

The Wild Cornucopia

Discovering the Nourishing Bounty
Beyond our Gardens and Farms

BY MELISSA JOSUE

Beneath the scattered shade of the tall bush, I felt like a child suddenly given permission to step beyond the paved path to taste shiny berries, supple leaves, and bright flowers straight from the vine. For the first time, I saw this small city park, tucked between the panhandle, dense housing, and busy urban intersections, as a tempting profusion of wild delicacies both nourishing and flavorful.

The journey to this realization was not without a guide. I joined a group led by Kevin Feinstein, a forager and instructor at ForageSF, on a tour through Buena Vista Park in San Francisco. Just a few yards from the residential intersection where we gathered to start the tour, Feinstein picked a small stem of leaves with tiny white flowers. He explained that the corn-shaped leaves of the chickweed are more nutritious than kale. He even adds some to his smoothies.

Ten years ago, people looked at him like a freak, Feinstein said. Now his Wild Food Walks are sometimes sold out weeks in advance. Wild-food foraging has grown in popularity over the last several years thanks, in part, to foodies. "It was a natural evolution for the foodie movement," said Feinstein. "How exotic and gourmet can you make it? Foraging is taking it to the next level for them." Uncultivated food — plants that haven't been farmed — such as wild chanterelle mushrooms, fennel, and huckleberries, have made their way onto the menus of the Bay Area's leading restaurants, such as Alice Waters' Chez Panisse and David Kinch's Manresa, because of their flavorful qualities.

Adding to the appeal is that they can be more nutrient-dense. Wild radish, for example, that isn't pampered on a farm is said to be nutritionally superior. Chickweed has more than three times the vitamin C of kale. "If you think of



dandelions, they will grow anywhere," said Jill Nussinow, a registered dietitian and author who teaches at Santa Rosa Junior College. "It has higher nutrition than other plants because of a higher will to propagate itself."

Harvesting wild food has also been part of a movement toward sustainable food sourcing. Foraging is about give-and-take, Feinstein explains. "The grazing of cows — is it good or bad? It can regenerate more grassland or devastate it.



When I forage, it's reciprocal. The goal is to promote healthier and larger areas of wildlife."

While foraging offers variety, flavor, and nutrition to our diets, it isn't as simple as going to your public park. It's illegal to remove plants from county parks, and there's the issue of safety. Feinsein advises not to forage anything unless you know from a local expert that it's OK to eat. Despite the legalities and the sharp learning curve of urban dwellers when it comes to differentiating edible chickweed from toxic scarlet pimpernel, the growing interest in foraging and permaculture has inspired thoughts on its positive influence on environmental awareness. Steve Brill, a naturalist in New York offering wild-food tours in the Northeast since the early 1980s, believes opposing foraging doesn't protect the environment and that it cuts people off from nature. "Kids who play in nature become our future environmentalists," he explained. Paul Entin, a marketing professional in New Jersey who took a wild-food tour with Brill, felt empowered by the experience and now sees his property as a source of food and medicine.

Katie Ries, a community organizer in Tennessee who helped start a group called the Urban Land Scouts, said the practice of foraging, or gleaning, teaches patience and appreciation for nature's course. "In my own life, I am very used to things happening immediately," she said. "But here, you wait for the chicory to age ... sitting with these natural cycles focuses your attention on them."

As we sampled the ripe elderberry and wild radish leaves along the trail, I realized how detached we are from the source of our food. Even at the farmers market, food is handed to us in cardboard baskets or ready to pick from a pile; we're not immediately aware of its abundance — or scarcity. The dandelion weeds that scatter the hillsides, the acorns that fall from the trees and are left to rot — to a growing community of people, these discarded plants are overlooked fruits in a wild cornucopia, or nourishment for the hungry.

"They are in such great abundance; our ecological niche is to process and use this food," said Feinsein. "It is as though nature is saying, 'Here, take these.'" 🍃

Melissa Josue is a SF-based journalist who has written for both online and print publications and believes that travel writing is much more than exposing a destination; it's about conveying the transformative experience of displacement and drawing other travelers to the people and places that have deepened her sense of wonder. melissajosue.com



**BAUMAN
COLLEGE**
HOLISTIC NUTRITION
AND CULINARY ARTS

January 2011 Events

More information & registration online

Wednesdays, Starting Jan. 5, 6–9 PM (Penngrove & Berkeley) Nutrition Essentials for Everyone – 8-Class Course

Increase your energy, improve your health, and elevate your mood with food! Each class includes a lecture, culinary demo, and discussion. These 8 lessons in Eating For Health™ are for personal growth and community education.

Friday, 6–9 PM (Jan. 7: Penngrove, Jan. 14: Berkeley) A Taste of Bauman College: FREE

Considering a career as a Nutrition Consultant or Natural Chef? Find out what Bauman College has to offer. Speak with our faculty, graduates, and Dr. Ed Bauman, Director. Enjoy hors d'oeuvres, a cooking demo, and nutrition lecture.

Sunday, January 9, 12–1 PM (All Bauman College Locations) Winter Cooking Demo Featuring Dark Leafy Greens: FREE

Learn some of the nutritional benefits of dark leafy greens and watch a short cooking demonstration featuring this highly beneficial food.

January 30, 12–3:30 PM (All Bauman College Locations) Better Breakfasts & Bars: \$75

Cook wholesome, warming, energizing breakfasts and snacks, like Homemade Granola with Fresh Almond Milk and easy Fruit and Nut Bars you can grab and go. This is a part of our new Eating4Health™ Community Cooking Series.

Berkeley, CA • Penngrove, CA • Santa Cruz, CA • Boulder, CO • Distance Learning

RSVP Required at www.BaumanCollege.org