

# Plants gone wild

A forgotten tradition in Europe, foraging has had a spectacular resurgence over the last few years thanks to the success of Denmark's René Redzepi and a host of local chefs who have put the humble weed back on the menu, writes Sheridan Randall.

A weed used to be a plant that had the audacity not to grow in rows, and for it troubles was either pulled up or sprayed with herbicide by enthusiastic farmers and gardeners. How things have changed. Denmark's Noma, Melbourne's Attica and Hobart's Garagistes have all grabbed the headlines for their innovative approach to foraging their menu staples, while many Lebanese and Italian restaurants have been quietly doing it for ages without making a fuss about it.

Melbourne-based Doris Pozzi, author of *Edible Weeds and Garden Plants of Melbourne* and foraging expert, grew up in an Italian household "where foraging, as well as growing our own food, was very much what we did".

"What we think of as weeds are really a mixture of introduced and native plants," says Pozzi. "In urban areas probably about 80 per cent of what we see is introduced, but as you go further out you get more bush foods."

It didn't take long for introduced plants to get a strong foothold in Australia following the arrival of the First Fleet, with some seeds coming by accident on people's clothing and cargo, and others being deliberately introduced.

Pozzi regularly conducts foraging tours, including one for the front of house staff at Attica, where she introduced them to the delights of plantain, a plant that grows wild in between the rows of vines at the One Thousand Candles organic vineyard in Victoria.

"Plantain is long and thin and with this limp sort of leaf and doesn't really look like anything else," says Pozzi. "It's a lovely green that you can put into salads, but it is unusual because it tastes a little bit like raw mushroom."

Purslane is another weed that is becoming more common on menus.

"It's really succulent and green and can be used in a

lot of salads," she says. "They're really easy to spot and really high in omega-3, so instead of buying fish oil you can forage for this instead."

When it comes to finding the right place to forage, Pozzi says caution needs to be taken, especially in public areas, with councils often spraying the well-trodden areas with herbicides and pesticides.

"Outside the city is best but if people are foraging in a city I just encourage people to get off the main paths to areas that look a little unkempt," she says. "It tends to be the main places that people are walking on that the councils want to keep manicured and hence use a lot of herbicide on." Many plants considered weeds were actively eaten in the past or are still used today in other countries as a staple ingredient, with purslane featuring regularly in Lebanese restaurants and mallow featuring in Egyptian cooking.

"I was in Egypt recently, where they use mallow just a normal vegetable," she says. "Here mallow is considered to be one of the most common weeds that people are always pulling out of their garden."

The irony of all that effort being expended to pull up so many edible plants in a frenzy of weeding is not lost on Pozzi.

"Purslane would grow in massive ground cover mats all over my garden, and I would pull it up and grow iceberg lettuce which has almost no nutrition at all," she says. "It's crazy – we have so much to learn."

## Supply and demand

With so many high end restaurants now regularly using wild plants on their menus, a number of suppliers have appeared to fulfill the demand.

Native Oz Cuisine is an Australian Indigenous owned and run company that has foraging teams working weekly to cater to restaurants such as Circa and Vue de Monde, with samphire, sea blight, coastal saltbush, bower spinach, Warrigal greens, purslane, sea lettuce, rivermint, wild thyme, native pepper and paper bark among the many plants collected.

Glenora Heritage Produce also supplies a growing number of restaurants and chefs with wild



Dandelion.



Nettle.



Wild fennel.



St John's wort.

## Bonetto's pick of wild plants in Australia

Amaranth – leaves in soups and casseroles, seeds in breads and cakes

Fat hen – leaves in stir-fry, seeds as flour for bread

Dandelion – leaves in salad, roots as coffee substitute

Wood sorrel – leaves in salads, flowers as garnish

Chickweed – young leaves used in salads or as garnish

Mallow – young leaves in frittata, seed pods as finger food

Wild fennel – young fronds as herb, seeds as tea

Nettle – young shoots in soups and tea

Rambling dock – leaves as pot herbs and baked with fish

Scurvy weed – young shoots in casseroles and risottos

Warrigal greens – leaves and stems in curries and as a pot herb

Sowthistle – young leaves in salads or sauteed in oil with lemon

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plants, such as wood sorrel, fat hen, nettles and purslane, that grow nearby their organic heirloom farm in Tooborac, north of Melbourne. Owner Andrew Wood, along with his business partner Jill McCalman, used to weed them out of their herb garden "without realising what they were".

After some research they concluded their energy might be better spent collecting them. Chefs coming to the property became intrigued and started to take various wild plants back to "play with". Since then, weeds have become a substantial part of their business, so much so that they forage beyond their farm to keep up with demand. However, they have no intention of trying to cultivate them.

"We know that nettle season is winter and spring and they'll just come up," Woods says. "The thing about weeds is they are such a nutrient product because they are opportunistic, as they grow in the right season in the right conditions. I reckon if we started to cultivate them you would lose a bit of that."

People have been eating stinging nettles in Europe for hundreds of years, particularly as they were one of the first plants to appear after the winter snow.

"They would go nuts on nettles and get this amazing boost of vitamins and minerals after months of not having anything green," he says.

Glenora has built a loyal following for their nettles at a weekly farmer's market.

"There's another one we've started to harvest called fat hen," he says. "It's like a small shrub, and the leaves you treat like silver beet, you can just break them and cook for 10 minutes or so with garlic and pancetta and that sort of stuff. It's very high in nutrients and is quite delicious. Summer purslane is starting to get a bit of a following as well, which is direct result of seeing it on other menus."

## Foraging club

Sydney-based foraging expert Diego Bonetto was involved in last year's Wild Chef Challenge, part of the Sydney Morning Herald Crave Sydney International Food Festival.

"I grew up on a dairy farm in Italy and foraging is something everybody does from an early age, knowledge passed on from generation to

generation," Bonetto says.

When not conducting foraging tours, Bonetto collaborates with chefs who want to work with foraged ingredients on specific occasions.

"What I teach is just recycled information already," he says. "It's knowledge that our ancestors knew by heart, but got lost during the industrialisation of food and agriculture."

The good news is it doesn't take long to rediscover, according to Bonetto, but adds as an aside that there are some common sense rules necessary when foraging.

"Firstly, positively identify everything," he says. "Don't just go around with a PDF you printed from the internet trying to guess which are the plants. It's pretty hard to get food poisoning but it's not impossible. Many taste bad so you wouldn't eat them anyway, but in terms of mushrooms you can pay with your life if you don't make the right decision."

"Best of all go with someone who knows. Foraging is something that you learn through action so you need to be taken to see what it looks like in its environment and get to familiarise with the plants."

I collaborate with a lot of indigenous people and they say once you do the story you own it, but you need to do it first. It's not enough just to read about. The smells, the colours, the colony and how they grow in conjunction with other plants – all these details help you identify species with confidence."

Rule number two is to forage in your own backyard.

"Especially in urban environments where you don't know what's safe, what pesticides have been used, and what the history of the ground is where they are growing. In your own backyard you know what's happening," he says.

The third and final rule is simply tread lightly.

"Never over harvest," he says. "Be sure you don't crop all of the flowers and all of the seeds so it is there for you to come back to."

So does this spell the end of farming as we know it, with chefs simply gathering what they need for the day from the side of the road as they come to work? Bonetto thinks not.

"We are not talking about survivalist skills, we are talking about gastro entertainment and enjoying something new and something special," he says.

"It's not about surviving the apocalypse." ☑



Andrew Wood and Jill McCalman of Glenora Heritage Produce.