



WILD AT HEART

Part epicurean, part environmental, the foraging trend shows no sign of slowing down

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PHOTO: TERRY MANZO



Not long before chef Rene Redzepi opened his Copenhagen restaurant Noma in 2003, he discovered an old army survival guide that taught its readers how to live off the land. He was intrigued by the fact that edible foods grew all around us in the wild, and together with his team of chefs, made it a priority to forage for these ingredients every morning and later use them to create new dishes at his restaurant.

Noma, which serves New Nordic cuisine, quickly became known for its use of plants that thrived in the wild, like sea buckthorn, white currants and bulrush. Five years later, Noma won two Michelin stars, and in 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2014, it was named Best Restaurant in the World.

For 10 weeks from January 2016, Redzepi brought Noma to Sydney, Australia. Foraged food was once again the focus of the pop-up venture, but this time, Redzepi and his team sought inspiration from the Australian outback and coastline. His Noma Australia menu, which was described as a tribute to the aboriginal people, featured foraged ingredients that most non-indigenous Australians hadn't even heard of: a seaweed called Neptune's necklace or bubble weed, citrusy finger limes, bunya nuts and the leek-like mat rush. His dishes—like seafood platter with crocodile fat; mango ice cream with green ants; and porridge of wattleseed with saltbush—were a hit, and shone the spotlight on native Australian ingredients.

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This page Wild fiddlehead greens are typically used as a vegetable



PHOTO: TERRY MANZO

Top Go foraging for wild leeks with Puck's Plenty Foraging Tours

Opposite page, clockwise from top Saffron milk cap mushrooms, also known as lactarius deliciosus; Native Restaurant in London; Native is famous for its use of foraged ingredients; A dish of foraged perfection at Parallel 37; Head chef Ivan Tisadall Downes and co-owner Imogen Davis of Native Restaurant

LET'S GO OUTSIDE

Foraging is, of course, not new—our hunter-gatherer ancestors did it for hundreds of thousands of years before they learnt to grow and cultivate their own food. The practice, too, has long been commonplace among country dwellers. But in the last decade or so, foraging has become a movement, thanks to chefs like Redzepi, who have taken it to a new level by seeking out rare, unusual, little-known or complex-tasting wild edibles, and then transforming these treasures into modern, inventive dishes.

Wild edibles don't just grow in fields and forests. Even urban spaces, like parks, public gardens and surprisingly, sidewalks, are a rich source of everything from berries to edible flowers. Here on the island, in places like Dempsey Hill and Punggol, you'll find butterfly pea flowers, commonly used to colour Nonya kueh blue, an edible weed called wood sorrel, curry leaves, wild pepper leaves, pandan and ivy gourds, all growing freely in the wild. Bjorn Low, co-founder of urban farming consultancy Edible Garden City occasionally takes chefs on foraging trips to show them what's out there.

Local chefs are showing interest in Singapore's natural bounty, according to Low, but he says that they are far from exploring the full potential of using these ingredients in their cooking. Perhaps it's because of the amount of work that's involved. "It's time-consuming, having to go out every day to look for these foods, and then collecting them," Low explains. "These chefs also have to know what the lesser-known foods taste like and how to cook with them."

Chefs who have ventured into the Singapore wilderness include Chef Michael Lewis of Tin Hill Social, who recently collaborated with Sydney-based chef Elijah Holland on a three-night dinner built around locally foraged ingredients such as pineapple weed, wild pepper leaves and red weaver ants.

FORAGED FOODS ON THE MENU

Native Restaurant in Covent Garden, London features a variety of wild edibles on its menu—think Lyme Bay scallops, sea buckthorn, marjoram and fennel. While head chef Ivan Tisadall Downes and co-owner Imogen Davis forage all over the UK whenever they can, they've also come across blackcurrants, redcurrants and raspberries growing in the wild on their morning walks to the train station in the English capital.

Chef Michael Rotondo of Parallel 37 at the Ritz-Carlton in San Francisco is also constantly on the hunt for wild ingredients for his globally inspired menu. "Parallel 37's location in northern California gives us access to various wild mushrooms that are abundant during the different seasons," he says. "We also look for wild herbs and vegetables that grow freely in the Bay Area."

On one foraging trip, Rotondo discovered a trailing plant called nasturtium, which he found enhanced the flavour of beef. He went on to create a centre-cut rib-eye dish using the herb, serving it with caramelised onions and celery root to bring all the flavours together.

