

Food from the woodland hedgerow river and foreshore



Introduction

This project came about as a result of asking Tricia Moxey to present a talk on *food for free* looking at the increasingly popular activity of foraging wild food stuffs, its history and any other aspects of this subject she has decided to include. I wanted to produce a hand out in the way many of our speakers do to accompany this talk, hence the booklet idea was created. I have progressed through the year making various dishes from the in season produce. Starting in early spring when not very much was useable, through summer with increasing amounts becoming available, to the absolute bounty of autumn, with only the meat dishes to complete in winter.

Food is such a universal subject that it is an excellent way of getting into conversations (particularly at gatherings, such as bar-b-ques) about wild food and wildlife. Through some of these conversations it has become apparent that I have missed a few. This is why the booklet is comb bound, hopefully to add pages in the future. Two I have in mind are syrup from birch trees and wild garlic. The syrup idea I did not even know existed, I had wanted to do a wild garlic dish but did not know where to find it, fortunately as a result of the society's renewed interest in Hawksmere spring I have found out that it grows in the small woodland that divides the two fields.

I have decided to initially omit any fungi dishes, firstly because of the danger of picking the wrong ones and secondly the extensive commercial picking that Epping Forest and other popular venues receive in the short season. It may seem strange that a wildlife group has included certain animals in this booklet. I hope you will agree that the species I have chosen are those that need to be controlled for the specie's wellbeing and the biodiversity of our country side. Our modern farming practises with large mono cultural fields have lead to the ability of these particular species to thrive so I also see it as a sustainable food source. This may be possibly more so than factory farmed animals which have given us a readily accessible meat rich diet but at what cost to the animals' lives and the environment. I have really enjoyed putting together the booklet and whilst doing the research I have learnt a lot more about each of the subjects and even some new cooking skills.

Illustrations

Front cover: frosted sloes in a hedgerow Shelley

Back cover: samphire growing at Essex Wildlife Trusts reserve Abbots Hall

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Nettle Quiche



Ingredients

Self raising flour
vegetable fat/margarine
sufficient to make pastry flan
case diameter of your choice

Quantity of eggs

Some nettles

Method

I know I probably don't need to explain how to make pastry but just in case this is how I do it. Crumble fat into flour (the ratio is half fat to flour I usually divide the fat into half margarine and vegetable fat) until it resembles fine bread crumbs, gradually add water, milk or both to form a dough, flour the surface and roll out. Line a flan dish, some people prefer to bake it blind. This requires that you place a sheet of greaseproof paper into the case and cover it with dried beans or rice thus preventing the pastry raising. Whilst this cooks at 190°C for approx 20 minutes prepare the nettles, wash and place in a sauce pan with a small amount of water boil and allow to simmer until soft (in a similar way you would cook spinach). These are now combined with the seasoned whisked egg and poured into the pastry case ,returned to the oven until the egg has set ,serve hot or cold

Tips

Just use fresh young nettle tips, the stalks are stingy and best removed.
Wear gloves.

Mustapha's plant



Ingredients

Mustapha's plant (buck wheat)
Garlic cloves
Spring onions
Olive oil
Salt
Chile flakes (optional)
Free range eggs

I am just a little concerned that this is only the second dish in the collection and we are eating a plant that we do not really know what it is! This is only possible as in this case when you receive personal recommendation from somebody who has eaten it for many years. This plant is seen as a delicacy in Turkey and Mustapha was very pleased to find it growing here. In a meeting with Tricia to establish what it was, we felt the best possibility was buck wheat, an introduced plant, the seeds being used in bird feeds. It is readily available in our hedgerows the quantity you see in the picture Mustapha was able to pick in the time we take to travel to their home, approximately fifteen minutes. Pick like asparagus removing the top five to eight inches of this rapidly growing plant. The picking season is about six to eight weeks from March to April. Serve as an accompaniment, vegetable side or on its own I had it for lunch cold the following day and I enjoyed this dish but as Mustapha said it may not be to all our western tastes it is quite bitter Tricia called it an astringent (really wanted to use that word) Happy eating

