



WILD THINGS

To eat *truly* local, follow forager Langdon Cook's lead and unearth ingredients for a tasty found meal. **BY LOLLY MERRELL**

THERE'S A WEED that grows along the loamy trails of the Pacific Northwest that can reach more than 10 feet high and sprout inch-long thorns so dense that its tentacles have been known to imprison hikers. Fittingly named *Oplopanax horridus*, or Devil's Club, this nasty plant is ready for a starring role in *Little Shop of Horrors*. But tonight it's sizzling in a cast-iron skillet precariously perched on my backpacking stove in Washington's North Cascade Mountains.

This is a radical departure from my typical trail-side cuisine. I'm a hiking and camping fanatic, always on the hunt for memorable waterfalls, lakes, and vistas. Food is usually an afterthought on these treks—beef jerky or instant oatmeal are all I need to fuel me toward the next heart-stopping landscape. This time, though, my eyes are glued to the ground in pursuit of something to eat.

My guide in this adventure is food writer and forager Langdon Cook. In 2008 he began blogging about his wild-edible gathering expeditions in this region; that effort eventually led to a book, *Fat of the Land* (Mountaineers Books). Unlike the nature survivalists of yesteryear, Cook is interested not in getting by on insects (though he's choked down a few in his day) but in discovering real food. He's a big part of the hyper-locavore movement, which embraces foraging as a sustainable and delicious way to eat. Cook has made cream of chanterelle soup, risotto with fiddleheads and morels, and fried dandelion "burgers" from ingredients found underfoot. If that sounds like the kind of food that belongs on a restaurant menu, that's because it is. Wild ingredients are now staples at field-to-fork eateries nationwide, from Devil's Club-infused chocolate sauce at the HerbFarm near Seattle to fried Queen Anne's lace flowers at McCrady's in Charleston, South Carolina.

Fancy silverware aside, Devil's Club is the first course of our three-day foraging fest. The thorns had stung my palm when we harvested the weeds by cutting them just a few inches from the tops, but now they tame in the pan. The cooked flesh is firm, like sautéed asparagus with a woodsy artichoke flavor. Cook admits he's prepared Devil's Club only once before, as an herbal accompaniment, and as I chew, I wonder if our hearty sample might lead to unfortunate repercussions. Hemorrhaging? Hallucinations? GI distress? Thankfully, my stomach and I are in good hands.

In the wrong ones, foraging can indeed be a dangerous sport. Its history is laced with lore of mushroom poisoning and run-ins with deadly weeds. Even with his decades of experience, Cook meticulously combs books, shadows seasoned foragers, and even consults scientists before sampling new wild edibles. "Part of the fun is learning the whole story behind a new plant," Cook explains as



PREP WORK

- 1 Morels and wild violets.
- 2 Cook harvests a morel by cutting it at the base.
- 3 Boiling nettle leaves for a few minutes gets rid of the sting of their prickly hairs.



we search the scraggly branches of a blowdown, where trees have keeled over and decayed, for a stash of morels. In the distance, another group of mushroom hunters tread lightly, carrying daintily woven baskets to allow spores from their harvest to escape and repopulate.

Bent over pine needles on the rumpled forest floor, we continue the lesson in mushroom hunting for two more hours. When trillium begins to fade, spring porcini season is afoot. A hot day can bring a flush of them, but it can also bring fly infestations—check caps and stems for worm holes. Where there's a "cheerio" (the remnant hollow stem of a picked morel), there's likely to be an undiscovered bounty growing close by. Mind the "false morel," a twin but for a cottony texture inside the stem; it's toxic. Your perfect specimen is larger than a walnut, with a firm pitted cap and a hollow stem.

Soon we spot the brainlike tan morels everywhere, and we whoop and snatch up our discoveries like prospectors. I crouch under a fallen hemlock and carefully clear the area around two perfect caps. Excitedly, I call Cook over to cut the stem near the soil with a small paring blade that he keeps sheathed on his belt gunslinger-style. He points out a porcini nearby, its small cream-colored dome peeking out from moss and decomposing leaves. Lost in the hunt, focused on the minutiae of the forest and rewarded for our diligence, by midday we have a sack filled with meaty morels, a handful of egg-smooth porcinis, and a puffball mushroom the size of a grapefruit. A morning of meditative

focus and a few hands-on tips, and I had gone from neo-fungi-phyte to someone who had earned a very good dinner.

