

How do you like?

Them Apples

By Earl Brechlin

With the gleam of a seasoned alchemist in her eye, Kathryn Suminsby of Northeast Harbor steadily stirs an amalgam of sugar, corn syrup and condensed milk as the sweet steam of culinary success rises from the pot. A professional candy thermometer sticks straight up with the indicator edging toward the magic number — 234 degrees. Too cool and the rich flavors won't fully blend. Too hot and the delicious mixture can end up an acrid tooth chipping lump permanently fused to the bottom of pan.

Looking up with an air of caramel-colored confidence, Kathryn, who lives in a contemporary house on land that has been in her family for more than 200 years, explains that making candy apples isn't all that complicated. And, she ought to know. It's a Northeast Harbor Halloween tradition she's carried on now for 50 years in a row.

She still uses the exact same recipe, modified to eliminate a coating of nuts, that she culled from a cookbook she bought at a local market for 25 cents back in 1959. And the results are still being enjoyed by a second generation of trick-or-treaters, as the tiny ghosts and goblins she first shared her treats with in the 1960s and 1970s now bring their costumed children by to experience a joy from their youth.

A new wife in 1957, Kathryn began collecting a series of cookbooks called "Cooking Magic," published by the Culinary Arts Institute in Chicago. She'd get one each week at Rip Graves' IGA. "I was living over the back fence. My husband Bob was working as an electrician and I was fixing his lunch and other meals and wanted to make sure he had good things to eat," Kathryn recalls. "I've gotten some good recipes out of those cookbooks."

On Halloween eve in 1958, she was taken aback by the kinds of store-bought candy she saw in the bags of local trick-or-treaters. "I could see what they had. So much of it was junk," she says. That next year she spotted caramel apples in the cookbook and the tradition began.

"I know there's some candy on the outside but the apple is good for you," she laughs.

While the average number of apples she has given away on Halloween is about 35 or 40, some years the total is closer to 75. It usually takes her between five and six hours to make five dozen or so. Even by conservative estimates she's given out more than 2,000 over the years.

"One year some older kids came toward the end and I was out so I whipped up some more," she says.

She's even suspected that from time to time adults in the village dress up in costumes and stop by for a candy apple as well as their kids. "There's been a few times that the kids seemed awfully big for trick or treating. I don't ask any questions."

The only time demand for her apples waned was during the late 1970s when there was a national

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scare about criminals putting foreign objects in un-packaged Halloween treats. "During the razor blade years no one wanted things that weren't wrapped," she says.

Kathryn begins by collecting apples from local trees. She cooks up the caramel taking care to get the color and consistency of the coating just right. "Essentially you have to burn it to get the right color," she explains.

Once the mix hits the correct temperature she has time to push Popsicle sticks into about half a dozen apples and then swirl them in the sweet and savory mixture. If the coating begins to stiffen too fast, it can be re-melted.

Often, trick-or-treaters will just take the apples in hand and begin eating them on the spot. Otherwise, Kathryn will brush a quick coating of butter on the outside and wrap the apples in waxed paper for later consumption.

"I've never had any complaints about the product. They keep coming back."

Among those who keep coming back, Kathryn notes, is Dondi Smallidge, formerly of Northeast Harbor who now lives in Franklin. He brings his young daughter Katherine by each year.

Finding the ingredients is never difficult, as they are available in just about every corner store. From time to time she has had trouble finding sticks for the handles but always has managed to scrounge up enough for another year.

Crammed into the pages of her cookbook are scraps of paper with handwritten notes Kathryn has kept for 20 years, ever since 1989, detailing the weather, temperature, and the way things she's given out. "It helps me figure out how many to make," she says.

Making candy apples for the children of Northeast Harbor each fall is so ingrained, Kathryn wouldn't think of stopping. A few years back she kept the effort going, even though her husband Bob had passed away just a few weeks before Halloween. "I've done it every year. It has never occurred to me not to keep up the tradition."

Although she is technically retired, Kathryn keeps a full schedule volunteering as a Master Gardener and taking care of the garden at the Birdsacre preserve in Ellsworth. A former nurse and ambulance corps volunteer, she also works now with Hospice of Hancock County. As busy as she is, she always finds time to make the caramel apples each autumn. "We've gotten to be such a disposable society," she laments. "Everything comes prepackaged from a factory; just use it and throw it away. It just seems like no one has any time any more," she says.

Come late October, however, Kathryn's thoughts automatically turn to fresh apples dipped in delicious caramel. "I guess it's just a Halloween thing," she says. "I don't think of it as work. I love to do it. For me it's just a lot of fun."

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Kathryn Suminsby of Northeast Harbor has been making candy apples for trick-or-treaters every Halloween for 50 years now. She uses the same recipe, below, that she first discovered in a 25-cent cookbook in 1958, minus the recommended nuts. Over the years she has made and distributed more than 2,000 of the coveted caramel apples.

