

challenge

Foraging in the great outdoors has its risks, but *marie claire's* Little Red Riding Hood's big, bad wolf turned out to be ... a Jack Russell.

off the eaten track

Sure, you could just visit a supermarket and hand over cash for pantry provisions, but where's the fun in that? Anne Fullerton explores the "foraged food" movement to see if she can feed her dinner guests with wild produce sourced solely from the urban jungle

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It's an overcast summer's day in Sydney and I'm crouched beside a river in the dirt. A plane roars overhead while cars thunder along a main road nearby. To my right, a Jack Russell is on the loose and sniffing out a patch of warrigal greens, nostrils flickering. After a few seconds of methodical investigation, he turns and unceremoniously lifts a leg. It's not unusual behaviour for a dog, but today his canine ritual is a cruel act of vandalism. Today, he has ruined my pesto.

Foraging is not a new concept – people have been finding and eating wild food since the early hominids came down from the trees with their very first tummy rumble. To call an ancient practice a culinary "trend" seems misleading, and yet, how else to describe the appearance of wood sorrel and purslane – plants you might find in a particularly unruly lawn – on some of the world's most expensive and revered tables?

New York magazine restaurant critic Adam Platt calls foraging "an urban obsession", writing, "In this age of the relentlessly local, Brooklyn-fuelled artisanal delirium, more and more of the grand chefs around town seem to find their culinary inspiration while hiking through meadows." René Redzepi, the Danish rock-star chef whose Noma restaurant was named best in the world for the third time last year, serves up what other people pick out of their running socks (juniper twigs, bugs). And wild food expert Miles Irving, who provides many of London's Michelin-starred restaurants with foraged ingredients, goes so far as to claim the practice "expresses what is fundamental to our biology and our identity".

I'd like to say that foraging appealed to one of my nobler qualities – a passion for botany, or a desire to commune with nature. But the truth is that I can't resist free things. And neither can Redzepi. While his contemporaries airlift lobster from Brittany to Las Vegas, Redzepi charges \$250 a head for his set menu and serves nasturtiums. And not nasturtiums grown on a distant mountain top and watered daily with a thimbleful ▶



FROM FOREST TO FRYPAN

When it comes to foraging, weeds are just the beginning. Check out some of the other wild ingredients chefs are using in their cuisine.

ANTS: Indigenous Australians have eaten honey ants for millennia, but last year chef René Redzepi gave the garden ant a makeover, serving them with *crème fraîche* at a Noma pop-up restaurant in London. The flavour was likened to citrus and lemongrass.

SPRUCE: You may be more used to seeing this in the Ikea catalogue than on your plate, but the evergreen tree has long been used to make beer and tea. Redzepi pairs young spruce shoots with grilled white asparagus, green asparagus juice and whipped cream.

PAPERBARK: Foraged ingredients needn't necessarily be edible to be useful. Ben Shewry of Melbourne restaurant Attica uses a traditional Aboriginal cooking technique, wrapping whiting fillets in paperbark before grilling over charcoal.

In his Copenhagen kitchen, René Redzepi creates such dishes as langoustine with locally harvested sea vegetable (above right) and bone marrow with foraged sorrel, chickweed and woodruff (right).



Or worse (death). Then there's pollution to consider, and the pesticides many councils use to control weeds. Given the closest I'd ever come to foraging was devouring half a pack of biscuits a fellow passenger had left behind on the Eurostar train – during a particularly impoverished stint of backpacking – the prospect of venturing out alone was daunting.

That's why I seek the expertise of Diego Bonetto, an artist and urban forager who leads guided walks educating the public on edible weeds. We meet in a car park and I follow the stranger with a pocketknife into a secluded area of a nearby sports field with what, in retrospect, is worrying eagerness. This is how I come to find myself rummaging about the undergrowth with a disobedient terrier, although Bonetto is unfazed by the encounter. "Do you know how things are grown that are sold in the supermarket?" he asks. "Covered in pesticides, and if you buy organic, covered in cow's poo. Just be sensible and wash everything well."

Bonetto tells me his tours attract an eclectic mix of foodies, locavores, sustainability enthusiasts and "preppers" – people preparing for impending apocalypse. (The latter, he says, are often easily distinguishable because of their army fatigues.) As for Bonetto, he grew up foraging. In case the impressively neat moustache wasn't a giveaway, he tells me he's from Italy. He grew up on a dairy farm outside Turin.

"Come springtime, we would go out to collect dandelions," he says.

"Dandelions? Really?"

"Oh yes. You know, in the 19th century people used to pull out grass from the garden to make room for dandelions. Now, we do the opposite."

He rattles off Latin botanical names as he digs plants from the ground and places them in paper bags, listing their many health benefits. "*Plantago lanceolata* makes a great cough medicine. *Portulaca oleracea*, extremely rich in omega-3. This is eaten all over the world and here it grows wild on the edge of concrete." Yes, but what about the taste? I want to dazzle my friends with new and exotic flavour profiles, not prevent early-onset heart disease. Some of the weeds have what can only be described as a grassy flavour, but others have a far more familiar taste. Wood sorrel is pleasantly lemony, while wild fennel has a potent aniseed tang. Dainty garlic flowers taste exactly like their namesake, as do onion weed flowers, which, according to folklore, have the advantage of working as a love charm.