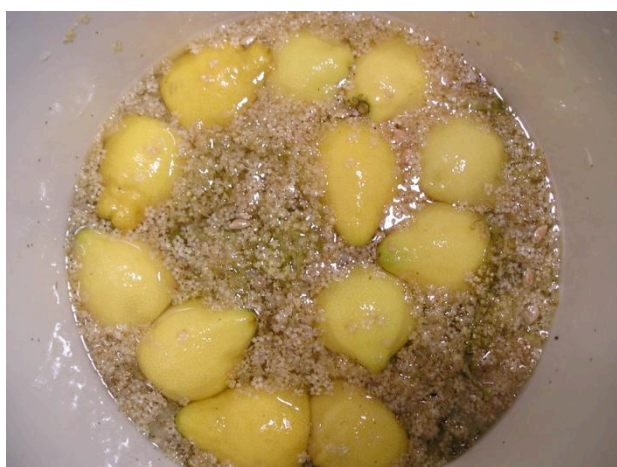


Method

Cut plants into inch lengths rinse in cold water cut and wash spring onions chop three or four garlic cloves combine all of the above in a suitable saucepan. Add the olive oil five or six table spoons, the salt and optional chilli flakes. Cook for about twenty minutes. Add the eggs and soft scramble.

Elder Flower

The name elder is derived from the Anglo-Saxon word 'aeld' meaning fire, as the heart wood makes good tinder. The hollow tube of elder was also used in bellows. From a hedge laying prospective elder would not be a very useful plant as its hard outer wood soft corky bark and pithy centre make it, I would imagine, difficult to lay. But from a wildlife view point its inclusion or self seeding offers large nectar rich flowers and copious amounts of black berries. I personally have not encountered elder in the younger hedges that we are called upon to lay probably for the better as mythology and folklore have us believe permission would have to be sought from the forest spirits to cut down any elder so as to avoid misfortune. This folklore may have built up because of its many uses; it has been described as the medicine chest of the common people. Applying the flowers to the skin was said to improve the complexion. Eyewash was also made from the flowers. Drinks and infusions were credited with relieving symptoms of the common cold. The aroma exuded by the leaves will repel flies and therefore bundles of leaves were hung in doorways of houses and dairies, even on horses' bridles. Cheese clothes were hung out to dry on elder trees to impart the fragrance hopefully reducing fly contamination on this process.



Elderflower cordial

3 pints cooled boiled water
3 lemons quartered
Rounded desert spoon of citric acid (from chemist)
3 lb sugar
24 elder flower heads

Add all ingredients together in a bucket for 24 hours stirring intermittently and squeezing lemons. Sieve through muslin cloth. Pour into plastic bottles. Dilute to drink. Can be frozen (plastic bottles only).



Elder flower champagne

24-30 elder flower heads
2kg sugar
4 litres of hot water
Juice and zest of 4 lemons
2 tablespoons white wine vinegar
(pinch of dried yeast if necessary)

Place the hot water and sugar into a bucket stir top up with 2 litres of cold water. Add lemon juice, zest, vinegar and flower heads and stir gently. Cover with a clean cloth and leave to ferment in a cool place. Check after two days, if NO sign of fermentation add a pinch of yeast and leave for four more days. Drain through muslin cloth and decant into sterilized bottles. Leave for a further 8 days before opening. Keeps for 2 months.

Line caught crayfish

First catch your crayfish. Mine have been removed from the river Roding at Fyfield and High Ongar. The line caught option is not just jumping on the band wagon of more sustainable fishing techniques, it is that the funnel trap is now an illegal method rightly so, as otters have been known to enter these traps and die as a result.

The black clawed crayfish in a similar way to the grey squirrel /red squirrel has decimated our native variety. They burrow into river banks which can lead to erosion. People who manage fishing lakes claim food reserves for their stock are severely reduced in the presence of large quantities of crayfish. It also makes the fishing very frustrating as they are constantly removing the bait intended for the fish. On the plus side they are good food for the hopefully ever increasing number otters on our rivers, but it is still going to be acceptable to remove some for your own consumption. The debate arises as to whether the crayfish should be purged in tap water. Currently it results in about a 50/50 split and those that have cooked them straight from the river say they have been fine to eat having removed the waste tube from top of the tail.

Whilst thinking of recipes for crayfish my thoughts were drawn to my favourite film Forest Gump. The scene where Forest and Bubba (a shrimp fisherman) discuss the many and varied uses for shrimp seemingly for hours. Wherever shrimp or prawns could be used substitute with crayfish tails. The two dishes pictured are my interpretation of a retro 1980s cocktail; iceberg lettuce, tomato, red pepper, cucumber, crayfish tails, Thousand Island dressing, paprika pepper and lemon. Use your imagination to recreate this popular starter. The other is very basic but tasty crayfish tails with a chilli sauce dip.



