

## *Eating the Invasives*



*Homemade pasta made with invasive wild mustard. Photo by Pascal Baudar.*

Ever thought about eating an invasive, nonnative plant?

Eating and foraging for wild foods has become an increasingly popular way to connect to the environment and eat nutritious, local, and free food. Foraging is an ancient human activity, and many indigenous and rural communities around the world continue to practice traditional forms of harvesting and using wild plants for food, medicine, and culture.

However, foraging, like many activities, can be either beneficial or harmful to the environment. The popularity of harvesting wild foods and medicines has driven some native plant species to a fragile and fragmented state due to overharvesting. Native plants such as ramps, American ginseng, devil's club and others have become dangerously overharvested by eager foragers. An ethic of responsible harvesting is a crucial part of foraging for wild foods.

The Sausal Creek Watershed is part of a landscape that has been cared for, tended by, and cultivated by the Chochenyo Ohlone people for thousands of years. Traditional land management practices allowed for certain plants to thrive and created the landscape that we care for and love today. The ecology and management of the Sausal Creek Watershed has been severely altered since initial colonization by the Spanish. Fragmentation of the landscape, elimination of traditional land-tending techniques, such as prescribed burning, and ever-encroaching invasive species pose a threat to many native plants in the watershed.

As we continue to work to protect and restore the watershed and its plant diversity, how can we responsibly harvest wild foods? The answer may be the enemy right in front of us – invasive plants. Many of the most nutritious and delicious wild plants are abundant in our landscapes and can be some of the most invasive and harmful to a native ecosystem. Foraging for invasives creates an opportunity to eat wild foods growing all around us while fighting back the onslaught of invasive plants, allowing native plants to continue to grow and recover.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of community food security for many. In addition, given the problems of modern agriculture--excessive use of pesticides and herbicides, nutrient runoff, soil erosion, and a carbon footprint from machinery and food transport--foraging is another alternative food source. The forager has the advantage of knowing the conditions of the environment and can often find wild edibles a few steps away from the kitchen. Pascal Baudar, a wild foods chef and author, has written extensively about eating invasive plants. "In my perspective, the biggest food waste is edible non-native wild food," Baudar explained in an interview with the San Francisco Examiner. "Their solution is to put pesticides on [the weeds] ... Why don't we make food part of the solution?." By promoting a culture of eating edible invasives, we can connect to local foods, the environment, and home cooking traditions that are beneficial to native plant communities.

When harvesting wild plants, there are a few guidelines to follow to ensure your safety. First, make sure you have a positive identification--if you are unsure, NEVER eat a plant. Correct plant identification is key to successful foraging. Additionally, make sure to get to know the areas you are harvesting from, and try to avoid sites that may be polluted. For example, do not harvest next to a major highway or areas that have a pollution history from previous land use, such as former military bases. Don't harvest in protected areas, and learn about which plants are rare, threatened, or illegal to pick. Make sure to wash any food you harvest prior to consumption. Many species have edible leaves, roots, flowers, fruits, and seed pods, but other parts of the same plant may be toxic--always do your research on which parts of the plant are edible!

Many common invasive plants are edible and delicious. These include dandelion, curly dock, mustards, wild radish, blackberries, nasturtiums, mallow, wild fennel, lamb's quarters, wild turnip, watercress, common chickweed, Jerusalem artichoke, purslane, spearmint, garlic mustard, burdock, and amaranth. These are just some of the edible invasives that can be found in the Bay Area and beyond.

When cooking with wild invasives, don't be afraid to be bold! Make substitutions for your favorite recipe with an invasive leafy green. Research recipes and sources for working with wild invasive plants. You can cook, bake, ferment, pickle, make sodas, freeze, or dehydrate your harvest.

