



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

Culturally, why have we come to eat certain foods and not others? This is a question that has always puzzled me. Clearly, some plants and animals are toxic and require varying amounts of preparation to render them safe for consumption. Perhaps we lack sufficient knowledge, or are simply too lazy to bother preparing such foods? Apart from that – and of course religious, ethical, environmental and sustainability issues – the main considerations seem to be how readily available a potential food source is, and whether or not it has the type of colour, flavour, texture and appearance that we are used to. Let's expand our culinary horizons and, in so doing, develop a deeper appreciation and respect for the land, rivers and seas where such foods are to be found.

In this issue, then, I want to explore a number of wild foods that are common and delicious, and that are readily eaten elsewhere, but rarely in the UK: jellyfish (China), goose barnacles (Spain and Portugal) and snails (France and Greece). But as if these things weren't, perhaps, enough challenge for some of you, I want to go still further and introduce you to a couple of wild foods that I've enjoyed and eaten extensively, but for which I can find no historical or contemporary accounts in terms of their culinary use: squid eggs and sandhoppers!

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Seafood – and eat it!

Fergus Drennan boldly goes where no wild food enthusiast has gone before.

Green walnut liqueur

Some people, not in their right minds in my opinion, pickle green walnuts. Others use them to make a thin ketchup – tasty, but it takes three to four years to mature. A strange, almost black sherry-tasting wine can also be made from them, but perhaps the simplest and best idea is the creation of a sweet liqueur.

Approx 30 medium-sized green walnuts, or enough to fill your bottle or jar once quartered
1 vanilla pod
2 small cloves
1 medium-sized cinnamon stick
1.2 litres (2pt) good vodka – or preferably 90-100% proof edible alcohol, if you can get or make it (legally)
225g (8oz) sugar

METHOD

1 Chop the walnuts into quarters on a chopping board and put them into a large sterilised bottle or Kilner jars. Add the

vanilla, cloves, cinnamon, alcohol and sugar.

2 Seal and leave in a sunny place for between two weeks and two months. Shake the jar for five minutes initially to dissolve as much sugar as possible, then once a day during this time.

3 Store for 18 months before use. When I first made this, even after a year it tasted terrible. I forgot about it for six months, by which time it had miraculously transformed into a delicious drink. I kept taking little disbelieving sips and in a week it was all gone!



Green walnut liqueur

Goose barnacles

I came across a huge colony of these curious creatures attached to a large driftwood tree trunk/telegraph pole on a Pembrokeshire beach last year. Not knowing what they were I broke all the common-sense rules about safely working with new wild foods – i.e. know what you're eating – by boiling a few on my camp stove and tossing them in butter and lemon. Tasty but tough – I'd over-boiled them. Later, whilst talking to a Spanish chef friend, I realised that his description of a Galician delicacy, *percebes*, often served as cold tapas with garlicky aioli, could be only one thing, as indeed it was: the goose barnacle *Lepas anatifera*.

In the UK it used to be believed that because the barnacle's shell closely resembled the head of the barnacle goose *Branta leucopsis*, it was connected to the goose in some curious way. These birds rarely nested in Britain and no one had seen their eggs

“Only harvest live specimens, to include as much of the main edible tubular part as possible.”

or nests. It was therefore supposed that the geese 'grew up on the planks of ships' – the large pieces of driftwood on which barnacle clusters are often found – and that the birds finally emerged full-feathered and flew away. Indeed this fanciful theory provided a convenient way round the church's ban on eating meat or flesh on Fridays. The barnacle goose was obviously 'not born of the flesh' but from a barnacle and could therefore be eaten not just on Fridays but throughout Lent.

As with the squid eggs, (see opposite), collect goose barnacles whilst scuba- or freediving, keep your eye out for clusters attached to rocks exposed at extreme low tides (every two weeks), or check over large pieces of driftwood on rocky exposed beaches. Only harvest live specimens, to include as much of the main edible tubular part as possible. Wash well prior to cooking.

