



Fruit for free

The wild food life is just a bowl of cherries, says **Fergus Drennan**



WILD food

Fergus 'the Forager' Drennan is attempting to live for a year entirely from foraged foods. He runs wonderful courses on wild foods and foraging (not always the same thing) throughout the year and more details are available on his website at www.wildmanwildfood.com

Wild cherry or gean trees *Prunus avium* can be found throughout the UK: large mature trees in woodland and woodland edges; smaller, more densely fruit-laden trees in hedgerows, on waste ground, near railway lines and in grassy coastal areas, mixed in with thickets of, for example, blackthorn (sloe). In fact, in the latter habitats the trees are just as likely to be dwarf or sour cherry *Prunus cerasus*. Both these varieties produce fruit growing on long individual stalks, singly or in small clusters. It ranges in colour from blushed yellow (rarely) to red and dark purplish-black – especially when fully ripe.

Bigger than a bird cherry (*P. padus*), yet smaller than cultivated cherries, wild cherries have a sublimely balanced, complex and mouthwateringly delightful flavour. Most wild food books will inform you that fresh from the tree they are too mouth-puckeringly sharp to eat, and that you must gather them under-ripe before the birds get them all. Both of these apparent facts are utter nonsense, or at least deeply suspect!

True, birds do like them but, in my experience, only really start to gorge when the cherries are fully ripe. Actually, birds often behave differently each year and seem quite unpredictable. Sometimes, for days or weeks on end, there can be dozens of sinister birds just sitting in an Alfred Hitchcock lurk of creepy watchfulness; then, just at the moment of maximum cherry ripeness, they all descend and devour like frenzied locusts or blood-thirsty piranhas. On other occasions they will completely strip almost every tree of fruit yet leave an adjacent one completely cherry-laden and untouched.

Why? Have they collectively decided to save them for later; have they detected some poison? Each year I speculate more wildly – those are my two sanest thoughts on the matter. Respecting the collective bird brain, I also leave such neglected trees well alone. Birds, on the other hand, are more than welcome to *Prunus padus*, the real bird cherry, as even for me the fruit – arranged on dangling spikes rather than single stalks – is too bitter for general usage.



Sometimes, for days or weeks on end, there can be dozens of birds sitting in an Alfred Hitchcock lurk of creepy watchfulness; then, at the moment of maximum cherry ripeness, they all descend and devour.



As to the second 'fact' concerning the reported unpalatable sourness of *P. avium* and *P. cerasus*, if there is any truth to it, it is only a relative and very subjective truth. Although very tasty, cultivated cherries have increasingly been selectively bred to reduce the acid content so that they taste relatively sweeter. As such they are nowhere near as versatile in the kitchen as the wild variety. Wild cherries can be harvested from early July or (usually) mid-July until mid-August. The longer you leave them the darker and, hence, sweeter they become. I always gather from trees about six to 15ft (1.8-4.5m) high. The branches of such trees (fully mature dwarf cherries, around 8ft/2.4m, or young geans) are very flexible and can be pulled down without danger of snapping them.

Culinary uses

You can use cherry blossoms in salads, or for wine or milk infusions for custards and sauces, in April and May. Use the ripe fruit for jams, chutneys, vinegar, pies, cakes, crumbles, cheesecake, tarts, fools, sorbets, ice cream, soups, salads, juice, cordials, pickling, wine, beer, summer puddings, fruit cheese or leather, cherry brandy, added fresh to natural yoghurt, cooked with game or meat terrines, dried or, of course, simply eaten off the tree!

Just for fun, though, let's create a three-course cherry menu consisting of Hungarian wild sour cherry soup, followed by Venison terrine with summer wild leaf salad, finishing with Cherry chocolate mascarpone mousse.



Cherry chocolate mascarpone mousse

Makes 4 glasses

250g (9oz) dark chocolate
100g (3½ oz) icing sugar, sieved
100g (3½ oz) unsalted butter, in small cubes
6 medium eggs, separated
150ml (¼ pt) whipping cream (plus a little extra for the top)
250g (9oz) mascarpone
150g (5½ oz) sweetened homemade wild cherry yoghurt

Cherry compote

500g (1lb 2oz) pitted cherries
300ml (½ pt) water
55g (2oz) sugar

METHOD

1 Make the compote by boiling the cherries with the water and sugar for 5 minutes. Strain out the cherries and return the liquid to the pan. Reduce down until thick, then mix the cherries back in and set aside to cool.

2 Melt the chocolate in a bain-marie and stir in half the icing sugar. Off the heat, melt and stir in the butter. Whisk the egg yolks and whisk them into the chocolate a little at a time. Set aside.

3 Whisk up the whipping cream in one bowl and in another, the egg whites, until they form peaks. Add the remaining sugar to the egg white and whisk up again until stiff. Alternately fold a large spoonful of whipped cream and one of egg white into the chocolate until all is incorporated.

4 Spoon an eighth of the cherry compote into the bottom of four presentation glasses (approximately 300ml/ ½ pt capacity). Then pour in mousse to one-third of the way up each glass. Place in the freezer for 5 minutes.

5 Meanwhile in a small bowl loosely mix together the remaining cherry compote (saving one cherry to garnish each glass), mascarpone and yoghurt. Using a teaspoon, spoon in a layer on top of the chocolate mousse, working from around the outside to the middle. Pour over more chocolate mousse to fill each glass. Decorate with whipped cream and a cherry.