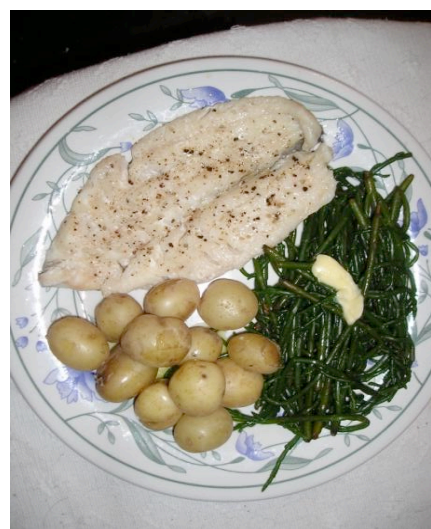
Ronnie and Reggie were unimpressed by their new found captivity





Samphire

When I first discussed including samphire in the booklet the committee raised some concerns, I think these were about habitat destruction and disturbing ground nesting birds, as opposed to the concerns expressed by Shakespeare in King Lear “half way down hangs one that gathers samphire, dreadful trade.” which refers to the dangers of picking rock samphire on exposed cracky rock faces. I decided to talk though the project with Essex Wildlife Trust and they were happy for me to go and collect some from the salt marsh at Abbots Hall. They sometimes sell to restaurants and markets. It was lovely to return to the salt marsh, having originally been there a short time after they breached the sea wall to begin its reestablishment (it clearly looks very different). I remember walking on fields with the pioneering samphire growing in-between the stubble of the last corn crop to grow there. Today it is made up of creeks and gulleys with three main plant species being sea purselane (its edible but I did not find out how to prepare and cook it in time for this edition), sea lavender and six varieties of samphire only possible to differentiate at the flowering stage. The picking of this plant begins on mid summers day for about six to eight weeks. It is sometimes referred to as sea asparagus and makes an excellent accompaniment for fish but has also had other more industrial uses in the past namely soap and glass making the latter giving rise to another name of glasswort. To prepare the samphire for cooking I washed the cut stems in cold water removing any additional plant material (some seaweed). There are different ideas on how to cook it- steaming, boil for two minutes only or the method suggested to me. Boil for a couple of minutes drain the water and re-boil in fresh water this removes more of the salt. Serve hot drizzled with a little olive oil or knob of butter my dish is simply butterflied haddock, baby potatoes and the vibrant green samphire.



Rose hip syrup

Conscious of the food miles some of my recipes were racking up I was keen to pick the rose hips locally. So I set out with my container to collect the hips I had seen ripening nicely on my dog walks near to Shelley church. It turned out I did not even have to go that far I called in to see a neighbour and they were in process of taming a fairly overgrown hedgerow that had contained rosehips now relatively easy to pick from the stems lying on the driveway. Rosehips contain high levels of vitamin C. When the supplies of oranges dwindled during the Second World War as a result of the naval blockades schoolchildren were encouraged to pick rosehips which were turned into rosehip syrup. With the renewed interest in wild food people are making rosehip syrup again. As well as the end product for me the delicate fragrance during the cooking process is worth experiencing.



Ingredients

2lb rosehips (the fruits of wild roses especially the dog rose)

1lb white granulated sugar

Method

Top and tail the rosehips whilst bringing three pints of water to the boil. Mince the rosehips through a coarse profile mincer or food processor. Transfer the fruit into the fast boiling water and bring to the boil again. Remove from the heat and leave for fifteen minutes. Pour through muslin cloth and allow the majority of the liquid to drip through. Return the pulp to the pan and add a further one and a half pints of boiling water, bring back to the boil. Remove from the heat and leave for fifteen minutes. Strain through muslin cloth again. Pour all extracted liquid into a clean sauce pan and boil reducing to one and a half pints. Add the sugar and boil rapidly for another five minutes. Pour into hot sterile bottles and seal immediately. Use small bottles as it only keeps for a week or so when opened. If you do not want to use bottles the syrup can be frozen into cubes.



