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FOUR SEA WEEDINGS

and a Funeral

further wild and random escapades.



by

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For the most part, when I forage, I use three main strategies. These strategies are reflected as themes in the articles I write: Go out for the day with a view to exploring one cooking or preserving technique – smoking, pickling or lacto-fermenting for example; go foraging to collect large amounts of one item – nettles, burdock roots or rose hips for instance, and then work with them in all manner of ways; finally, and most frequently, go walk-about in a spontaneous and random fashion. That usually entails exploring new areas for which it makes little sense to plan on the basis of what may or may not be found. These three strategies complement each other well but, apart from in the last edition of this magazine, I've rarely written with this latter approach in mind. So, here we go again.....

This time I've selected four seaweeds I encountered and wish to include them, in part, for their intriguing common names, but also, of course, because they're tasty and perhaps less familiar to people than some others: Oyster Thief, Dead Man's Fingers, Furbellows, Thongweed. Of course, also, it being summer, I've included some seed and fruit recipes: great plantain, hawthorn, rowan and crab apple. "And the funeral?" you ask. Ray Mears, in his series on Wild Food, processed the tuberous root of Black Bryony to eliminate toxins, but choose not to eat it. I've eaten a whole one after processing so perhaps its use doesn't have such a funereal outcome as I've implied – but you can't argue with a good title. Safe to eat? You decide.



Thongweed (Himanthalia elongata)

Summer is by far the best time for finding the majority of seaweeds – edible or otherwise, and although there are 700 odd species found around the coast of the UK, only about 35 of that vast number have any traditional use as a human food source. Why? Availability is a key consideration, and within that the issue of

size, scarcity and distribution. Seaweeds can be categorized by colour, at its most simple, that's greens, browns and reds. Reds predominate, yet most of these grow only in the sublittoral – areas not exposed by the tides, so are unlikely to be encountered by the average (non-free/scuba diving) forager. Indeed, for that reason alone, the vast majority have not been explored in terms of their food potential – although some give off such a polyphenolic stench that only a wreckless fool would try them (Griffithsia corallinoides springs immediately to mind). Others, whether green, red or brown are simply too small, too scarce or too unevenly/poorly distributed to render them useful as a regular food source. And, of course, last but absolutely not least is the issue of pollution. Especially if eating seaweed regularly, particularly from one area, make sure the water is as clean as possible. Check with local water authorities, Natural England and the Environment agency – make a fuss! Demand healthy, vibrant and living seas!!!

Thongweed (Himanthalia elongata). This distinctive, long brown seaweed can be found growing up to 1.5 m or more at the extreme low tide mark and below and in deep rock pools on rocky shores. It attaches itself to rocks by means of a distinct two pence-sized and shaped holdfast. It's not recorded for eastern and south eastern coasts of Britain (which doesn't mean it's not there – I find excellent drift material on the South coast, so am certain it grows nearby). Excellent rinsed in sea water and dried to a crisp before eating raw. With sustainability in mind, harvest only a few fronds to within an inch of the holdfast

Seaweed Straws (adapted from a recipe in Prannie Rhatigan's excellent 'Irish Seaweed Kitchen')

Ingredient

- 100g (3oz) plain flour
- 100g (3oz) butter
- 100g (3oz) mature cheddar, grated
- 2 tspn dried and flaked laver (Porphyra purpurea, P.umbilicalis)
- 1 tspn mustard powder
- Juice of 1 lime and 1 grapefruit
- