

The traditional pumpkin seed oil production in the Slovene Raba Region

An old custom worth preserving

One of the culinary specialties of the Raba Region is pumpkin seed oil, which is still produced the traditional way (hot-pressed). Out of personal interest and as a means of preserving this old custom we considered pressing pumpkin seed oil ourselves. Once again we counted on the help provided by Mr Károly Bedi from Stevanovci/Apátistvánfalva, who had already explained to us how to produce home-made schnapps a couple of months ago.

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Already some weeks ago we had purchased a bag containing 15 kg of pumpkin seeds and were curious to find out how many litres of oil we could possibly produce of them. Ripe pumpkins are usually harvested in autumn, which is the reason why people already start taking out the seeds of the pumpkins at that time of the year. Firstly, the seeds need to be cleaned from pumpkin leftovers and peeled in laborious handwork, before they can be placed on a dry spot for several weeks. As a consequence of this storage, the seeds are soon completely dry, which is indispensable for the further processing of the seeds to oil. Due to the long period of this drying and cleaning process the pumpkin seed oil production normally takes place only in the course of the winter months. Before we could work the seeds in the workroom, we had to go outside to clean them once more from possible hulls by repetitively shaking them in plastic vats. Some decent early morning exercise for all of us, and it soon turned out not to be the only form of physical activity on that morning. Even though we did not expect this kind of spadework, we still did it with the necessary zeal in order to be ready for the actual oil pressing process. The second production step consisted in seed grinding. Afterwards, the grinded seeds were filled into a special kind of machine, which kneaded these grinded seeds to a pasty mass and may remind the amateur of a bread kneading machine. The slow but continuous circular motion of this kind of centrifuge turned the once solid substance into a mellow, green mass. After having taken the kneaded pumpkin seed mass out of the machine, we filled it into a long wooden recipient. This mass felt comfortably soft, and Mr Bedi said, quite appropriately, that it would give the skin a smooth gloss, and that we should not wash our hands right afterwards. After this well-intentioned advice Mr Bedi explained to us the further processes in pumpkin seed oil production. What followed his explanations soon turned out to be the physically most demanding procedure of the day. Mr Bedi heated an oven providing two worktops with logs. The green pumpkin seed mass that had been put into two large pans had to be stirred with big wooden spoons up to the point it changed colour to a brownish colour and no steam evaporated from the pans anymore. We needed to be careful to make sure the heated mass was not only stirred with strong concentric motions but we also had to prevent the mass from sticking to the pan or even scorching. Back in those days when oil was still produced without any machine technology, both the stirring and the kneading of the mass were exclusively done by the women in the village. Pressing the pumpkin seed mass, however, used to be man's business. The fifth and final step in the production of pumpkin seed oil was the actual oil pressing process. The heated mass was filled into a press, which ran a hydraulic piston unit with high pressure into the mass and squeezed the oil out of it. Showing great skills, Mr Bedi knocked out the round, hard leftovers of the pressed mass out of the end piece of the press with a stake. These leftovers are commonly either fed to the cows or used for the oil production as well. In the latter case they are crumbled and squeezed once again in the press; this oil, however, is of poorer quality. In the end we had produced 5 litres of pure home-made pumpkin seed oil, a result to be proud of. The two hours' work was worth the effort, and we were looking forward to flavouring our salads, potatoes and other foodstuff with the healthy natural product.

We would like to express our gratitude to Mr Bedi for his precious information and active participation. What is more, we owe a big thank you to Mrs Mária Horvat Gmeindl, Tibor's aunt, and Mrs Ildikó Takács-Fébert, who both cooperated with great zeal as well.

Pictures

Tibor Horvat and Joël Gerber