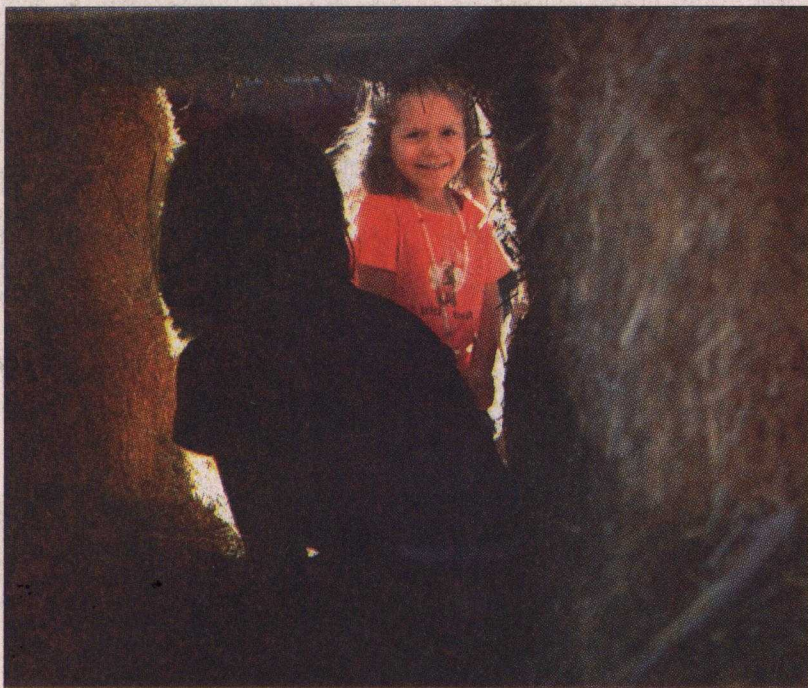


Anairy
Gonzalez
of Visalia
peers into
a tunnel
made of
stacked
hay bales
in the
kids' play
area at
Gizdich
Ranch on
Saturday.

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A celebration of harvest and heritage

Events ✓ Apple Butter Festival welcomes fall with old-time farm fun

RP 10-22-07

By DALA BRUEMMER

FOR THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

The sun shone brightly, and the tantalizing smell of cooked fruit and spices hung in the air at Gizdich Ranch on Saturday, as hundreds turned out for the orchard's annual Apple Butter Festival.

Festivalgoers drove in from as far away as San Francisco and the Central Valley to enjoy fresh air, friendly conversation and old-time fun at the annual event.

Always held on the third Saturday of October, the festival celebrates the harvest season with an apple butter-making demon-

stration, a small craft fair, an old engine display, a kids' pumpkin patch, hay rides around the ranch — and of course, plenty of apples and fresh-baked Gizdich pie.

The line at the bake shop stretched out the door all day long. Old friends chatted over pie or while keeping a watchful eye on the kids crawling through the hay-bale tunnel. New friendships were struck as people shared picnic tables or swapped descriptions of what they'd seen and learned throughout the day.

Many at the Apple Butter Festival said they were fascinated by

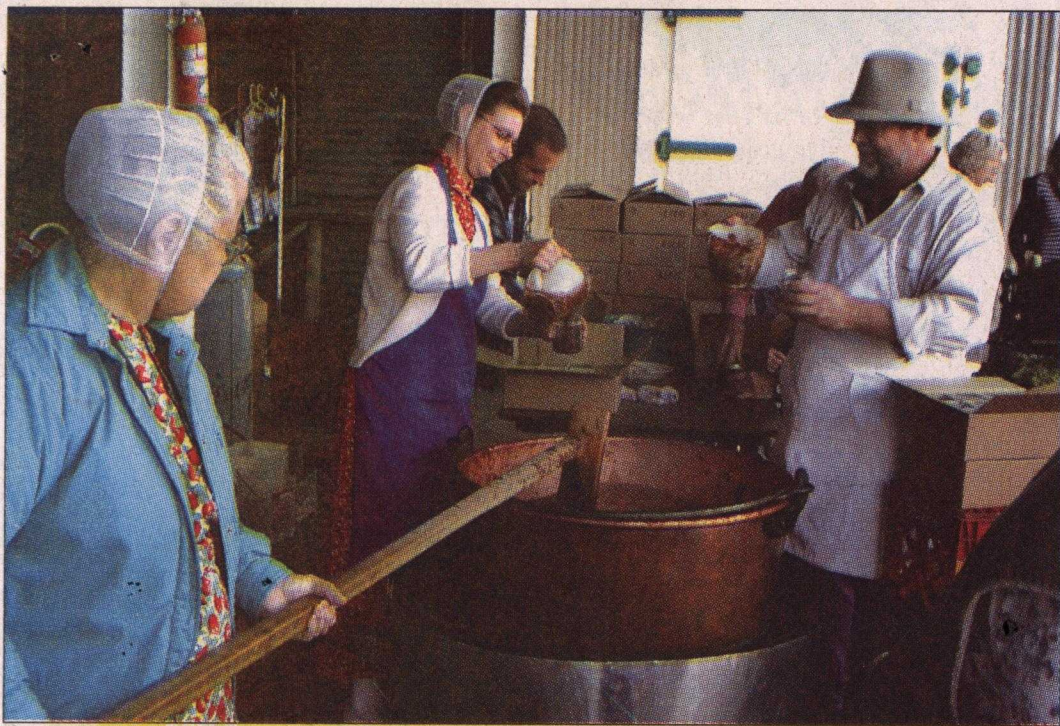
the working old engines on display in the parking lot.

