

# RAIDING *nature's* LARDER



*The current foraging trend has foodies everywhere licking their lips — and it's not just fashionable restaurants getting in on the action. The good news is anyone can hunt for wild food — providing you know your hogweed from your hemlock, and you know where to find it* **WORDS:** Chris Horton

I can pinpoint the exact moment I realise I've been bitten by the wild food bug. It's during an after-dinner chat with local chef Owen Hall at Penrhiw Hotel, St Davids. The foraging enthusiast has just told me he'd recently been a split-second away from deliberately mowing down a pheasant in his car. He sighs and shakes his head, his expression one of wistful regret. A chance for a free meal and he'd squandered it. Far from being appalled by his feral thought process, though, it's my own response I find shocking: I'm on Owen's side, not the pheasant's.

Only the day before, I'd arrived at the gabled former priory a wild food sceptic. Unmoved by all the articles and websites extolling its virtues. Untempted by the gastropubs and restaurants serving it. If it was that good, surely there'd be a dedicated section in Tesco. I was convinced it was just a fad; certain it'd take more than a foraging tour and a 'wild dinner' prepared by a local chef to change my mind. But I was willing to give it a go. After all, the tiny Pembrokeshire city jutting into the Irish Sea is a good stand-in for Copenhagen, the coastal city where the trend began. It was here wild-food chef René Redzepi won Noma its third Best Restaurant in the World title in 2012. Yet, in theory, most of the ingredients for his two Michelin-star creations (dishes like sea buckthorn leather with petals of rose hip pickled in apple vinegar) could be found growing wild within a mile of my hotel. The next day I'm to test that theory on a foraging walk with a local expert.

Julia Horton-Powdrill looks the part. Arriving in a Land Rover, she wields a hiking staff with

a carved dog's-head handle and has a healthy, outdoors glow. She explains our round-trip will cover the medieval heart of St Davids, centred on the cathedral and ruined Bishops Palace, plus the lanes behind Penrhiw Hotel. In the afternoon, we'll hit the beach for seaweed.

She leads the way up leafy Quickwell Hill. As we discuss the dismal spring, I can feel her antennae trained on the roadside, twitching, sensing the presence of wild morsels hiding in the undergrowth. Julia's eyes narrow as she spots something. After a rummage, she emerges with a handful of greenery. "Sticky bud!" I exclaim. Its velcro-like leaves and stems made it ideal for throwing at schoolmates; Julia tells me goosegrass, as it's commonly known, works just as well in soups and salads. I'm less convinced the next blast from my past is so benign. Following Julia's lead, I pinch a nettle leaf firmly, pluck it from the stem and roll it into a ball so the hairs can't sting. Even so, it's like handling a scorpion. I chew it gingerly, braced for the burning pain. Instead, I'm tasting spinach, with hints of butternut squash.

Wild food appears from all directions. Reaching up, Julia snaps off a leaf to show me. "Beech — you can make tea with it, or use it as a poultice." Clusters of tiny lilac flowers spill from cracks in a wall. Despite the Harry Potter villain name, ivy-leaved toadflax tastes like cress. Opposite the tumbledown courtyard of Bishops Palace, where Julia organises the Really Wild Food & Countryside Festival every autumn, we find sorrel — a herb Noma serves with fermented crickets. ►

**Clockwise from top left:**

Sign overlooking St Non's Bay, near St Davids; cooking potatoes; pepper dulse, sea beet and rock samphire on the beach at Caerbwdy Bay; Julia leads a foraging course; foraged hedgerow pickings; carrageen; gathering kelp; Julia describes coastal plant Alexanders; dried seaweeds



Julia's suggestion, "great with fish", seems more practical.

The yellow flower of a weed sprouting from the cathedral car park's tarmac is next to be sampled. "It tastes like the smell of my school hall," I stammer. Julia laughs. "Most people say wasabi." Having never encountered black mustard, my brain was confused, she says. "I've had people tell me things taste like the smell of cut grass before. We know beef is going to be beef; lettuce, lettuce. But with something new, it can be shocking."

The sight of Julia leading groups of strangers through St Davids is clearly a familiar one.

Outside the guesthouses and tea rooms on Nun Street, the passers-by she greets flash knowing smiles. "Oh look," she chuckles, waving at a car driver, "there's Julia with another strange man."

