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She's the Johnny Appleseed of Pickling

Traveling by Bus, an Evangelist for Fermentation Gives Lessons on Food Preservation

By RACHEL WHARTON JAN. 30, 2015

If you find yourself wandering near Whale Creek, in an industrial stretch of Long Island City, Queens, and you come across a dilapidated 1986 International Harvester school bus emitting a faint smell of decay, no need to call the authorities.

It's the 40-foot mobile office of Tara Whitsitt, 29, a nomadic evangelist for fermented foods who is camping out in Queens for the winter.

A soft-spoken Texas native who refers to her cross-country travels as Fermentation on Wheels, Ms. Whitsitt has spent the past 18 months motoring around the United States in the bus, a former Michigan State Police vehicle outfitted with a kitchen and a wood stove and laden with five-gallon jugs of mint-lemon balm wine, jars of radish-turmeric sauerkraut and plenty of sourdough starter. Ms. Whitsitt earns a living largely by holding workshops in which she teaches old-fashioned methods of food preservation.

Capitalizing on the growing popularity of probiotic foods — which some studies have shown may help benefit digestive and immune systems — Ms. Whitsitt had originally planned to teach these bygone techniques to the small cooperative community in Oregon where she moved in 2012.

She discovered, though, that nobody there needed the instruction. "Fermentation was like old news," Ms. Whitsitt said. "Everyone does that — no

mystery here.” She had an epiphany: She would go on the road in a \$6,000 bus and become the Johnny Appleseed of traditional pickling.

Working off a list of cities where she found parties interested in her techniques, Ms. Whitsitt has made stops in places as varied as Jackson, Miss., Scottsdale, Ariz., Trenton and New York, where she plans to stay until departing for the Midwest in late March.

Ms. Whitsitt adapts her outreach to her environs, often hosting “open bus” days with hand-drawn posters that offer “free culture for all” — get it? — or “a taste bud dance party.”

She occasionally finds farmers who let her park on their property for a night, bartering lessons for raw materials. “My favorite trades,” she said, “are education for veggies.”

On Feb. 7 and 8 — at Judson Memorial Church in the West Village in Manhattan and a home-brew store called Bitter & Esters in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn — she is to give lectures on the proper care of sourdough cultures and on the thick, fermented dairy drink called kefir, whose sour tang is admired in foodie circles.

In January, Ms. Whitsitt gave a sold-out, \$25-a-head class in a Brooklyn coffee shop on how to make tempeh — a fermented soybean cake that dates to 12th-century Indonesia — that came with a guide she illustrated. Those who stayed for dinner tossed around the scientific names for edible molds over a family-style meal that included her kohlrabi kimchi and fig cider.

A self-professed introvert who typically travels only with a slate-colored cat named Franklin, Ms. Whitsitt became a fermentation expert by accident.

In 2011, she was living in Brooklyn and handling logistics for companies in the fashion and entertainment industries. A friend persuaded her to make the fermented tea called kombucha and a batch of sauerkraut. From there, she moved on to other fermentation projects until her interest in the practice became, she said, an obsession. When her kitchen finally began to resemble a chemistry laboratory, she headed to a commune in the woods, 50 miles west of Eugene, Ore., looking for more space and like-minded fermenters. Besides, she said, “I’d done the whole New York thing long enough.”

Now she is back and trying to park her bus in legal spots — thankfully abundant in the streets near Whale Creek — and staying at a friend's place in the neighborhood. "I sleep on his couch most nights," she said, "and I dominate his kitchen." The accommodations are a far cry from her place in Oregon, which included land to grow vegetables. But while Ms. Whitsitt has less room to ferment in New York, she said she had been welcomed by the city's thriving scene of probiotic fanatics.

Many belong to NYC Ferments, a Meetup group with more than 450 members that was begun in 2012 by Angela Davis, 42, and Michaela Hayes, 43, an Inwood resident who teaches classes and sells fermented vegetables under the name Crock & Jar. Each month, the group picks a theme, Ms. Hayes said — Japanese pickles, for instance, or mead — and then discusses recipes and results over samples in the back room of an East Village bar.

