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FLAVOR
WHERE THE
WILD THINGS
GROW

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RESTAURANTS GONE WILD



1. *Juniper*

Foraged foods are flavorful ingredients on restaurant menus

By JODI HELMER

The first time Tama Matsuoka Wong went to the upscale French restaurant Daniel in New York, she took handfuls of anise hyssop from the meadow near her home. She presented the fragrant perennial weed to chef de cuisine Eddy Leroux and asked him to incorporate the wild ingredient into her meal. To her delight, Leroux agreed. On that evening in 2009, Wong feasted on a shrimp salad made with anise hyssop and sorbet prepared from the licorice-flavored weed.

"It was a special meal because it was made with ingredients I found growing wild," she recalls.

When she approached Leroux with the wild ingredients, Wong hoped the experienced chef could introduce her to new recipes to prepare using foraged foods growing in the meadow behind her New Jersey home. In the kitchen of Daniel, she found a fellow foraged foods enthusiast.

"He asked me what else I had growing in the meadow and asked me to bring him more [wild foods]," recalls Wong, a lawyer-turned-professional forager and author of the James

Beard-nominated book *Foraged Flavor: Finding Fabulous Ingredients in Your Backyard or Farmer's Market*.

Wong started bringing wild foods like rose petals, sumac, juniper berries, papaw, purslane, chickweed and wild mint to Daniel each week. Leroux experimented with the ingredients, testing new recipes and learning about their distinct flavors; over time, foraged foods became an essential part of the restaurant menu.

"It's great to have ingredients with such strong, pure flavors," Leroux says. "The wild foods bring unique flavors to our dishes."

MEADOWS AND FORESTS ON MENUS, OH MY!

Now that the farm-to-table concept has caught on, creative chefs are looking for new ingredients to add to their menus.

Foraged foods add an unexpected twist to popular dishes. The hard-to-find seasonal ingredients have limited growing seasons, allowing chefs to rotate flavors to keep the menu fresh and give each recipe unique appeal.

The demand for foraged ingredients is increasing at such a rapid pace that professional foragers like Wong often struggle to keep up with restaurant requests. Notable restaurants such as Le Bernardin, Per Se, Momofuku and Atera feature foraged foods on their menus.

Thanks to referrals, Wong works with a team of 10 foragers in several states, including South Carolina, Maine and Massachusetts, and supplies wild foods to top New York restaurants like ACME, Gramercy Tavern, Il Buco and Khe-Yo.

"It's a lot more than traipsing around and picking things here and there," she explains. "It takes discipline and rigor to do it well."

Just as it takes significant effort to find wild foods, it also takes time and devotion for chefs to incorporate foraged foods into their menus.

Chef Fredrik Berselius has been scouring meadows and forests for wild ingredients to use on the Scandinavian-inspired menu at Aska since the restaurant opened in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in 2012. In the mornings before he goes to work, Berselius forages near his home in Brooklyn; when the restaurant is closed, he ventures into the Hudson Valley to search out ingredients.

"It's surprising how much grows around here," he says. "Some [of the wild foods] are





more connected to the foods we're serving, and those are the ingredients I look for, but there are a lot of flavorful ingredients growing wild, even in New York."

Berselius uses wild foods like sorrel, a bitter green, in salads, adds nettles to soups, and incorporates forest leaves and lichens into a root vegetable dish on the tasting menu. He also forages for shoots, herbs, greens, berries and mushrooms.

"Foraging gives relevance to the food and makes [Aska] a seasonal restaurant," he says.

There is another reason Berselius believes it is important to seek out wild foods for the menu: Handpicking ingredients is part of the culture in Sweden, where he grew up. Foraging for ingredients provides a connection to the foods and flavors Berselius knew as a child. "I want the menu to reflect where we are as a restaurant," he says.

A SEASONAL AND SUSTAINABLE ENDEAVOR

While chefs like Berselius seek out specific ingredients, most chefs create menus to take advantage of the wild foods that are in



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Wong at work, foraging ingredients; chef Fredrik Berselius (left) of Aska in Williamsburg, Brooklyn; and a dish from Aska: milk sorbet, blueberries, spruce syrup and yarrow, a foraged herb.

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
Forager Tama Matsuoka Wong and chef Eddy Leroux of Daniel in New York.

season. In fact, Wong does not take orders for specific ingredients. Instead, she harvests wild foods that are available.