The reason her walks are so popular is partly due to Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, she says. The TV series and books centred around his Devon farm, River Cottage, have popularised a lifestyle based on seasonal, locally-sourced food and back-to-basics self-reliance. Foraging, of course, is the ultimate expression of this philosophy.

"Foraging lets you start to take ownership of wild places around you," Julia explains. For her, this began on childhood forays into the wilds of southeast Wales with her father. As well as mushrooms, eels and cockles, they'd gather seaweed, some of which was stored in jars. "I've got some he collected 80 years ago," she says proudly.

Julia assures me kids enjoy her walks as much as adults. "I get all ages and backgrounds — everyone from grandparents to backpackers." She has to be careful what she tells young children, though. "Some think when I say something looks like a pea, it means it *is* a pea, and they try to pop it in their mouth." Confusion like this can be fatal, even in suburbia; last November, a Somerset housewife died after making soup from death cap mushrooms growing in her back garden. In the countryside, the scope for error is far greater. That's why all but the most recognisable fungi are avoided on Julia's walks. Edible cow parsley, too, as it looks just like the UK's deadliest plant, hemlock water dropwort. One mouthful kills in a matter of hours, and there's no antidote.

Confusion of a more pleasant kind awaits us in the verges lining the road to Whitesands Bay. Ribwort plantain has crunchy, mushroom-flavoured buds. Gorse's yellow blooms transport me to the Caribbean with their coconutty taste and smell. Meadowsweet's gossamer-fine white flowers taste of elder but reek of Germolene — awakening memories of grazed knees. This seems less bizarre when I learn the herb can be used to treat various complaints, from gout to peptic ulcer, as well as make a refreshing cordial. Like the vast majority of plants Julia introduces me to, it belongs not just in the kitchen cupboard but the medicine cabinet too.

At Caerbwdy Bay that afternoon, a rough sea is churning up foam. As I clamber after Julia over the wet rocks, some of her words are lost in the

blustery wind, but I think I hear her say seaweed will be the next big thing. "I've got it on my Google Alerts," she shouts, gesturing around us at shaggy wet heaps, and a partly submerged swathe of rubbery tentacles bobbing in the shallows. "I'm certain this will be the next superfood."

The whiffy flotsam looks like the washed-up guts of a sea monster, so I'm curious to find out what Julia sees in it. "Dulse," she says, breaking off a translucent maroon ribbon for me to chew on. "The Irish snack on it. It has some amazing ingredients." While I savour the spicy marine biltong, Julia lists a few: "Vitamins B6 and B12, as well as iron, potassium, fluoride, iodine..."

Besides being nutrient-packed, Julia enthuses, they're all edible, non-toxic, low calorie and can be stored dry for years. We slip and stagger to a patch of purple laver, forlornly awaiting the tide. Part of the 'full Welsh' breakfast, along with cockles and bacon, its thin fronds taste like salty spinach. Just feet away, what looks like bin bags draped over the rocks is nori — toasted sheets of which make the flaky black wrapping for sushi.

As I munch my way across the beach, Julia supplies potted biographies: carrageen ("big in Ireland, thickens kids' milk"); sea lettuce ("full of fibre"); sea beet ("the granddaddy of our garden beet"). All share a texture and taste that's meaty, vegetable and fishy — appropriate for a rootless algae occupying the no-man's land between shore and sea. I'm amazed how easy they are to find; laid out in front of us like a leathery banquet.

### **Pilfered petals**

Julia and I head back to the Land Rover, each clutching a carrier bag of kelp. "It's got a strong flavour that's good with beef," she tells me, "although I might put this in my bath." I've no interest in its skin-rejuvenating properties, but I am keen to cook with it. Who knows, after all my traumatic childhood rockpool encounters — its plasticky strands wrapped, octopus-like, round my legs — that could be cathartic.

I look back. The arc of seaweed spanning the bay is no longer a dull, amorphous mass but a collage of subtle hues. Driving back, rust-coloured patches leap out at me from the verge. "Sorrel!" I exclaim — suddenly four years old again, showing off a new word. It's not the first time the day's foraging has made me feel childlike excitement. The experience has stirred up old memories: scouring clover patches for four-leaf freaks, blowing dandelion-seed wishes, playing hide-and-seek with rockpool crabs, collecting conkers. Now, wild places are exciting me all over again. I can see why chef René Redzepi calls foraging 'treasure hunting'.