"We have people who have been fermenting for three decades," Ms. Hayes said. "And we have people who haven't even done it but are there because they heard about the health benefits or because it's a food trend."

Ms. Hayes, who ran the "pickle program" at the Manhattan restaurant Gramercy Tavern, said the group had been such a success that Meetup.com invited her to speak to its staff. Many of the Meetup employees, she said, were a little wary of her focus on what she called "weird pickles" like Japanese nukazuke, which are made by fermenting vegetables in a bed of mashed and roasted rice bran.

Even with items like kombucha and kimchi appearing on supermarket shelves, fermenters — who often live among pungent jars, tubs and crocks and rely on friends to "feed" their sourdough starters with flour and water while on vacation — are still considered outside the mainstream.

"It's so misunderstood," said Cheryl Paswater, 36, a Prospect-Lefferts Gardens resident who has attended Ms. Whitsitt's workshops and teaches fermentation classes under the monikers Dr. Delicious and Contraband Ferments.

"God bless their souls, my roommates have never complained," said Ms. Paswater, who keeps a stash of Japanese miso fermenting under her bed.

Last summer, Ms. Paswater traveled with Ms. Whitsitt to Vermont to help run an event. “Her project’s special,” Ms. Paswater said. “Anybody that’s willing to be that adventurous and go out and talk about their passion, those are the people who are magic. They are the unicorns.”

Mythical beasts aside, home fermentation raises some legitimate food-safety concerns. Robert Tauxe, the deputy director of the division of food-borne, waterborne and environmental diseases for the Centers for Disease Control, said that fermented foods have a long, established history. As one of the earliest culinary techniques, Mr. Tauxe said, fermentation has changed little over centuries: Naturally occurring microbes like yeasts and bacteria break down cabbage, soybeans or grape juice into sauerkraut, miso or wine.

“Where people have gotten into trouble,” he said, “is striking out on their own and mixing and matching.”

Though the C.D.C. encounters fermentation-related problems only rarely, Mr. Tauxe offered a few hair-raising anecdotes, including two cases of botulism in Queens from home-fermented tofu (it is known as stinky tofu and can be found on Chinese menus). Then, he said, there is the prison beverage known as “pruno,” made by inmates who put fruit or vegetable juice in “a plastic bag under their armpit until it is fermented and filter it through a sock.”

“That,” he said, “is real freelance fermenting.”

In the city, learning about fermenting is now easier thanks to people like Ms. Paswater and members of NYC Ferments, which hosted Ms. Whitsitt for a kimchi-making demonstration. “I love the idea of her journey,” said Ms. Davis of NYC Ferments, who is also the education manager for a city nonprofit called Just Food, where Ms. Whitsitt is scheduled to teach a fermentation workshop on March 15.

“I think it’s wonderful, what she’s doing,” Ms. Hayes said, noting the increase in interest among students, those who wish to buy fermented foods or even organizations that want to host their own fermentation classes.

Attendance has also grown at the annual Ferment! Ferment! — a spring fermentation “potluck-meets-party-meets-informal tasting” held by a Crown Heights resident, Zachary Schulman, 34, for the past eight years.

What started as a dozen or so people in Mr. Schulman's living room has swelled to a crowd of 250 that gathers over samples of pear cider or Russian beet kvass at the Brooklyn Free School in Clinton Hill.

Mr. Schulman said he hoped to have Ms. Whitsitt speak at the ninth annual gathering in March. He has long admired what he said was her openhearted approach to sharing her knowledge, and her ability to curate a well-stocked pantry of foods that can require as much care as pets.

"It's pretty spectacular not just to keep them alive," Mr. Schulman said, "but to keep them alive traveling on a bus."

Of course, not everyone is a fan of Ms. Whitsitt's pink and yellow-striped behemoth, most notably the Long Island City resident who banged on her door threatening to take action about the proximity of the bus's front bumper to another car.

Ms. Whitsitt said she was less concerned about parking rules than about simply sitting still. Though New York is full of friends, she said, "this is the longest I've stayed in one place on this trip."

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