Hawthorn

This is one recipe I had not planned to do, but whilst talking to people about this booklet two people mentioned it, so I thought the idea was worth trying. Having researched more about hawthorn I am even more convinced, what I thought of as nature's barbed wire, a good source of nectar and berries for birds and mammals turns out to be endowed with curative properties for our modern age, particularly the heart and blood. Hawthorn is mainly considered as a hedgerow plant but if left can form a tree of about seven to ten meters. In East Anglia there are examples of trees seven hundred years old. The wood is extremely hard and burns with such heat it can melt pig iron. Like all very useful trees it has its share of folklore and associated symbolism. The song here we go gathering nuts in May (there are no nuts in May) is probably a corruption of here we go gathering knots in May, bundles of hawthorn or may blossom hung on children's beds to protect them from illness. The blossoms appearance early in the spring has been given association with fertility at this changing time of year.



The following recipe is made from the berries or haws, to give them their correct name. I just collected enough for my experimental attempt of this recipe. Mash the haws in a bowl with water add more water and continue mashing until you have a blend that will pass through muslin cloth or sieve, (you will need to work fairly quickly at this stage as the high level of pectin in the fruit will be making it set) strain into a container and allow to set (it will probably already have the consistency of margarine). Once set cut into thin slices and dry. Air and sunshine are the preferred method but I understand drying above a sixty watt light bulb does the job when autumn sunshine can be in short supply.





Elderberry chutney

As I started to use more of the hedgerow fruits than I had previously planned to do, it became increasingly tempting to find a recipe for the large quantity of elderberries, now jet black, hanging from their parasol stems. I thought these would only be of interest to wine makers, a skill I did not really want to explore for the booklet. I am also led to believe that a good elderberry wine is probably four to five years old, so time was against me. With a little more research I chanced upon the use of the berries in chutney. Chutney is a Hindu word and process of preserving fruit in vinegar and spices brought to this country in the late 18th century, famously using a selection of home grown vegetables in piccalilli. It is often said that chutney should be left for about three months for the tastes to mellow.



Ingredients

1lb elderberries
 1lb onions
 1lb cooking apples
 4oz raisins/sultanas
 1tsp mixed spice /salt/pepper
 ¼ tsp chilli powder
 ½ pint malt vinegar
 12oz sugar

Method

The elderberries need to be stripped from their stalks and washed, placed in a large pan with the finely chopped onion and the peeled, cored and sliced apple. Add the dried fruit, spices, salt, pepper and half the vinegar. Bring to the boil and simmer until ingredients soften. At this stage add the sugar and remaining vinegar. Stir frequently (to prevent sticking) over a low heat until the sugar dissolves. Continue to simmer the chutney reducing the mixture until thick (when a spoon can be drawn through without any liquid filling the gap). Fill pre-warmed jars with the hot chutney putting waxed discs wax side down on top before screwing on the lids when cool.



Damson

We are very fortunate in the Shelley area that somebody had the forethought to plant a couple of twenty five meter sections of damson hedgerow. Most years producing so much fruit the boughs bend under the weight. The name damson derives from the Latin name which translates to plum of Damascus, capital of what is now known as Syria. Damsons were introduced into this country by the Romans, stones have been found in archaeological digs at sites of Roman camps. When ripe (late August to September) the skins of the oval fruit are blue to indigo. Ancient writings describe the use of damson skins in the manufacture of purple dye. The skin is highly acidic making these plums unpalatable if eaten from the tree. They certainly benefit from cooking producing a tasty tangy jam.



1.25kg damsons

500ml water

1.5kg sugar

Wash and destalk the damsons and put into a preserving pan with the water. Cook slowly until damsons are well broken down. Add sugar stir over a low heat until dissolved. Bring to the boil and continue to boil rapidly.

Remove stones as they float to the top, a wire basket that clips on to the pan is useful for this as it allows the liquid to drip back into the pan. After ten minutes boiling test for setting point (see crab apple jelly) later in this booklet. If setting point has not been reached continue to boil testing after about another minute repeat this until you are happy with the set. Remove from the heat pot and cover.