Below are a few recipe ideas to get you started:

### *Italian Wild Greens and White Bean Soup*

Recipe Inspired by Diana Falconi's book: *Foraging and Feasting--A Field Guide and Wild Food Cookbook*

#### Ingredients:

- ¼ cup olive oil
- 2 cups onion, chopped
- 3 tablespoons wild mustard leaves, chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, chopped
- 1 teaspoon freshly crushed wild fennel seeds

- 6 cups soup stock of your choice
- 4 cups of cooked white beans
- 4 cups of mallow, or your choice of wild greens, chopped
- Optional: ½ cup pecorino romano cheese, 1 cup of sausage chopped in 1-inch chunks, several drizzles of pickle or sauerkraut brine

Instructions:

Heat oil in a soup pot, add onion, and cook over medium-low heat with the lid on until onions are soft, stirring occasionally. Add wild mustard, garlic, and fennel and cook for 1-3 minutes, stirring constantly. Add the stock, beans, and optional cheese and bring to a simmer. Once a simmer has been reached, add mallow and optional sausage and simmer, covered, about 6-10 minutes. Turn off heat and serve. Sprinkle in salt, pepper, and optional brine directly into each bowl.

*Dandelion Fritters* from [Mountain Rose Herbs](#)

Ingredients:

- dandelion flower tops (*Taraxacum officinale*)
- 1 egg or vegan egg substitute
- 1 cup milk or nondairy milk substitute
- 1 cup flour (brown rice flour can be used for a gluten-free alternative)
- olive oil
- spices of your choosing

Instructions:

Gather dandelion tops during the day when the sun has opened up the bright and cheerful flowers. Rinse in cool water to remove any critters or debris, and allow to dry while preparing the batter.

To make the batter, combine egg, milk, and flour in a bowl and mix until all lumps are gone. If you prefer sweeter fritters, add a little maple syrup, honey, cinnamon, or a dash of vanilla extract. To make more savory fritters, try adding rosemary, oregano, basil, chives, sage, thyme, tarragon, ground peppercorns, salt, or even a little Parmesan cheese.

Prepare a skillet on the stove with olive oil over medium heat.

Take one of the flowers, hold it by the greens at the base, dip into the batter, and twirl until the flower is covered in batter.

Drop it into the skillet, flower side down. Continue dipping and dropping until the skillet is full. A second method is to remove the “petals” (each yellow petal of the dandelion is actually an individual flower with a single petal and reproductive parts), sprinkle them directly into the batter, then cook just like pancakes.

When the fritters are lightly browned, flip them over, and brown on the other side. When finished, remove from the pan and plate.

For a sweet treat, drizzle with maple syrup, honey, jam, plum sauce, or powdered sugar. For a savory snack, dip into aioli or a sauce made with tahini, mustard, curry, hot chili peppers, or anything else you wish!

*Wild Mustard Pasta* from [Pascal Baudar](#)

### Ingredients:

- 2 cups flour
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1/2 cup warm water
- 1 cup wild greens (de-stemmed and shredded)
- fresh mushrooms
- herbs of your choice

### Instructions:

Boil the shredded leaves for 3 minutes, place in cold water, and with your hand squeeze out excess liquid. Blend into a puree.

Mix all ingredients together in a bowl or on a counter. You can add garlic powder, some savory herbs, and so on. Mix and knead for around 10 minutes. Keep adding some flour until it does not stick to the board.

After kneading the dough, make a nice ball and place in plastic wrap. Let it rest for 30 minutes or so then take around 1/5 of it, make a ball (around 2 1/2 inches) and start rolling on a board covered with a thin layer of fresh flour (so it doesn't stick to the board). No need for fancy equipment. I use an old wine bottle to roll the dough. Make it as thin as possible then cut into strips around 1/4 inch wide.

When done, dust some flour over the sliced strips of dough so they don't stick together. You can cook the fresh pasta for 3-4 minutes in slightly salted water. You can also dehydrate or freeze it for later use.

Serve with nutritional yeast or Parmesan, fresh chervil, and crispy marinated mushrooms.

--Jackie Van Der Hout