

WENDY JOSEPH finds the CWA's ideas of thrift and self-sufficiency are back in vogue.

CWA is new again

"IF ONLY SOMEONE HAD TOLD me about jam thermometers years ago," came the plaintive cry from the back row of the tent. "I can never get my apricot jam to set. I had no idea it was so simple."

Noela MacLeod, ex-CWA Victorian president, Royal Show judge and jam and preserve-maker extraordinaire, was speaking on "how to preserve your harvest" at the most recent Sustainable Living Festival in Melbourne – and the fascinated response of the (mostly) young audience suggests that this know-how is hard to find these days.

A generation or two ago, your local expert was called Mum or Nana – but basic home-making skills have been undervalued in recent decades. Now the CWA (Country Women's Association of Australia), with its philosophy of thrift – whether it's about preserving food, repairing clothes or gardening – is coming to the rescue.

"About five years ago we noticed that more (and younger) women were approaching us wanting to learn to cook like their grandmothers," Noela said.

"So we've run demonstrations and classes at our centre (in Toorak in inner Melbourne) and have put out a range of cookbooks, available by mail order."

Hot off the press is *Noela's Book of Hints*, a compilation of "household tips collected over 30 or 40 years".

Noela believes the upsurge of interest is because: "... people are sick of eating plastic food ... so many people have allergies these days; they don't want to eat chemically treated foods or have to always check ingredients. If it's homemade jam, for instance, you know it's good and fresh, and not padded out with filler like some commercial jams."

Changing demographics also means that many young people are moving



Above: Noela MacLeod, ex-CWA Victorian president and jam-maker extraordinaire.

Above right: Making plum jam is the perfect way to use up surplus fruit.

into suburbs where they are lucky enough to have established fruit trees, and are loath to waste their produce.

The CWA itself is undergoing change, attracting an influx of younger members who want to do things differently, favouring a less formal structure, with evening meetings, social craft sessions and minutes sent by email.

Getting in a jam

Back to the thermometer... when it comes to making jam, Noela's list of essential equipment includes a jam thermometer, a stainless-steel pan with a good thick base and two handles ["so you can lift it without spilling"] and "nice clean bottles" (stubborn old labels can be removed with eucalyptus oil).

It's best to keep batches small, says Noela – no more than two kilos of fruit – and commercial jam sugar should be avoided. "Commercial jam sugar is loaded with artificial pectin and gives



the jam an unpleasant texture" says Noela. "Good jam should be spreadable and good jelly should wobble."

There's a lot for novices to learn, but the help is out there. Perhaps the rest of us have caught up with the CWA, as old models of thrift and self-sufficiency become new again. **OG**

MORE INFORMATION

- CWA branches in all states, www.cwaa.org.au
- Fowlers Vacola sell preserving and bottling kits (simple and quick to use), do mail order and also have recipe books. Ph (03) 9329 7799.
- London & American Supply Stores are among the stockists for jam thermometers. Ph (03) 9329 7181, www.chefsales.com.au
- Bake and Brew also supply jam thermometers. Ph (08) 8522 6144; www.bakeandbrew.com.au
- *A Year in a Bottle*, by Sally Wise, ABC Books, \$24.95, has more than 100 recipes for preserves and conserves.



A tale of rags to riches

THE SUN IS BEATING DOWN ON the fashion tent at the Melbourne Sustainable Living Festival – but inside, it’s a much cooler scene. An excited crowd of fashionistas, of all ages and both genders, are picking through a huge pile of donated clothes. The task? To restructure these discards into new outfits fit for a Federation Square fashion parade. Time limit? Three hours!

Those who have an eye for fabric and colour consider the makeover possibilities of purple chenille pants, a crisp linen skirt, or a floaty sundress, while those new to sewing gamely attempt to thread a needle. Scissors flash, machines whirr and trestle tables are heaped high with haberdashery.

Like many others, I’ve wandered in to watch, but stayed to sew. Urged on by our dynamic compere, we tack, scrunch and stitch our way towards the deadline, making sure we’ve incorporated the secret “ingredient” – a recycled bottle top. The more organised among us have brought along their own models; the rest of us search for a likely prospect or bravely wear our designs ourselves.

And the result? From beautifully tailored creations to the vibrantly bizarre, it’s an eye-catching show of

GET STITCHING

- Check out sewing and clothes design courses at community colleges, TAFEs and CAEs in your state.
- Sustainable Living Festival 2010: Federation Square, Melbourne, February 19 –21, Ph (03) 9249 1888, www.slf.org.au/festival
- The Mobile Sewing Company: www.hetmobielenaaiatelier.nl/international.html
- Thread Den Sewing Lounge (drop in machine hire and extensive sewing classes – all levels, including some men only classes): Ph (03) 9329 5305, www.threadden.com

environmentally sustainable fashion. There are prizes (and appreciative applause) – but the real reward is our sense of achievement.

And it’s not just Melbourne that’s in the midst of a recycle fix. WOMADelaide (World of Music and Dance festival), WOMAD New Zealand and the Perth Writers Festival were recently blitzed by The Mobile Sewing Company, the brainchild of two women from the Netherlands who have added new meaning to the word ‘recycling’.



Top left: It’s all go inside the fashion tent, as fashionistas put their creative caps on.

Top right: The Mobile Sewing Company in action in Perth.

Above: Mobile Sewing Company founders Karin Arts and Marieke Biegman.

Since 2003, Karin Arts and Marieke Biegman have been travelling the world with their bike-powered vintage sewing machines, turning passersby’s clothes into unique works of art as they watch.

The catch? It all takes place in the street, and the lucky participants must use their muscle power to keep the sewing machines running. It’s a great way to get fit – and fashionable. **OG**