Blackberry

- We have finally reached what I feel is the most socially acceptable of all the hedgerow foods in season between August to October.
- Pick when the blackberry comes readily off the bramble. Take a walking stick or umbrella to pick the high ones, pick a few from each bush rather than clearing one area and don't pick near roads as the blackberries have been shown to contain pollutants.
- Blackberries contain vitamins, antioxidants and are rich in salicylates (analgesics of the kind found in aspirin).
- I despair of all the superstition around hedgerow foods and of course blackberry has its own apparently after the 29th of September the devil spits on all the remaining berries supposedly rendering them inedible. I suppose if this means more are left for the birds and mammals it's for the good, after all it is there harvest to prepare them for the winter.
- Blackberries freeze well. Place a single layer on a baking sheet to freeze then put them into a container
- Ask young people what you should do with blackberries they would probably reply "check your emails whilst away from home" encourage them to come blackberry picking.
- I initially would not have included blackberry and apple crumble albeit a classic blackberry dish but for the latest Marks and Spencer advertisement in which the actress creating this dish opens a sachet of blackberry and apple compote and sprinkles packet crumble on to it. If not for this generation maybe the next here is how it's done.



● crumble topping

Flour, butter and sugar to a ratio of 2:1:1. Combine the flour and butter until the butter is equally distributed and the mixture resembles fine bread crumbs and the sugar and stir in. I have not included any quantities for these ingredients, because the amount you need will be dependant on the size of the dish in which it is cooked. This also applies to the fruit prepare cooking apples slicing them finely lay the slices into the dish add the washed blackberries and cover with the crumble mixture cook at 180° c for 45 minutes.



● Blackberry and apple jam

Half a pint of water
4lb blackberries
1 ½ lb cooking apples
5 or 6lb sugar

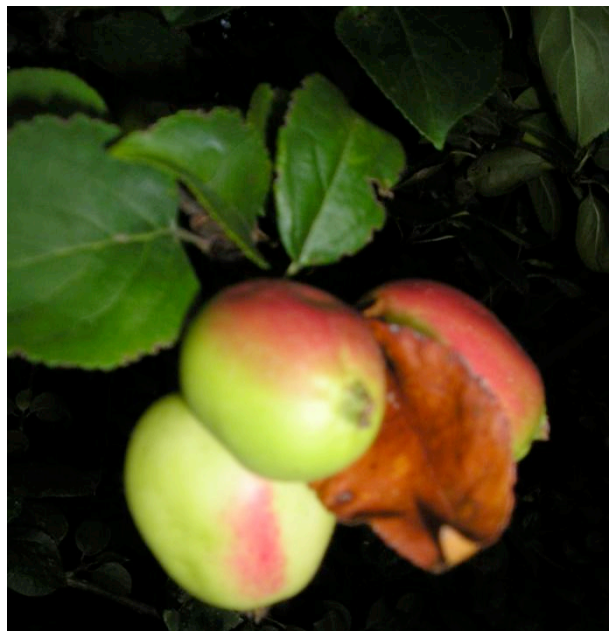
Peel core and slice apples simmer with ¼ pint of water when soft pulp with a masher. Wash blackberries then simmer in ¼ pint of water until soft. Mix together and add about 5lb of sugar. Boil rapidly and stir until setting point is reached. Pot and cover.



Crab apple jelly

The main preoccupation amongst the crab apple enthusiast is, are you picking the real thing?. Here is the evidence. Leaves are oval with a point at the tip and fine serrations either side smoothing out half way down. The fruit starts out green ripening to yellow, When fully grown it is approximately two and a half centimetres in diameter, the stems are long. The trees grow in hedgerows or on the edge of woodland. They will not tolerate acid soil. It is possible that any concern derives from the fact that many feral apples exist when you consider the development of domestic apples began at the end of the Stone Age, there are now many apple varieties long since resigned to life in the wild. Crab apple wood is very resistant to water penetration so when buildings have parts submerged under water such as in Venice this is the wood to use. When burnt in the home it produces a fragrant smoke this is also used in smoking food.

Crab apple jelly is easy to make just apples, sugar and water. Quarter the apples no need to peel, core or remove the stalks as they will be strained out. Place the prepared apples in a saucepan preferably a jam making one. Add water to just cover the fruit. Bring to the boil and simmer until the apples are pulped. You can aide the process by squashing the softened apples against the side of the pan. If the pulp appears too dry add a small amount of water. The pulp is now put into a muslin bag and allowed to drip into another saucepan. Proprietary products are available to suspend the muslin bag but this can be improvised, I used a piece of plywood with a hole cut into it with nails driven through to hang the muslin from, supported between two chairs. Do not be tempted to squeeze the bag as it will make the jelly cloudy. Allow the pulp to drip through for twenty four hours. Measure the collected liquid and put this into the cleaned jam saucepan. Add one pound of sugar per pint of extracted apple juice and bring this to the boil and simmer (skim of the froth) until setting point is reached (setting point is established by putting a small amount of the solution onto a plate that has previously been in the refrigerator, if it wrinkles when pushed with your finger it will set). Place in clean pre-warmed jars. This is a template for all jelly making regardless of the fruit type.



