

NEW YORK STORY

You Cooked What? I'll Trade You Granola!

By Debbie Koenig

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THE kombucha guy was doing it wrong, and so was I.

By the time Rich Awn, the owner of the one-man tea-and-coffee brewery Mombucha, arrived at the food swap in a TriBeCa apartment building, the table brimmed with inventive homemade goods, including vodka infused with the needles from an organic Christmas tree. Next to each offering was a green placard where swappers could “bid” I had already scribbled my name and my offer (chocolate-chip cookies, Samoa bars and granola) on cards for Meyer lemon curd and a few other enticing treats.

Mr. Awn’s problem was that he saw the event as a promotional opportunity, and quickly began pouring samples of his surprisingly tasty (to someone like me, anyway, who had always avoided kombucha) fermented brews. Mine was that I had gone simple and homey in a crowd that favors innovative and esoteric: who would want cookies, even ones as perfectly crispy and chewy as my own, when they could trade for fresh vegan garlic chickpea pasta or finishing salts infused with rosemary, sage and matcha?

Food swapping is nothing new ancient Babylonian homemakers probably traded olive oil for beans. In modern times, bartering has mostly been associated with poverty; think of the country doctor paid with eggs. But in certain precincts of Brooklyn, where artisanal food buffs have become as ubiquitous as artisanal beards, the lingering recession has combined with a do-it-yourself fervor to fuel any number of edible swaps.

This one is known as BK Swappers, and it began last March, when Kate Payne, a writer and canner who lives in Bedford-Stuyvesant, e-mailed Megan Paska, the founder of Brooklyn Honey, offering jars of her triple-citrus marmalade for some of Ms. Paska's honey. "We came to the conclusion that it would be really fun to get all of our food-centric friends together and do a swap on a larger scale," Ms. Paska recalled. "When you make a batch of pickles, jam or the like, you often end up with excess that you'd feel comfortable letting go of for the sake of keeping your pantry interesting. For a few of those excess jars, you end up getting fresh, handcrafted foods for virtually no cost."

Twenty-three cooks attended that first event, in Ms. Payne's apartment. They swapped provisions like homemade sauerkraut, portions of not-canned soup and sourdough bread starter. They have swapped every other month since at different locations, attracting up to 40 participants through Twitter and Facebook and a lengthy waiting list: I signed up the day that the February swap was announced, and an hour later it was fully booked. Groups inspired by BK Swappers now meet in at least a half-dozen other cities, including Austin, Tex. (where Ms. Payne now lives); Los Angeles; Portland, Ore.; and Minneapolis; there is also a swap scheduled in London this spring.

February's was the first BK Swappers event in Manhattan: April Somboun, a marketing manager and avid home cook, hosted the event in a party room on the 19th floor of her boyfriend's Lower Manhattan apartment building. Most participants are amateur cooks, and most are women; veterans bring extra portions to share in a kind of potluck.



Megan Paska, the founder of Brooklyn Honey, at the BK Swappers event in February, in Manhattan. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Lisa Guido, a new media producer in her 40s who lives in Park Slope and whose citrusy Buddha's hand-infused vodka was highly sought-after, said she started swapping after she learned to cure guanciale, or pig's jowl. "I wanted to show it off," she said. Sam Kramer, 30, an illustrator from Greenpoint, came because her "boyfriend's not a food person."

"He won't eat pickles," she explained. "Here, I can get things I don't have the chance to make."

Jane Lerner, a writer who took over co-organizing duties after Ms. Payne moved away, brought Thai green curry paste. Like a proud mother, she shared iPhone pictures of the paste taken when it was still in her mortar and pestle, and described the steps involved in making it. She also shared the secret to being a successful swapper: "It's uncool to repeat yourself."

For the first 90 minutes, people milled about, smelling and tasting, bidding on their most-wanted items. When Ms. Lerner announced the start of trading, the group's adrenaline level surged, and I wondered what my humble treats would earn. Might

I score a jar of Ms. Guido's candied tangelo peel? Ms. Kramer's shepherd's pie, still warm from the oven? Or perhaps a bottle of Mr. Awn's Crescent City Koffee, a beverage that tastes like sweet vinegary java, infinitely better than it sounds?

I was pretty sure the answers would be no, no and no. My chocolate-chip cookies and Samoa bars — an homage to the Girl Scout cookie — had attracted just one offer each, and the sign-up card for my chocolate cherry granola remained blank. It felt similar to the reaction I got when leaving my Williamsburg apartment in minimal makeup and comfortable shoes.

But a funny thing happened: Nobody paid attention to the placards. Instead, people marched up to whomever had made their first-choice item and offered to trade. Once I realized I did not have to wait for people to come to me, I grabbed my goodies and jumped in. Twenty minutes later, the Samoa bars had garnered jars of peanutella and hot fudge sauce, and a portion of that shepherd's pie. The chocolate-chip cookies earned me raspberry marshmallows, that Meyer lemon curd, and candied temple orange peel — close enough to tangelo to make me happy. And my ignored, unwanted granola? For that, I wrangled a jar of four-fruit marmalade and (yes!) a liter of Crescent City Koffee. Swapping turned out to be invigorating, even inspirational.

Mr. Awn, for his part, scored big: In addition to my cookies and granola, he got another jar of granola, Ms. Guido's vodka, two kinds of marshmallows (Meyer lemon and peppermint), two kinds of herbal tea blends, three bags of flavored salts, and fresh eggs from a backyard chicken coop.

"This kombucha blend of mine has a really high currency value on the swap market," he marveled, fine with having collected a phalanx of fans rather than a fistful of dollars. "The Tibetans say, 'He who makes money on kombucha will have money problems his whole life.' "

The next BK Swappers gathering is scheduled for April. Clearly, I'm going to have to step up my game if I return — and I plan to return. Wonder how quickly I can learn to make my own mustard. No, chutney. No, sriracha. ...

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