To cook them, whilst still in their shells, blanch them for under a minute in boiling seasoned water or white wine, allow them to cool and toss them in melted butter, lemon and chopped herbs. Eat the white flesh of the inner tube by first pinching off the skin, or by sucking.



Only harvest live barnacles, and include as much of the main edible tubular part as possible.

Jellyfish tempura

Jellyfish have been eaten in China and throughout Asia for thousands of years. Being very mild in flavour it's mainly their pleasing texture that recommends them for consumption. A number of different species are consumed throughout the world and some of these can be purchased partially dried and salt-preserved.

In the UK we can make use of the common or moon jellyfish *Aurelia aurita*. This can be seen in shallow waters and stranded on the beach in increasing numbers from June through to September. Only collect live specimens (if found on the sand, place in a rock pool to check for signs of life). The short peripheral tentacles, although containing stinging cells, are of insufficient strength to bother humans (nevertheless, avoid deliberately touching the tentacles of any jellyfish you may encounter).

The common or moon jellyfish *Aurelia aurita* can be found in pools or stranded on the beach from June to September.

Serves 2

2 fresh jellyfish (approximately 200g/7oz)
30g (1oz) cornflour
30g (1oz) wheat flour
A pinch of salt
1 tbsp laver (nori) flakes
1 tbsp dulse flakes
2 tsp toasted sesame seeds
100ml (3½ floz) chilled soda water or light beer
Oil suitable for deep-frying



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METHOD

1 Place jellyfish in a sieve or colander and rinse under cold running water, plunge into boiling water for a minute then remove and rinse again. Using scissors cut off the outer rim to remove tentacles. Cut into 2cm (¾") batons, boil for 5 minutes, rinse in cold water and pat dry with a tea towel.

2 Sift the cornflour, flour and salt together in a bowl; add the seaweed and sesame seeds then stir in the soda water or beer to make a thin batter. Dip the chunks of jellyfish into the batter and drop them in the hot oil to fry until golden but not quite brown in colour (about 1 minute). Lift out with a slotted spoon and place on absorbent paper.

3 Serve with a sweet chilli or sweetened soy, vinegar, sesame oil, garlic and/or ginger dipping sauce. It can also simply be chopped, boiled, tossed in this dressing and served as a cold salad or served boiled or fried with noodles.