Blackthorn

This is one of our native hedgerow plants, the factor that keeps it out of my hedge plant top five is its readiness to sucker out and form dense thickets. Wildlife takes full advantage of this reasonably impenetrable barrier with its vicious black thorns. It is a valuable nesting site for birds such as the black bird, song thrush, finches and white throat. The leaves provide food for the caterpillar of brown and black hairstreak butterflies and many moth species. The black thorn is the first of the hedge row plants to come into bloom with clouds of delicate white flowers emerging before the leaves. At this time of year there is often a spell of cold weather known as a blackthorn winter. The fruits (sloes) ripen slowly throughout the year and should only be picked after the first frosts. At this stage it is easy to see they are the early ancestor of plums. The wood from this relatively small tree has some well known and some less well known uses. The shillelagh, the Irish staff/weapon, is made from the heavy dense blackthorn. The usher of the House of Lords is known as black rod because he knocks on the door of the house of parliament with a blackthorn stick to demand its opening. Witches were said to carry wands of blackthorn, when they were burnt at the stake blackthorn was thrown into the fire. At completely the other end of the spectrum, the crown of thorns made for Jesus at the crucifixion is said to have been made from blackthorn. How I get from this to sloe gin I am not sure I think I have over done the jam theme so here's the classic sloe recipe.



For a 70cl bottle

Wash and remove any stalks from the sloes, prick the skins with a darning needle, fork or knife. Fill a clean 70cl bottle with the sloes; add 8oz of caster sugar. Fill with warmed gin, shake. As the sugar dissolves add more gin until the bottle is full. Secure the lid, shake well and lie on one side for two months shaking the bottle twice a week.

Sweet Chestnuts

Whenever I hear the phrase 'introduced by the Romans' I think of a sketch in Monty Pythons 'Life of Brian' where a small group plotting rebellion against the roman occupation ask "what have the Romans ever done for us?" Then members of the crowd pipe up "well there's the roads, sanitation, baths" the list continues to the reply "apart from those, what have the Romans ever done for us?" To that list add sweet chestnuts. They planted chestnuts to feed the troops as they advanced on their various campaigns across Europe. There were whole communities in southern Europe without access to cereals that relied on chestnuts as their main source of carbohydrates. In this situation they are not just roasted but used to make flour for bread and polenta. Surprisingly considering the length of time these trees have been here they are less well known than the horse chestnuts that were only introduced about two hundred years ago. This year the Tree Council has introduced a policy to record more of these beautiful ancient trees, perhaps to counter the dominance of oaks in the current records. One particular tree the Tortworth chestnut in Gloucestershire would have been a landmark tree when King John was on the throne. The chestnut is quite often managed in a coppice system which would traditionally produce fence posts and chestnut paling fencing. Larger trees can be used for building in a similar way to oak.

How to roast chestnuts

Preheat oven to 220 °C

Slice a cross into the chestnuts to allow steam to escape (they would explode without the cross).

Roast for 25-30 minutes.

Peel the nuts when they have cooled sufficiently to handle.



Chestnut stuffing

100g butter

2 medium onions

150g duck, chicken or pork liver chopped

5 leaves of sage chopped

2 tsp thyme leaves

30-40 chestnuts lightly toasted peeled and quartered

150g fresh white bread crumbs

3 tbsp chopped parsley

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Melt the butter in a thick bottomed pan season and cook the onions, liver, sage and thyme on a medium heat for 2-3 minutes then remove from the heat and mix in the bread crumbs, chestnuts and parsley season to taste then stuff your bird.



