food industry has its ups and downs.

"We've been carried by many good and loyal distributors but last year we lost four distributors," he said. "It's a hard thing to predict because it is seasonal. It's a tough market and very competitive."

The Trappists rely on their preserves to support their life in Spencer. They also have another industry, the Holy Rood Guild, which manufactures vestments.

"You must remember that unlike Smucker's we are not here for the sake of producing Trappist Preserves," said Father Sweeney.

"We could expand and become bigger," he added. "But we do this work to make income to preserve our monastic life."

EDITORS' NOTE: To order Trappist Preserves, call 508/885-7011.

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