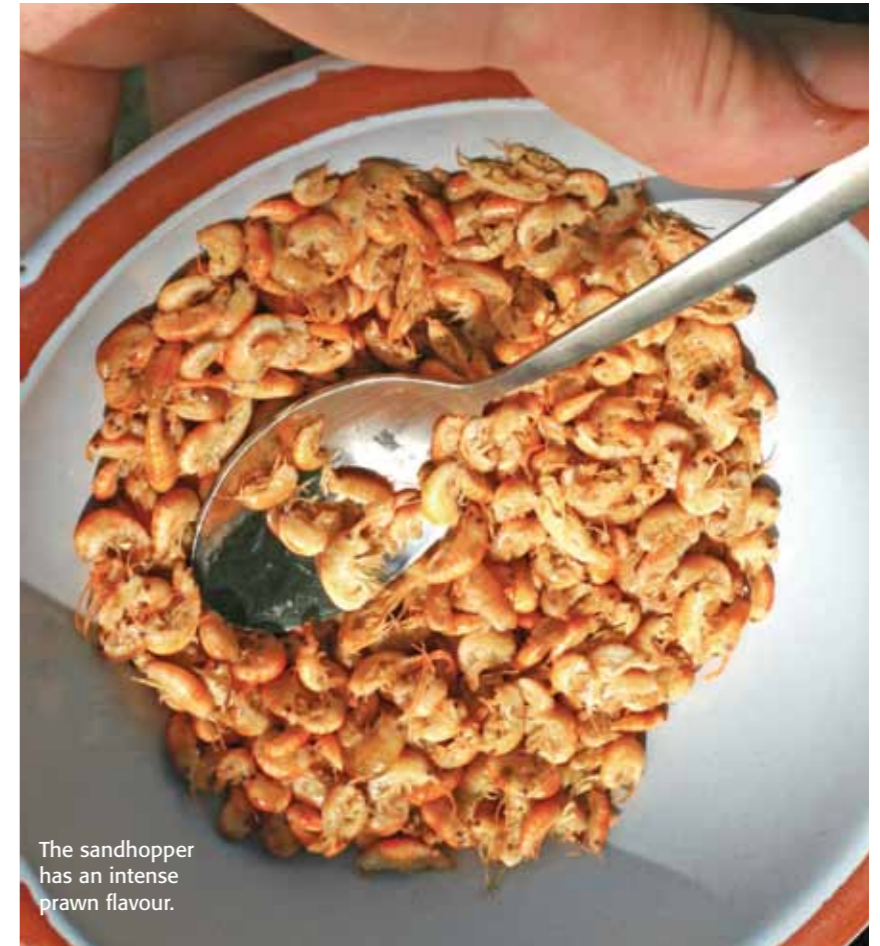


Sandhoppers

These delicious, intensely prawn-flavoured nocturnal strandline seaweed-munchers, amphipods of the *Talitridae* family, can reach up to 2.5cm (1") in length. On a moonlit summer's evening, they can create the illusion that the beach is moving and alive as you stealthily approach intermediate strandline clumps of seaweed to see them amassed in silvery profusion. Grabbing these seaweed clusters and shaking them over a large tub of seawater allows the sandhoppers to rain down and be captured in abundance. Moving along the strandline and repeating this process, it's possible to collect 2kg (4lb 8oz) per hour.

The challenge then is to separate them from the little rafts of debris they cling to so tenaciously. In Charles Campion's latest book, *Eat Up!*, I describe a method of separation which, quite frankly, is utterly hopeless! There's a much better way. This involves leaving only an inch or so of water in the tub and placing over it a similar-sized tub. The second tub is lined with cloth (glued) on all sides, so that it hangs down against the inner sides of the lower tub, about 1cm (¼") from the water. Leave for eight hours. The sandhoppers always migrate upwards, so will climb up the cloth. They can then be shaken out into a tub of clean seawater ready for use.

They are sensational fried and used to garnish and flavour all sorts of seafood dishes. Alternatively they can be boiled in milk, liquidised and strained out to leave a highly prawn-flavoured milk for soups, sauces, savoury mousses, or the rehydration of well-textured but otherwise flavourless varieties of seaweed.



The sandhopper has an intense prawn flavour.

Crispy squid egg wafers

I'll start with this fascinating food, not only because it is the most delicious new food I've discovered in recent years, but also because it has the Heston Blumenthal seal of approval – unless he was just being polite! "Wow, delicious; an intense umami flavour!" That was his description when I gave him some to munch on when we were cooking in my kitchen back in November.

I mentioned the umami taste in my last feature on seaweed for, as the all-knowing Google says, "Umami as a separate taste was first identified in 1908 by Kikunae Ikeda of the Tokyo Imperial University while researching the strong flavour in seaweed broth." It's a loanword from Japanese meaning 'flavour' or 'taste'. In English, 'brothy', 'meaty', or 'savoury' are suggested translations.

The common squid *Loligo vulgaris* lays its eggs sublittorally, attached to kelp stems, rocks and other suitable structures – or unsuitable ones, like lobster pots. You can find them when scuba-diving or freediving but, failing that, the jelly-mop-like egg clusters can be found washed up in late spring and summer all around our coast. Only collect fresh-looking specimens found at the extreme low tide line or beyond.

● Wash them well in running water, cut separate 'fingers' of egg mass from the cluster, boil for 10 minutes, then dry on a non-stick flat surface in a food dehydrator or an oven at 60-70°C (140-158°F, gas dot), until completely crisp and dehydrated. Store in an airtight container. Enjoy!



“These wafers are a great snack on their own, or can be used as a garnish to all sorts of seafood dishes (including seaweed and fish).”

Eggs of the common squid *Loligo vulgaris* can be discovered in clumps around our coastline.