After three and a half hours of foraging, I have a lot of greens and garnish, but still no protein or carbohydrate. As

'You can eat poplar bark,' offers forager Diego Bonetto. 'What does it taste like?' I ask. 'Like bark.'

I'm a vegetarian, the park's ample pigeon population is safe, so the only bounty left to harvest is a large, black poplar tree towards the centre of the park. "If you're desperate, you can eat the inner bark," offers Bonetto.

"What does it taste like?"

"Like bark."

A quick search on my phone reveals that its leaves have "a strong turpentine odour and a bitter taste". "A famine food," says one site, "it is only used when all else fails." In my case, that's still a few hours away, so, instead, I decide to consult Karl Firla, chef and owner of acclaimed Sydney restaurant Oscillate Wildly, for some menu suggestions.



Right: our writer's excursion into the wilds of inner Sydney proved to be surprisingly fruitful. And chef Karl Firla adds to her menu with a few of his own foraged ingredients (above).

Firla cooks with foraged food on a regular basis but, like Bonetto, he acknowledges urban man cannot survive on foraging alone. He suggests some complementary flavour pairings (acidic wood sorrel with something rich, and purslane, a succulent, with dry foods like fish), and gives me a few ingredients from his own kitchen to take away. The most appealing of these is samphire, a salty, crunchy, bean-like plant that grows at the sea's edge and that I spend the rest of the afternoon mispronouncing as "sand fire".

THE DINNER

With no specific recipes in mind, I decide to consult the high priest of wild haute cuisine. When it comes to foraging, René Redzepi wrote the book. Er, literally. It's a heavy tome with a white cover and chic typography called *Noma: Time And Place In Nordic Cuisine* (Phaidon, \$69.95). It would look more at home in the gift shop of a modern art gallery than a suburban kitchen, and instructions are straight from the script of a '60s Bond film: "Load a spray paint gun." "Submerge in liquid nitrogen."

I browse the internet for a Redzepi recipe that won't require birch sap or a prep time of several weeks, but finally,



Dinner is served: warrigal greens dip (right), then wild fennel and goat's cheese risotto, samphire and sautéed dandelion (above).

unconvinced I should take advice from a man who thinks some food-stuffs "taste better when they die in your mouth", I decide to wing it.

First up is a dip made from warrigal greens. It's a spinach-like plant that, when eaten in large quantities, can cause kidney stones, so I blanch it to remove the problematic oxalates and place it in the food processor along with garlic, macadamia nuts and parmesan, then add a garlic flower garnish. The result is an aesthetically pleasing pesto dip that all three guests agree is tasty, although the person who scoffs it down comes from Poland – the only country I know of with an illegal garlic racket.

My main dish, a wild fennel and goat's cheese risotto, is described variously as "edible" and "like liquorice clag", but everyone finishes what's on their plates and generously agrees that the fault lies with my cooking rather than the ingredients.

Next is samphire, which is sometimes called "sea asparagus". All I do is lightly steam it and cover in melted butter and the reception is so euphoric I feel like Christopher Columbus returning from the New World with corn. The words "new favourite vegetable" are mentioned. (The fact that I didn't forage it myself is not.) Fresh, crunchy and naturally salty, one guest likens it to "ocean edamame".

The remaining side, sautéed dandelion leaves, is reviled by all. Embracing cuisine's current love affair with American comfort food, I'd consulted a Southern recipe and pan-fried the leaves with garlic, salt, pepper and chilli. My two most masochistic friends finish their serving wearing the grim face of a politician caught in a sex scandal. I, on the other hand, can't swallow a single sinewy, fibrous mouthful.

THE VERDICT

Despite the enthusiasm of my guests, my night of

foraged feasting ends with a wine-fuelled call to a local pizza joint – not typically regarded as a marker of gastronomic success. But if there's one thing I've learnt from my foray into wild eating, it's that there is more to food than just filling stomachs.

Whether you're eating live fjord shrimp dipped in butter emulsion at the world's most experimental restaurant, or making a decades-old biscuit recipe with your nan, food is about the experience as much as the flavour. Not just what you eat, but where and with whom and how it got there in the first place. Have I cooked more delicious things for my friends? Sure. But none of them has intrigued, delighted or – I'll admit it – worried them in the same way. There's a primordial kick in heading out into the world and unearthing your own food, and it's one very few city dwellers get to experience. The results might not have been exactly what I'd hoped, but the process was a lot more interesting. And if nothing else, I can guarantee this: I'll remember the digging, the dandelions and that cheeky Jack Russell long after the greasy pizza boxes are gone. ■

SOURCE SAFELY AND LEGALLY

It goes without saying, but we'll say it anyway: foraging can be extremely dangerous. The safest way to introduce foraging to your diet is to go out with a local expert. Not only will they be able to identify edible plants, fruits and fungi correctly, but they'll know which areas to avoid because of pollution or council management programs. Diego Bonetto guides walks in NSW (www.weedyconnection.com) and Doris Pozzi, author of *Edible Weeds And Garden Plants Of Melbourne* (www.edibleweeds.com.au, \$18) runs regular workshops in Victoria. Laws on taking plants from public land vary depending on whether the species is native or introduced, and between states, municipalities, national parks, reserves and state forests. Gathering some plants may require a permit. Illegal collection can result in fines of up to \$220,000 or a prison sentence, so always check with your local authority.