





Forest to Fork

Wild foods are gaining popularity in B.C.

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long sand-and-gravel spit runs between the ocean with its log-strewn beach and the Esquimalt Lagoon. A great blue heron poses elegantly in the shallow water, its long bill still, poised, waiting for a passing fish. Birds trill and call. Lance Staples, his tangle of blonde hair blowing in the wind, bends over, cuts wild sea asparagus with a knife and places it in a basket. Nimbly traversing logs, he heads down the spit, stopping now and then to snip nodding onions, wild mustard, sheep sorrel, water cress, beach peas, wild rose and more. Soon his basket overflows with wild greens.

Young, lean, athletic and clean-shaven, Lance has been foraging for four years. "I work more than full time," he says. "In spring, the peak season, I put in 80 to 100 hours per week." He has no trouble selling his wild produce for the forest-to-fork movement has become a hot trend with top restaurants, whose chefs weave them into a myriad of culinary treats. Lance, who lives in Victoria, British Columbia, and forages mainly on southern Vancouver Island, delivers his collected goods to Agrius, Olo, Stage Wine Bar and Saveur restaurants in Victoria and Kissa Tanto (selected as one of the best new restaurants in Canada by *en route* magazine) and Farmers Apprentice in Vancouver.

"It's not just the great fresh taste, but also the medicinal and health value of these plants," he stresses. "Wild greens contain 10 to 50 times more nutrients than cultivated plants. The nodding onion, for example, is a blood cleanser, detoxicant and works against cancer." Lance knows the health aspects well, for he studied wild plants in the Amazon Basin with an international expert as his mentor.

Lance is devoted. "Every summer I chase morel mushrooms, which burst out after forest fires," he says. "I go to some crazy places with lots of bugs and even some grizzlies, and I've made huge hikes with 100 pounds of mushrooms on my back."

WANTING TO LEARN about—and taste—the dishes that chefs create from foraged goods, I head to Agrius in Victoria, recently voted best restaurant in Victoria by *Vancouver Magazine*, where executive chef Sam Harris greets me. I quickly discover that Chef Sam is more than imaginative and a maestro of local, fresh



Lance Staples harvests sea asparagus and other wild greens on the beach in Esquimalt Lagoon.



FALL  FORAGING

ingredients. The man is passionate, even obsessed, and pretty damned talented. He embraces farm-to-table, and has gone a leap above, using a professional forager—namely Lance Staples—to bring in the best and freshest mushrooms and greens from forest and shore. While I watch, Chef Sam prepares three dishes that showcase foraged ingredients: cured steelhead garnished with wild salmonberries, sea asparagus and sea coriander; poached duck egg, butter-fried morel mushrooms, new potatoes garnished with wild watercress and beach mustard; mint sorrel ice cream with fresh strawberries, wild rose meringue flakes and edible wild rose and tiger lily flowers. On their plates, the dishes look like works of art. And, yes, they taste even better. I love the intense flavours and crisp freshness of wild greens.

I HEAD WEST to Tofino, where waves roll in from far in the Pacific to crash and swirl on the shore and mist seductively wreathes the landscape. I meet Paul Moran, executive chef at Tofino Resort & Marina, and one of the most knowledgeable foragers in the province. Paul's no slouch at cooking either, winning his first cooking competition at age 15; since then he's won a dozen more including the Best Young Chef in Canada.

Furthermore, he has foraging in his DNA. Both his father Larry and his brother Scott are professional foragers. The family, whose roots are in Austria and Estonia, has been foraging seriously for at least four generations.

We enter the Tofino Botanical Gardens and stroll along a wooded path to a sheltered cove. En route, Paul gathers spruce buds, salmonberries and salal blossoms. Wearing rubber boots, Paul tramps into the tidal flat and fills plastic bags with sea asparagus, sea chives, sheep sorrel and more.

"I'm just collecting enough for today and tomorrow at the restaurant," he says. "But a few years ago, my father and I were foraging commercially and were getting about 750 pounds of morel mushrooms each day." He smiles and continues, "We were so deep in the wilds of the Yukon we needed a helicopter for transport. We never saw a grizzly but came across black bears a few times."

We return to the resort, which is abuzz with workers and scaffolding, part of a massive renovation. Paul is the executive chef for the resort's Hatch and 1909 restaurants and he's proud of the brand-new kitchen. ▶

"We have a Mugnaini, the Ferrari of wood ovens, heated by maple from the Cowichan Valley," he says proudly. "That's good because Italian cooking, especially pasta and pizza, goes really well with foraged greens."