Hazel Nuts

Hazel takes its name from the Anglo Saxon name haesel knut which means cap or hat referring to the cap of bracts (modified leaves) that surround the nut when it is on the tree. Hazel grows in hedgerows or as an under-storey within deciduous woodlands. They grow as clumps of slender stems and readily respond to coppicing which can extend the life of the tree from the expected 50 to 70 years up to 500 years. The stems are put to a variety of uses, hazel can be split length ways and even bends back on its self making it ideal to weave wattle animal hurdles or the walls of medieval houses when daubed with mud and straw. When bent and twisted into u shapes it is used to hold down thatch on roofs. Like willow, hazel can be used to make baskets and other containers. Walking sticks or shepherds crooks also make use of the pliancy of hazel as the shape required can be bent into the growing tree to be cut out when formed. We use hazel for the stakes and binders when hedge layering. I have also recently seen hazel woven into screens at the side of busy roads. The uses don't stop at the wood as the leaves which are the first to appear and the last to fall were fed to cattle as a fodder and were even said to increase a cow's milk yield. Then of course there is the nuts a plentiful (grey squirrel permitting) and easily stored source of protein. Their importance was recognised in the past; holy cross day, the 14th of September children were given a day of school to pick nuts this continued until the First World War. Nut crack night was celebrated some time in November when the stored nuts were opened. Having just had our own nut crack night here is my suggested recipe.

Hazel nut, honey and blackberry yogurt

Make a blackberry sauce. Stir into Greek yogurt according to your taste. Into more Greek yogurt stir honey and chopped hazel nuts Again use your taste as a guide to the quantity. Combine the two yogurt flavours stack or swirl.



Rabbit

Introduced by the Normans around the year 1200, rabbits were initially kept in enclosed warrens looked after by warreners. Surprisingly rabbits did not become a widespread species for about 400 years after their introduction. Ferrets would have been used to harvest the meat and fur from this live food larder, the method I consider to be the best way of obtaining this excellent meat source. I realise that in this day and age we need to justify and explain all forms of hunting. To help I would like to look at the alternatives. Guns, I am not anti gun as they are probably the most humane of the other options, rifles being better than shotguns for lead free meat. Poisonous gas is indiscriminate killing whatever happens to be in the warren. Rabbits die underground and the meat is wasted purely a pest control exercise as was the introduction of myxomatosis in 1954, this caused a slow lingering death. At one point about 95% of the rabbit population died from this disease. The country side would have been littered with dead and dying rabbits which looked so awful people were put off eating it. However they have once again reached pre-myxomatosis numbers having developed resistance to the virus. Snares, any wildlife can be caught even non target species, this probably lead to the use of cage traps. They are better but possibly stressful for the captive animal before it is dispatched or released. Ferreting uses the rabbit's natural instinct to run away from a predator, hopefully into purse nets placed over the exits of the warren. If caught they are quickly and humanly culled. Ferreting takes place in the winter months October to March when rabbits are not breeding. It has been practised for about 700- 800 years and has not really changed; the only modern adaptations to this activity are ferret finders, electronic devices used to locate the ferret's position underground and nylon nets. I still prefer the hemp ones. I feel there is a need to control rabbit numbers when you consider statistically one pair of rabbits in a five year period would produce a million descendants. Agriculture and forestry can be seriously affected by rabbits causing damage to growing crops and trees. I would never want to see the countryside without rabbits in fact rabbit grazing in certain areas such as chalk down land or mature woodland (areas not suitable for crops) can be beneficial to wildlife, keeping invasive plants like bramble gorse and hawthorn at bay allowing low growing flowers to survive.

Ingredients

2 rabbits skinned and jointed
55g bacon derinded and chopped
200g onion peeled and chopped
6-7 juniper berries
2 sprigs fresh thyme
60ml calvados (brandy or cider)
60ml port (red wine)
240ml water
25g butter
1 tbsp vegetable oil
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Method

Heat the oven to 180°C/ 350°F/gas 4. In a deep fireproof casserole dish, melt the butter add the oil and sweat the onions and bacon for about 2 minutes or until soft. Remove the onion and bacon and brown the rabbit joints on all sides in the residue. Return the onion and bacon add the thyme and crushed juniper berries. Flambé with the calvados, add the port and water to moisten. Season with salt and pepper. Cover and cook in the oven for about 1 hour. Remove from the oven and stand for 10 minutes before serving.