Owen Hall is in his chef's whites readying our four-course wild meal when we arrive at Penrhiw Hotel. Neither roadkill rook-and-beef pie nor grey squirrel terrine is on the menu, although they're both among the gourmet foraged creations he and other local chefs have served up at the local Really Wild Dining Club Julia runs. Instead, living near an estuary, Owen's rustled up sea vegetable samphire and salt marsh herbs for the

***I think I hear Julia say seaweed will be the next big thing. "I've got it on my Google Alerts," she shouts, gesturing around us at shaggy wet heaps, and a partly submerged swathe of rubbery tentacles bobbing in the shallows***

**Clockwise from top left:** Seaweed; Julia on a family foraging walk; dulse, bladderwrack and sugar kelp drying out



*beurre blanc* accompanying our main of pan-fried mullet. The silverweed root, Alexander flowers and mint going in the nettle haggis starter were gathered by Julia and I. Owen sheepishly admits the rose petals for the elderflower sorbet were pilfered from a neighbour's garden.

As we tuck into the delicious, Noma-style fare, Julia tells me she thinks the gimmicky side of foraging will fizzle out — particularly restaurants serving token wild ingredients “tweaked onto plates”. “But,” she adds, “in its purest sense, it will live on because there’s something very attractive about going for a walk and accidentally finding stuff.” Having experienced that attraction myself — even if Julia did most of the finding — I hope wild food doesn’t end up on supermarket shelves. If it does, it won’t be wild any more, just another tame commodity — denying those buying it the sort of excitement I’d felt picking it.

After we’ve polished off our Douglas fir panna cotta, blackberry compote and honey crumble, Owen admits to his close encounter with the pheasant. Julia owns up to having recently nipped over a neighbour’s fence to pinch a puffball mushroom. I realise, sadly, I don’t have a confession to share. But it’s only a matter of time. I’m busy plotting raids on my own city’s larder, buoyed by the success of my kelp stir-fry. So far, I’ve just been gathering nettles growing along the canal towpath I cycle to work on (don’t tell Julia but I use Marigolds and scissors). They taste great steamed with potatoes. But every time my wheels pass inches from a plump mallard dozing by the water’s edge, I realise what’s missing. □

---

## Foraging courses

---

### **London/Hampshire: Forage London**

Expert John Rensten offers year-round foraging walks in various London parks (£25) and New Forest ‘mushroom forays’ (£60). [foragelondon.co.uk](http://foragelondon.co.uk)

### **Devon/Dorset: River Cottage**

Three one-day courses (hedgerow/mushroom/seashore) with a River Cottage expert. Includes meals, demos and tuition, from £150. See our VIP Club on p.38 for an exclusive reader offer. [rivercottage.net](http://rivercottage.net)

### **Manchester: Cracking Good Food**

Cookery classes, workshops, demos, as well as £20 wild-food walks around the River Mersey area in Didsbury and Chorlton. [crackinggoodfood.org](http://crackinggoodfood.org)

### **Perthshire, Scotland: Mushroom Foraging Weekend**

Late-September mushrooming long-weekends in Crieff and Strathearn with an expert. Includes B&B accommodation at Galvelmore House and all other meals. From £260. [galvelmore.co.uk](http://galvelmore.co.uk)

### **North Yorkshire: Taste the Wild**

Day and weekend courses, including coastal and wild food foraging, plus wood-fired cooking, from £50. [tastethewild.co.uk](http://tastethewild.co.uk)

### **Leicestershire/Derbyshire: Woodland Survival Crafts**

Wide range of survival/craft courses, including a ‘family bushcraft day’ and ‘lime bark weekend’, from £65. [woodlandcrafts.com](http://woodlandcrafts.com)

---

## How to do it

Rooms at Penrhiw Hotel start at £175 a night, based on two sharing. The hotel can arrange foraging walks or day courses for guests with Julia Horton-Powdrill from Wild About Pembrokeshire!, from £50 per person. [penrhiwhotel.com](http://penrhiwhotel.com) [wildaboutpembrokeshire.co.uk](http://wildaboutpembrokeshire.co.uk)