Some chefs are such huge fans of foraging that they even have dedicated teams for the task. In 2013, Chef Virgilio Martinez, who owns Central Restaurante in Lima, Peru and the one-Michelin-starred Peruvian restaurant Lima in London, created Mater Iniciativa with his physician sister Malena Martinez. The mission of this cultural and biodiversity research project: To explore the vast, and at times, dangerous rainforests, jungles, mountains and coastal areas of Peru in search of new ingredients and to learn ancient techniques from the natives.



PHOTO: TERRY MANZO



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Clockwise from top left Plating up wild edibles at The Willows Inn; Ingredients foraged from nearby areas take centrestage at The Willows Inn; Chef Virgilio Martinez's 'River Fish, Quinoa' dish; Delicious plates at Parallel 37; The Willows Inn's bounty of wild flowers

Together with his team, Martinez has so far ventured through the Andes region and Amazonia, as well as the warm waters of the north Pacific. His Central Restaurante, ranked fourth on the World's 50 Best Restaurants list, celebrates the biodiversity of Peru by using ingredients like paiche, a massive jungle fish; a type of indigenous tuber called sacha papa; sea lettuces; and even coral.

In October 2016, Martinez brought some of these edible treasures to Singapore during the Shangri-La International Festival of Gastronomy, which ran for five days at BLU at the Shangri-La Hotel. Diners were treated to dishes prepared by Martinez himself, like scallops with sea lettuce and coral; and river fish with quinoa.

IT'S GOOD TO GO WILD

Aside from giving chefs and restaurant owners new, different and unusual ingredients to work with, foraging has other advantages compared to cultivated produce. For one, it's environmentally sustainable. Foragers in general respect the plant and the environment as a whole, simply by harvesting no more than what they need and by not damaging the surrounding plants or disturbing the soil.

Of foraging, Rotondo says that as long as we follow the rules and regulations, and avoid commercialising foraged plants, we will be able to ensure the plants' environmental sustainability.

Another benefit of consuming foraged ingredients—different foods thrive during different seasons, so when we harvest these edibles in the wild, we know we're getting them at their very best, both in terms of taste and nutrition. "Our diners certainly notice when we've got something different or unusual on the menu," says Downes of Native Restaurant. "And when they eat these wild ingredients, they notice a difference in taste from the cultivated versions. These foods just taste better because they haven't been sprayed with pesticides



PHOTO: MICHELLE WALKER



or seen human interference.”

Reid Johnson, public relations director at The Willows Inn on Lummi Island, Washington, agrees. “It is only from the best ingredients that our chef can create the right flavours.” The Willows Inn uses ingredients foraged from areas around the restaurant with the help of professional foragers and its team of chefs. Its head chef is 30-year-old Blaine Wetzels, who trained with Redzepi at Noma and won the James Beard Award for Best Chef: Northwest in 2015.

There’s one last great aspect of foraging that is often overlooked: It is nature’s fantastic bounty for free. Wait. Make that two. It is also a reason to get out in the wild—and back to nature. **WD**

Where the wild foods are

If you want to know where to find the best wild herbs, fruit and plants, and learn to distinguish the edible from the inedible, these guided food foraging trips are for you.

No Taste Like Home

Based in Asheville, North Carolina in the US, this 20-year-old company offers wild food excursions that take you “off the eaten path”. As you venture through the woods, you’ll gather 12 to 30 edible wild plants and mushrooms. The tour concludes with a picnic, during which you’ll learn how to prepare the ingredients you picked and even get to take some of your bounty home with you. The tours are also an education in ecology, medicine and folklore.

notastelikehome.org

Puck’s Plenty Foraging Tours

This Stratford, Ontario-based business was established in 2010. Owner Peter Blush, who is also a naturalist, takes groups out every weekend from mid-April through mid-November, teaching them how to identify wild edibles, and more importantly, how to harvest them in a sustainable way. He also tells you how to tell poisonous mushrooms from the edible variety. **pucksplenty.com**

ForageSF

Based in San Francisco, ForageSF offers a range of foraging classes, from wild mushrooms to sea foraging, seaweed foraging, and even a foraged cocktails workshop, where you learn how to make absinthe bitters using local plants. The expert-guided classes are conducted at various times and in various locations. **foragesf.com**

Iga Warta

This Australian company operates out of the Northern Flinders ranges in South Australia. Its Plant Tour teaches you to identify about 30 different wild plants that are commonly used for both food and medicine. **igawarta.com**

Lamai Homestay Guesthouse

This award-winning homestay in Isan, northeast Thailand, offers a range of tours. Its food foraging tour gives you an insight into how local Isan families obtain their foods such as edible insects, frogs, water beetles, bamboo shoots and wild mushrooms. Your hosts will also cook these so you’ll get to sample your foraged goodies. **thailandhomestay.com**