I watch Chef Paul blanche sea asparagus and sear sea chives with a blow torch. He slices an albacore tuna, adds a gomaе sauce and carefully lays on his foraged greens.

Picking up a ball of dough, Chef Paul tackles the flatbread (pizza). "This is not just any dough," he says. "It took us three months of research to develop the recipe, which includes five days of fermentation." He ladles on a white sauce made with heavy cream and buttermilk. He adds clams and then artfully garnishes the top with products he foraged just half an hour earlier.

"The quality of the ingredients is critically important," he says, which explains why he and other top chefs are pursuing foraged products. They want the freshness, forest smell and zest.

After a few minutes in the wood-fired oven (800° to 1,000° Fahrenheit), Chef Paul pulls out the steaming flatbread with a large wooden paddle. I take a bite. The crust is wonderful and the foraged greens add a delightfully fresh tangy taste. I'm in heaven.

"Foraging is in my blood," says Paul. "My father, Larry, got me started hunting mushrooms in the Okanagan at an early age and I've been hooked ever since."

The family connection continues, for Paul's brother Scott is a full-time forager, operates *Everything Wild* out of Kelowna, and gives classes on foraging. He gained experience working for the top foraging company in Britain. My telephone call interrupts his collection of miner's lettuce at a burned forest across from Kelowna. It's pouring rain but Scott's happy. "There's lots of lettuce here and it's popular with chefs. Yesterday, Summerhill Winery took my entire haul."

I learn that Scott supplies several top-end restaurants in Vancouver and Kelowna and also sells at markets. "I've sold 300 to 400 foraged products," he says. "I use different parts of the same plant—blossoms, greens, roots, berries—in different seasons." I realize that to be a good forager one needs an encyclopaedic knowledge of botany. Scott, now age 26, has been stocking his knowledge bank since collecting mushrooms at age 10. He's been a professional forager since 2010.

When I ask about his favourite foraged dishes he answers, "I eat wild plants for both flavour and health. In the spring, everything is so young and fresh. I love nettle pizza and pasta with foraged greens and wild mushrooms."



A trio of dishes featuring foraged ingredients like edible wild rose and tiger lily flowers, wild salmonberries, sea asparagus and morel mushrooms—prepared by Sam Harris in Victoria's Agrius restaurant.

ALTHOUGH THERE ARE a few dozen professional foragers in British Columbia, including a handful of small companies, none beat the expertise and production of the Moran clan. Larry Moran, the head of the talented family, is based in the Okanagan and says, "I live doing what I love, although I forage full time only during the peak seasons. You can't beat the superb fresh food, and the lifestyle with walking and nature is great."

He stresses that foraged plants are healthy too. "I remember my mother making a syrup from spring-time foraged greens that our father forced us to take each day of the winter, like cod-liver oil." (Austrian Health Syrup: 100 grams narrow leaf plantain; 100 grams fir shoots. Combine with equal parts water and organic sugar. Simmer until sugar melted, then steep for one hour.)

"Father knew what he was doing, for the syrup has lots of antioxidants, and we seemed to get fewer colds."

"We still have lots to learn about wild plants," he says and relates a story of how a decade ago he was shown unusual mushrooms by First Nations gatherers. "They told me that lightning strikes the grassy hills and causes the mushrooms to grow." Subsequently, he showed the mushrooms to experts, one of whom ran DNA tests. Strangely, the lightning mushroom is very similar to one that grows in Mongolia.

I JOIN AN ethnobotany tour on Pender Island led by John Bradley Williams, a knowledge keeper with the Tsawout First Nation, on whose traditional lands we are walking. John Bradley shows us horsetails, salal and nettles and says, "Foraging is natural. First Nations have hunted, fished and gathered wild foods from the seashore and forest for eons; it was our standard fare." He smiles and adds, "Our people are starting to return to their traditional natural foods."

I've loved learning about foraging, but a dilemma weighs on my mind. In recent years with high-end chefs enthusiastically promoting the unique tastes of wild foods and presenting them as a key part of haute cuisine, foraging is gaining popularity. And little wonder, for wild, natural foods are a stark contrast to mass-produced plants that require fertilizers, pesticides and monocultures. It's a good trend. Yet to feed an ever-growing human population and with increasing urbanization, there is no alternative to mass production. Foraged foods, once the norm, have become rare and a luxury.

Nevertheless, I realize that foraging offers wonderful edibles and a healthy lifestyle choice. Even if we can embrace it only occasionally, we should seek it out. And I'm glad I have. 🍄

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Executive chef Paul Moran, from Torino's 1909 restaurant, comes from a family of professional foragers.

