

Marley Mills is the alchemist of all things wild in the kitchen including making jelly out of knotweed, chokecherries and wild grapes.

Jam & Jelly

By Jesse DeGroot

Knotweed. *Knotweed?*

Do you know anyone who says, I'm headed into the kitchen to whip me up a big ol' batch of knotweed?

A lot of things people eat have funny names, but to this writer knotweed comes in right around on par with grilling up a railroad spike accompanied by a side of purple looses-trife. What in the world could one create that might possibly be edible from something as unpalatable-sounding as knotweed?

Marley Mills, the alchemist of all things wild in the kitchen who came to this through an unforeseen career change brought on by life-altering health issues, can tell you.

"They cook with it in Japan. It's very invasive. But it turns out you can hack it down and make jelly with it," she said. (And a seriously good jelly, as we can now attest.)

As it turns out, a gnarly sounding plant does nothing to deter the dauntless Mills, who is busy fashioning a second career out of childhood ways learned in her mother's kitchen.

Made by Marley

"made by marley" delectable jams and jellies, yes, knotweed included, have begun popping up in such local spots as The Berry Farm and O's Eatery in Chatham, and Blueberry Hill Market Café in New Lebanon.

Her childhood prepared Mills well for this new venture.

"I've been doing jam and jelly since I was a little kid in my mom's kitchen in western Pennsylvania," said Mills. "Both my parents – Joyce Lee Mills and Monty Mills – were farm kids."

"We had a massive veggie garden and fruit trees – we ate all winter what we grew and canned every summer. And what we didn't grow, my dad's parents did," she said. "We were raised making our own food. Edible, not so much – everything we ate was boiled. But it was all homegrown. My mom thinks it's hysterical that I can stuff for fun, while she had to do it to survive."

At 16, Mills met future husband Josh Muskovitz when both were students at Simon's Rock in Great Barrington: "After graduating, we were determined to be here. We've now been in Columbia County for 22 years – we're almost locals. When we bought our house on Clark Road in Chatham 18 years ago, that's when I started canning again."

Upon earning her master's degree in 1995, Mills joined St. Peter's as a clinical social worker, a position she held for the next five years. Meanwhile, son Eli was born in 1997, followed by son Toby in 2004. In 2003, Mills went to work for the St. Peter's Community Hospice as a community grief counselor, and in October, 2009, she entered the social welfare doctorate program at the University at Albany, working as a research assistant for the first three years. "I went academic hard core and I loved it," she said.



A health event

Three years ago, the chronic migraines set in. Although Mills continued along in pursuit of her Ph.D., the migraines wouldn't allow her to "look at a computer screen for more than 20 minutes." At first, she thought "maybe it was Lyme disease, and even up until six months ago I thought it was something else. There were all these different things going on."

Turns out, she said, "when I talked to a genetic counselor, I rang every bell for Ehlers-Danlos syndrome," described by the Mayo Clinic website as "a group of inherited disorders that affect your connective tissues – primarily your skin, joints and blood vessel walls. Connective tissue is a complex mixture of proteins and other substances that provides strength and elasticity to the underlying structures in your body."

Last October, Mills tore the left rotator cuff on her shoulder, and this February, she tore the right one, both times simply by removing her shirt. These and similar episodes are among the day-to-day hazards of living with Ehlers-Danlos.

"My identity has changed," she said. "Once I was a social worker, and now I make jams and jellies."

Mills has embraced it. "What else am I going to do?" she said.

Fortunately, the materials for her tasty product abound around her, along with the background and the will to make things happen.

"We bought our house on Clark Road in January. The first summer we discovered on our property black and red raspberries, dewberries, blackberries, a pear tree, a peach tree, wild apples, and a wild grapevine," said Mills.

Mills said ever-present in her car are "a 22-gallon bucket and a pair of Mucks – you never know where you're going to find something. Wild grapes grow all over. I noticed the road is lined with chokecherries. I wasn't sure what

they were. So I talked to my dad and asked him, 'Can I eat these?' Free food. I am my parents' child. I refuse to buy commercial stuff except for citrus and pineapple, and cranberries from Cape Cod."

What's edible?

She's spent "a lot of time learning what's edible and what's not." What not to eat, Mills said, are things such as Virginia Creeper, poison sumac, and snakeberries, which "are lethal. And they might look similar to chokecherries."

Speaking of her roadside forays and trips into the woods, Mills laughed: "It's a good thing I'm resistant to poison ivy."

All of her products are created "six jars at a time. I don't want to become Vlasic," she said, with all packaging done by hand. "I am my own quality control expert," said Mills.

Her products are decidedly low in sugar: "You know how when you open a jar of jelly from the store and all it tastes like is sugar? Mine tastes like what it's made from. The guys at the transfer station call me the Jelly Lady. They don't know my real name."

Among the locally grown fruit jams from "made by marley" are apricot, gooseberry, nectarine, strawberry rhubarb, peach, and plum. Bee balm, black locust, dandelion, and rose are among the flower-blossom jellies. A complete listing is available at madebymarley.com.

A recent "huge retail order for 60 jars" sent Mills into an 11-hour frenzy to put it together in time to meet the deadline, but, she said, "I can't do that all the time. I do this because I need to. I get a lot of joy from it. It's very meditative, standing out in the woods picking things."

Five stars for the knotweed jelly! ~