Wood pigeons

Wood pigeons are the most numerous of all our native birds and their numbers are increasing exponentially. They are the worst agricultural pest and can do a fair bit of damage to allotments or vegetable gardens particularly in the cold weather. Their varied diet may help to explain the population growth. They eat plant matter, seeds, leaves, fruit, berries, nuts and flowers, occasionally eating small snails and slugs. The inclusion of oil seed rape in the farming crop rotation has given the pigeons a food source to see them through the winter months. Pigeons have also adapted to life away from the countryside to one in our gardens where they have taken advantage of people's increased levels of wild bird feeding. Pigeons breed from April to September (sometimes longer if weather permits) they nest in hedgerows or trees normally laying two white eggs having up to three clutches in the breeding period. The incubation is 18-20 days shared by both adults. The young pigeons or squabs are fed on pigeon milk secreted from the crop. The only bird to produce a milk like fluid similar to that of mammals. Pigeons are generally obtained by the following methods. Decoying - hide is built and artificial or dead birds are used to attract pigeons within effective shotgun range (20-35 yards). Roost shooting - guns position themselves in woodlands where pigeons are known to roost and wait for the birds to return from their days feeding mainly carried out in February and March when the trees are bare. To remove the breast meat pluck the feathers from that area, take off the skin. Then cut down the length of the keel bone, continue to cut close to the carcass to detach the fillet.

Ingredients

- 2 wood pigeons
- 100g black pudding thickly sliced
- 100g smoked bacon cut into lardons
- 100g bag of salad
- 2-3 table spoons olive oil
- 1 table spoon balsamic vinegar
- Salt and pepper

Method

Wash the salad and put into a bowl. Heat a frying pan with a little olive oil and add the bacon. Once the bacon fat has begun to run add the pigeon breasts. Fry the black pudding in a second frying pan. Cook both over a medium heat for 2-3 minutes each side. Remove the pigeon, bacon and black pudding (keep the pigeon pan) slice each breast into 4-5 pieces and crumble the black pudding. Add the meats to the salad and stir gently. Add the vinegar and olive oil to the warm pigeon pan and deglaze. Pour this dressing over the salad. Stir gently and serve



Squirrel

During the year I put this booklet together an independent supermarket trading under the Budgens name courted controversy by selling squirrel meat. I hope this was intended to encourage the customers to make use of wild foods (as in my case) rather than some free additional advertising. It would be interesting to see if they continue to sell it. The grey squirrel is another of our introduced species first here in 1876 (surprising recent when you consider how wide spread they are). They have faired well in what was originally the domain of our native red squirrel. They have certain genetic and physical advantages over that species that make them so successful. These include an immunity to squirrel pox even though they can be carriers. Also they are bigger than the reds and can use their size to drive them out. The greys can digest acorns giving them a food source unavailable to the reds. They also eat hazel nuts, sweet chestnuts, beech masts, tree bark, fungi, leaves, and flowers. They will also raid birds' nests for the eggs and young. Squirrels breed twice a year giving birth in March/April and again in June/July after a gestation of 42 days. Generally 3 kittens are born per litter. These will be ready to live independently at around 14 weeks and set up a dray of their own. They breed for the first time after one year. The dray is a beach ball sized nest of sticks and leaves the summer one being of looser construction than the winter accommodation. Squirrels do not hibernate as they cannot store enough energy but would be less active in extreme cold weather, occasionally emerging to find nuts they have buried in the woodland floor. Love or hate them it is hard not to be impressed by their agility and athleticism particularly when they are working out how to obtain nuts put out for the birds in supposed squirrel proof situations. There were even squirrel assault courses and intelligence tests set up on some nature programmes which made interesting viewing.

Squirrel ragout

1-2 table spoons rapeseed oil
1 large onion finely chopped
2 large carrots finely chopped
2 sticks celery finely chopped
2 squirrels portioned
200g smoked bacon lardoons
250ml chopped tomatoes
1 litre stock
Glass red wine
1 bay leaf, sprig of thyme and rosemary salt and pepper

Method

Heat the oil in a frying pan to a medium heat, add the onion, carrot and celery and cook until soft, but not coloured. Transfer to a large casserole pan. In the same frying pan sauté the lardoons until golden. Add these to the vegetables. Brown the squirrel portions and place in the casserole pan. Deglaze the pan with wine keeping all the brown bits. Pour into the casserole pan stir in tomato, stock, herbs and seasoning. Simmer for one and a half to two hours. Remove the meat from the bone when tender. Remove the herbs, pass the source through a sieve retaining as many of the vegetables as possible. Reduce the sauce by a third. Season to taste and add the squirrel.



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