In addition to searching for ingredients in forests, she partners with conservation groups to remove invasive plants and responds to calls from organic farmers who want chemical-free solutions for removing edible weeds like purslane and lambsquarters. Wong plucks the available ingredients in the field and offers the bounty to chefs.

“Chefs want local and seasonal ingredients, and foraged foods are the ultimate in local and seasonal foods,” she says.

Prior to sourcing ingredients from Wong, Leroux was familiar with common wild foods like nettles, wild cress and sumac but had never cooked with—or even heard of—sheep’s sorrel or pineapple weed. For her part, Wong also had a lot to learn about foraging. In the beginning, she brought the entire plant, roots and all, to the restaurant; now she clips the parts of the plant that can be used in the kitchen and leaves

A FORAGED RECIPE:

CURRIED LAMB AND LAMBSQUARTERS MEATBALLS

Lambsquarters are common weeds that bloom in the wild between June and October. The plants, which have diamond-shaped leaves and red streaks on the stems, have a flavor similar to spinach or chard. In this recipe from *Foraged Flavor*, the lambsquarters are mild and make the meatballs juicier. **MAKES 15 LARGE MEATBALLS**

- 3 tablespoons olive oil**
- ½ large onion, chopped**
- 2 garlic cloves, chopped**
- 4 ounces (4 cups packed) lambsquarters leaves**
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper**
- 1 pound ground lamb or beef**
- 1 heaping tablespoon curry powder**
- 1 large egg yolk**
- Vegetable oil for frying**

1 In a large skillet, heat the olive oil over medium heat. Sauté the onion and garlic for 3 minutes, or until softened. Increase the heat to high and add the lambsquarters and 1 teaspoon salt. Stirring occasionally, cook for 3 minutes, or until bright green and softened. Turn off the heat and let cool.

2 Meanwhile, in a large bowl, mix the ground meat with the curry powder and egg yolk. In a food processor, blend the lambsquarters mixture for 1 minute. Stir into the bowl with the ground meat. Mix well. It should look greenish. Using your hands, roll the mixture into 2-inch meatballs.

3 To cook the meatballs, pour ½ inch of vegetable oil into a large saucepan and heat over medium heat. Season the meatballs with salt and pepper and brown them well on both sides for 5 to 8 minutes, or until they become dark outside but are still a little pink inside. Test one to make sure it is not raw in the middle.

the rest in the wild to continue growing. The practice has become part of her commitment to making sustainable practices an integral part of her foraging business.

As Wong explains, some of the wild foods that chefs want to feature on their menus are plants she refuses to harvest, including ramps, a declining native plant that is in high demand. Instead, she prefers to promote environmental stewardship through foraging. She emphasizes responsible harvesting and noninvasive plant removal; she also limits her foraging activities to sites that haven't been treated with pesticides and ensures she has permission to pick wild foods. New York City parks, for example, have a strict no-foraging policy.

THE FLAVOR OF FORAGING

Because the foraged foods trend is so new, Wong notes that both foragers and chefs are still experimenting with recipes and best practices.

The first time Leroux tried autumn olives, he didn't like the flavor of the plant. Later in the season, as the flavor became sweeter, Leroux was inspired to create an autumn olive marmalade with foie gras. He called it "an amazing pairing," and the dish was a huge hit.

Even though he has developed an enormous repertoire of recipes featuring foraged foods, the wild ingredients are just part of the ingredient list.

"The window [for wild ingredients] is so small; from one week to another, the taste can change a lot," he says. "There are a lot of different pairings and preparations to explore."

It's not just Leroux who is excited about the unique flavors of foraged ingredients. Daniel has earned a reputation for dishes featuring hyperlocal ingredients that have diners eager to sample the flavors of wild foods.

"Nature is fantastic for what it brings to the table," Leroux says. "Our guests know that our suppliers are craftsmen; they love the purity of the ingredients and know that these unique ingredients add flavors that will please their palates."

At Aska, the percentage of foraged ingredients on the menu changes with the seasons. During summer, almost every dish on the menu features at least one wild food. Berse- lius is proud of his commitment to using foraged ingredients.

"Anyone can go buy an ingredient and put it on the plate," he says. "Foraged foods tell a story."



2. Anise Hyssop



3. Mint



4. Papaw



5. Sumac



6. Purslane



7. Chickweed