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HEADLINE: Home Cooks Gag on Rules For Fairs In Loudoun

BYLINE: **Christine B. Whelan** , Washington Post Staff Writer

BODY:

Aunt Edna's rhubarb pie may be to die for, but Loudoun County health officials are taking no chances.

They're clamping down on small-town fairs in Lucketts, Bluemont and hillocks beyond, where homemade pies and jams have been part of the charm for decades. Homemakers would bring the best from their kitchens to compete for blue ribbons, and sometimes sell samples to the crowds.

But now, worried that unsafe food bought at a fair could actually land someone in the obituary notices, the county is insisting that all bakers and canners take a food safety course before unleashing their goodies on the public.

Pickles, pies and preserves are just a few of the treats under the Health Department's microscope, which has some cooks hotter than a skillet full of bacon fat.

"They're taking the country out of country," lamented Brenda Beale, director of the Lucketts Fair.

Although she has great respect for the Health Department, Beale said, this time it has gone too far. "It's a shame you can't have the homey, down-to-earth things we grew up with," she said.

"This is just a real sore point for us."

Fair organizers feel an era has ended. In earlier generations, women prided themselves on their prowess in the kitchen. If it didn't matter to their families whether someone sneezed in the

cookie dough or the cat shed in the relish, why make a big deal about it now?

Health officials say they aren't out to spoil the party but can't ignore the danger of food poisoning.

"The sale of unregulated canned goods is a risky business," said Jim Anderton, a Loudoun Health Department supervisor. "Most people think acidic canned goods like pickles are safe, but they may contain bacteria and botulism that would kill you dead."

Word of the kitchen crackdown went out earlier this year to the organizers of Loudoun's community fairs. Health officials and fair organizers worked out a compromise under which bakers who want to sell their goods at the fairs must attend a one-hour food safety course, while canners and picklers must meet more stringent requirements, including kitchen inspections.

Thus it was that Alice Dillon, who has been making strawberry jam, dill pickles and pepper relish in her Falls Church home for 15 years, had to submit her recipes to the Department of Food Science and Technology at Virginia Tech, open her kitchen to Virginia agriculture officials for a look-see and take a food preparation course.

"It was quite involved," Dillon said, but she didn't mind terribly.

"If you are going to sell to the public, you need to be clean."

Not everyone has been so accommodating.

"They want these little old ladies to have their kitchens inspected," said a disbelieving Kim Labash, co-chair of this weekend's Bluemont Fair, which has lost many of its regulars because of the new enforcement effort. "It's just ridiculous."

Various state and local laws address the sale of homemade foods, with exemptions for church bake sales and other private events. County fairs fall into a gray area, but they are too important--and public--not to pay attention to, said Gary Hagy, an official with the Virginia Department of Health.

While no deaths or illnesses have been reported in Loudoun as a result of "pickled this and pickled that," Anderton said, the county decided that it was better to be safe than sorry.

The Virginia State Fair allows homemade goods to be seen, but not tasted. Michael Campbell, Henrico County environmental health manager, said his department does not allow the distribution of uncertified foods at the fair; a few years ago, some dilled green beans being handed out had to be confiscated.

Prince William health official John Meehan said he is more concerned with the "roach coach" roving vendors at local fairs than with putting a lid on canners and bakers.

Joanne Tharp, bakery manager for the Lucketts Fair, said Loudoun's Health Department is picking on the smaller fairs. "What about the auctions that sell food, or the Girl Scout bake sales?" she asked.

Anderton said he looks at everything that comes down the pike, with safety his top priority.

But Sheila Heider, who owns a country store outside Lucketts, said she thinks it is silly that the bureaucrats are getting crusty about this. "When was the last time one of these state officials had a home-baked pie?"