"The old machines fascinate me," said Daniel Lovick of Marina. He imitated the sound of his favorite, then said, "It's a work of art. I could set it up in my back yard and just watch it for hours."

A mechanical apple corer-peeler drew a constant stream of fascinated onlookers.

"I spent a good 10 or 15 minutes watching it," admitted Rhett Hurlston of San Francisco. "And the bonus is, if you catch (the peeled apple), you get to eat it!"

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Brenda Brubaker (center) and Steve Brubaker pour hot apple butter into jars while Marianne Bowman stirs the mixture with a wooden paddle and Dan Bowman prepares a new batch of jars. The family came from Modesto to take part in Saturday's Apple Butter Festival at Gizdich Ranch.

FESTIVAL

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The central event of the festival, though, took place around an enormous copper pot in the ranch's packing shed. There the Bowmans, a German Baptist Brethren family attired conservatively — men with beards, women wearing bonnets — spent the day tending what would eventually boil down to be about 30 gallons of apple butter.

Although the ingredients for apple butter are simple — apples, juice or cider, sugar, spices — making it calls for time-consuming patience and skill. Like a fine stew or pozole, it requires hours of slow cooking. The entire process takes 10 to 12 hours, with nonstop stirring to keep the hot apple pulp from scorching as it boils down to about half its original volume.

The effort is worth it when you taste the end result: a smooth, rich brown spread that's sweetly aromatic and absolutely delicious on a fresh slice of yeasty bread.

Apple butter was perfected centuries ago in Germany. It has been maintained most famously in the U.S. by those with ties to the German-derived Anabaptist community, which includes the Amish, Mennonites, Moravians and Brethren Christian communities. To make the long cooking process more enjoyable, families or communities typically turn the process into a celebration in which everyone visits and enjoys a mellow fall day together.

Raised in this tradition, the Bowmans are friendly folks who explain the apple butter process as they take turns stirring the pot with a huge wooden paddle.

Lloyd and Marianne Bowman have roots in Ohio, but moved to the Central Valley years ago. Lloyd brought along the family recipe and an enormous copper pot in which he continued to make apple butter each fall. Over the years, his family — son and daughter-in-law Dan and Diane Bowman, and daughter and son-in-law Steve and Brenda Brubaker — got in on the tradition as well.

A mutual friend introduced them to Nita Gizdich. It wasn't long before the Bowmans had a standing engagement to cook and can apple butter at the Wat-

sonville ranch every October.

The process begins Friday afternoon.

Apple butter is traditionally cooked outdoors, in a huge copper pot set over a fire. Copper is used because "It distributes the heat evenly. And it's easier to clean up," said Steve Brubaker. So setting up the pot over a propane flame in the Gizdich packing shed was the first order of business.

While gallons of apple juice rolled to a boil, the Bowmans and Brubakers fed 400 pounds of apples through a 100-year-old mechanical apple peeler/corer.

"It sure beats peeling them all," said Dan Bowman with a grin as he lifted a bin full of peeled apples onto a nearby table, where the rest of the family had formed an assembly line to check them by hand and remove any remaining cores and bruises.

From there, the apples went into the pot for a slow cook before turning off the flame for the night. Four hundred pounds of apple pulp retains plenty of heat, even overnight.

Come morning, it's mostly a matter of tending the fire and patiently stirring. And stirring. And stirring some more.

As cars unloaded at the ranch Saturday, the Bowmans took turns stirring and chatting with onlookers. At 2:30 p.m., the pulp was finally thick enough make a soft, slightly sticky heap atop a spoon — a sure sign it was time to quickly mix in the spices and start pouring the mixture into jars.

The family sprang into action. Diane got busy handing out samples at the sales table. Marianne Bowman kept the wooden paddle in motion. And the rest of the family kept up a friendly banter as they dipped measuring cups into the hot liquid and filled jar after jar.

Many a customer left the ranch Saturday with a pie in one hand, a jar of warm apple butter in the other, and a nostalgic taste of the "good old days" when Americans were closer to the land, and, it seems, each other.

No wonder they all looked so happy.



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Before starting up the tractor for a hayride, Norm Ayers explains to passengers what they'll be seeing.