6 Refrigerate overnight or for 6 hours before serving.

100% wild cherry wine

Makes 1 gallon

4.5 litres (1 gallon) pure wild cherry juice (from a large basket of cherries)
10 sloe or mahonia berries with a good yeast bloom on them
2 tight handfuls of oak leaves

Also needed:

Milton or similar sterilising solution/tablets
Extra, set-aside double-concentrated wild cherry juice

METHOD

1 Gather your cherries in late July or August when they are maximally sweet – just a handful at first from which to extract 50ml (2froz) of juice. Sterilise a small plastic bottle and pour in the 50ml (2froz) of boiled cherry juice. When cooled to room temperature add the whole sloe/mahonia berries, and loosely fit a lid. Place in a warm cupboard for 5 days until bubbles appear.

2 Now collect a large basket of cherries, mash and boil them for 10 minutes, and extract the juice by squeezing them through a large pillow case (or place them in a large container and tread on them – more fun!).

3 Return the juice to the pan and boil for a few more minutes. For the last minute add the oak leaves (to provide tannin). Pour the juice minus oak leaves into a large sterilised food-grade bucket with a loose-fitting cover (or an office water-dispensing container – what I use; don't fill beyond two-thirds capacity).

4 When the juice has cooled to lukewarm, add the homemade activated yeast. Place the loosely covered bucket in a warm cupboard for 7 days, then transfer the contents to a sterilised demijohn. (If there is still froth at the top, don't transfer to the demijohn until the fermentation has slowed a little.)

5 Fit with an airlock and leave to ferment out in an airing cupboard until no more bubbles appear in the airlock – approximately 4 to 8 months. Then taste for sweetness/alcoholic strength. If it is too dry, add a little concentrated cherry juice and let it ferment for another month. Decant into a clean sterilised demijohn.

6 Leave for 6 months, then decant into wine bottles. Drink then or, preferably, put down for another year or two after placing a crushed sodium metabisulphate tablet into each bottle.

Note: Although all my cherries for this recipe were wild-gathered, 50% were dwarf/sloe cherries and the other 50% were naturalised cultivated cherries.



Hungarian wild sour cherry soup (aka Meggy leves)

Serves 4-6

Up to 175g (6oz) sugar
450g (1lb) pitted fully ripe wild cherries
Zest of one small lemon
¼-½ tsp powdered cinnamon
2 cloves
Salt and pepper
125ml (4froz) sour cream, single cream, natural yoghurt or crème fraiche, plus extra for serving
1 heaped tbsp plain flour
200ml (7froz) dry wild cherry wine (optional; see recipe on page 72)
850ml (1½ pt) water

METHOD

1 First a note on sugar. The exact amount will really depend on personal preference and how sweet/sour your cherries are. I make this without sugar, but on average most recipes call for 175g-ish. Place the water, sugar,

pitted cherries, lemon zest, cinnamon, cloves and seasoning in a pan; boil for 5 minutes.

2 Meanwhile, in a medium bowl, mix the sour cream or equivalent with the flour until smooth. Temper the sour cream mixture with a ladle or two of the hot cherry liquid/cherries, stirring until well mixed. Transfer to the pan with the cherries and wine, then stir to fully incorporate. Simmer for 5 minutes.

3 Serve with sour cream at room temperature or chilled in the fridge, as is the traditional Hungarian way. In either case, cover with clingfilm (in contact with the soup) to prevent a skin forming whilst cooling. Alternatively, serve hot, or blend before serving. I like to just snip it up a bit with a pair of scissors, or liquidise a third of it.



The fruit can be frozen uncooked for later use – very useful if you need to create recipes for a magazine three months before the fruit is available!

Venison and pheasant marbled terrine

Serves 4-6

400g (14oz) (roadkill) venison steak, cut into 10cm (4") strips
350g (12oz) (roadkill) pheasant breast, cut into 10cm (4") strips
600ml (1pt) wild cherry juice
Salt
10 juniper berries, crushed
½ tsp ground cloves
½ tsp milled black pepper
1cm (1") cube fresh ginger, finely chopped
350g (12oz) pork belly, minced
2 tbsp wild cherry or plain whisky
1 tbsp wild thyme, chopped (less if non-wild)
2 medium wild garlic bulbs, finely chopped
250g (9oz) bacon, thinly sliced
70 wild cherries, fully ripe, pitted and boiled in their own juice for 2-3 minutes
30-40 medium seabee (wild spinach) leaves, briefly blanched and refreshed

METHOD

1 Marinate the venison and pheasant strips in wild cherry juice seasoned with a little salt overnight.

2 Sear the prepped meat in a very hot pan. Transfer to a bowl and mix in the juniper, cloves, pepper and ginger. In another bowl mix together the pork, whisky, thyme, garlic and a pinch of salt.

3 Line a terrine or loaf tin with the bacon – with long bits hanging over the side that can be used to fold over the top later. Make a thin layer of pork mixture on the bottom. Slit the meat pieces and stuff in one or two prepped cherries, and then wrap a blanched seabee leaf around each piece. Place a layer of them in the tin close together. Scatter over a few cherries and a thin layer of pork, pressing down to fill any gaps.

4 Put down more layers of leaf-wrapped meat, and then pork and any remaining cherries. Fold over the bacon to enclose the inner meat. Don't worry if it packs out to 1cm (½") or so above the tin; it will squash down later.

5 Wrap the whole dish tightly in foil. Place in a casserole dish, filled with enough water to come halfway up the tin. Put a lid on and bake at 180°C (350°F, gas 4) for 2 hours. Remove from the oven and put a weight on top until cool.

6 Chill to ease slicing and serve thin slices at room temperature with a lime leaf and wild rocket salad (for instance), vinaigrette and a few wild pickles.

● Adapted from a recipe in Nichola Fletcher's excellent *Ultimate Venison Cookery* (2007).