AT HOME IN THE WOODS

Cook has been stirring around in the wilderness his whole life, first as a kid in the Connecticut suburbs, then as a fly fisherman in the West, and finally during a year living off the grid when his wife, poet Martha Silano, won a fellowship that landed the family (their son, Riley, was 3 at the time) in a small cabin nestled in Oregon's backwoods. Cook decided to leave his desk job at Amazon.com and never looked back.

"We had solar panels and a small vegetable garden," he recalls, "and we planted or gathered a lot of our own food." With help from the classic guide *Putting Food By*, he grew expert at canning and drying what he found in the forest. He preserved wild berries, pickled root vegetables, picked miner's lettuce and fiddlehead ferns, and dried fish and mushrooms for the winter. Before they left Oregon, Riley could identify more than 40 birds by their songs.

When Martha's fellowship ended, the return to their city home proved harder than he expected. "I was in a funk, wandering around the city parks, trying to re-engage with the seasonal rhythms," he said. One day he was in traffic when he spotted a patch of untouched dandelions sunning in a median. He parked, collected the flowers, and baked up a batch of dandelion bread—and with it the idea to share his vision of urban harvest on his own blog.

RULES OF THE WOODS

Before you harvest a wild meal, heed this advice.

1. **Never eat anything you can't identify with 100 percent certainty.** Get guidance from a local mycological society (find yours at namyco.org) or park naturalists.
2. **Be careful where you forage.** Many wild plants are safe to eat, but they may have been exposed to herbicides or pesticides. Look for them in locations far from human impact.
3. **Consult field guides for prep and cooking instructions.** A bite of a raw fiddlehead, for example, may not be fatal, but it can cause dizziness and nausea. Cook's fave guides are *The Forager's Harvest* by Samuel Thayer and *Mushrooms Demystified* by David Arora.



GET COOKING

1 After brushing off dirt (rinsing can make them slimy), Cook cuts porcinis.

2 Sliced and whole porcinis, fiddlehead ferns, and morels.

3 Cook and Merrell scoop up bowls of “tofu” and fiddlehead ramen.

BACK DOWN TO EARTH

The morning after savoring the first meal of Devil’s Club (accompanied by morels and wine sauce over grass-fed steaks) I begin to understand Cook’s passion. I feel clear-headed and purposeful as I search for breakfast. We pick violets that border the trail leading from our base camp, dandelion heads near a glacier-fed creek, and a fistful of morels stretching out of a steep embankment. Cook removes the dandelion buds from the stems with a swift tug, then sprinkles them into the skillet with eggs we’d hiked in. The buttery omelet contains a hint of nutty grass and the plant’s nutritional punch, beta-carotene.

Climbing out of the tent at dawn, I train my eyes immediately on the ground. Each morning, we cube a mild, giant puffball for a “tofu” and fiddlehead ramen, brew nettle tea, and sauté bitter bracken shoots. All the while, I’m mainly unaware that we’re covering several miles a day in our pursuit of grub until I finally look up and see that the ragged, snow-capped Enchantment mountains are so much closer than they were that morning. I feel the familiar tug to *get there* and admire these wild surroundings from the summit, but only for a second. I have treasures to hunt and another meal to prepare. +



WILD APPETITES

The best fiddleheads have tight tendrils. Soaking them for a few minutes will make it easier to remove the papery sheaf.

FORAGED FRANK AND BEANS

SERVES 6

- | | |
|--|--|
| 2 Tbsp olive oil | 2 cups fiddlehead ferns, sheaves removed, trimmed to about 2 inches |
| 1 lb Italian sausage, cut into pieces | 1 can white beans, drained |
| 1 small onion, chopped | 1 cup dry white wine |
| 4 cloves garlic, chopped | Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper |
| 1 lb morels, quartered | |
| 1 lb porcinis, quartered | |

1. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a cast-iron skillet. Add sausage and cook until brown. Remove and set aside. **2.** Heat remaining tablespoon of oil; add onion and garlic and cook until softened, about 2 minutes. **3.** Add mushrooms in batches and cook until tender, about 3 minutes. Add fiddleheads and cook until tender but slightly crunchy, about 3 minutes more. **4.** Add beans and wine. Simmer until liquid has reduced by half. Season with salt and pepper.

HUNGRY FOR MORE? To see all the recipes from the trip, go to wholeliving.com/foraging