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U.S. | NEW YORK | URBAN GARDNER

A Place to Learn the Do-It-Yourself Arts

An experimental program offers workshops in everything from jam making to glass blowing



Ruth Abram, founder of Behold! New Lebanon. PHOTO: RALPH GARDNER JR.



By

RALPH GARDNER JR.

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“This is what the recipe does not tell you,” Deborah Gordon told the students in her Hudson Valley jam-making class. “You need to have a plate in your freezer.”

Once the jam comes to a full boil—in this case it was strawberry basil—you put a teaspoon of it onto the frigid plate. “Draw your finger through it. If the jam starts to creep into the inroad you made with your finger, it’s not done.”

Ms. Gordon’s workshop, “A Jam for All Seasons,” may be more significant than it seems at first glance—though nobody should underestimate the importance of the skills needed to make a first-rate strawberry or raspberry jam.

However, in classes such as hers may also lie the secret to saving rural America. Ms. Gordon’s class is part of a bold experiment called Behold! New Lebanon. The name refers to a down-at-the-heels town three hours north of the city that in recent years was perhaps best known for a speedway that has been a source of noise complaints.



Deborah Gordon canning strawberry jam. PHOTO: RALPH GARDNER JR.

Other classes—they run from June into October and are taught by locals—include foraging, deciphering the language of birds, jewelry making, homesteading, pig farming, sausage making, breeding heritage cows, glass blowing, animal training, tracking, and even behind-the-scenes tours of the Lebanon Valley Speedway, that controversial dirt track by owner Howard

Commander.

Behold! New Lebanon is the brainchild of Ruth Abram, co-founder of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and a New Lebanon resident.

“We’re aiming to create a model for community economic development for small rural towns by harvesting the resources in the town of New Lebanon,” explained Ms. Abram, who dropped in on the jam-making workshop. “Our greatest resource is the people. Fifty people have come forward to teach what they know.”

Behold! New Lebanon is supported by grants, Ms. Abram said, the sponsors including the U.S. Department of Agriculture. “The USDA is really worried,” Ms. Abram said. “Small towns are dying everywhere. It would be lovely if this grows into something with real jobs for lots of people.”



Behold! New Lebanon's headquarters. PHOTO: RALPH GARDNER JR.

Instructors such as Ms. Gordon are paid a \$100 honorarium per session.

The nonprofit's goals include increasing tourism by making visitors aware of the area's resources. New Lebanon has a rich history. It was the spiritual home of the Shakers, and now the Shaker Museum. And in the 19th Century the area's medicinal springs were a destination, drawing such

notables as Daniel Webster and the Marquis de Lafayette. Its population peaked in the 1830s.

Another goal is to modernize tourists' concept of rural America. "The people you're meeting haven't been left behind," Ms. Abram explained. "They've chosen this life."

While discussing the perfect amount of sugar used to make jam—approximately four cups, though it depends on how ripe the fruit is—Ms. Gordon also managed to work in a pitch for her other passion: restoring local historic structures.

"I worked for 30 years for the New York state Bureau of Historic Sites," she told the workshop.

While Behold! New Lebanon doesn't have a Colonial Williamsburg-style destination with brick streets, period structures and historical re-enactors, it has a polished website and a headquarters shop showcasing the talents of local artists.

Ms. Abram said that when she first tried to enlist locals to teach classes, "they were worried they'd be laughed at" because their homes didn't necessarily measure up to a romantic, picket-fence version of rural America or boast "a Julia Child kitchen."

"I asked them to take a chance," Ms. Abram said. "Instead, they discover people love to be in their homes. It gives everybody a sense of what they're doing is valuable."

Among the students in Ms. Gordon's \$10 class were Karen and Barry Korman, who divide their time between the Upper West Side and Hudson, N.Y., about 45 minutes south of New Lebanon.

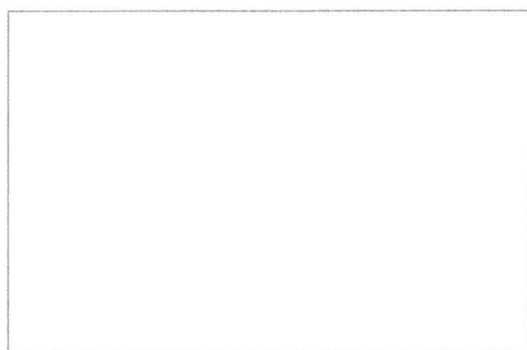
As Ms. Gordon's dog scratched from the other side of the kitchen door to join the festivities, Ms. Korman recalled her favorite preserves. "The best jam I ever had was greengage in France. I can still taste it, the tartness of the plums."

Ms. Gordon gave each student a jar of the finished strawberry jam, then introduced the class to her sister, Phoebe, who leads the sausage-making class.

"We're definitely coming back for the sausage," Ms. Korman said.

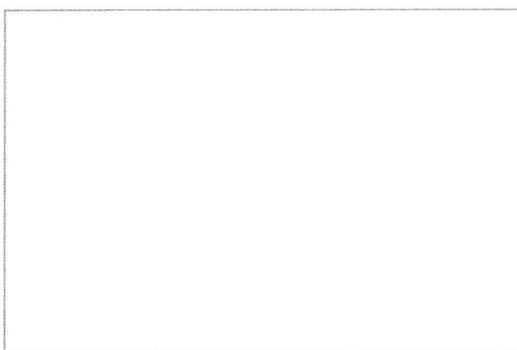
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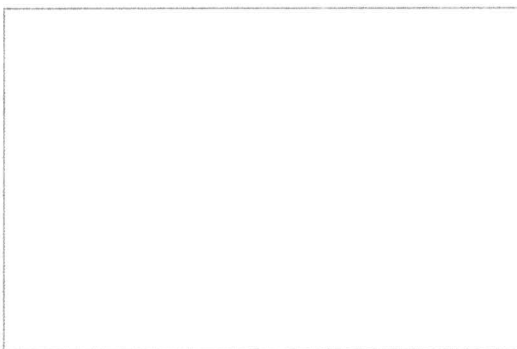
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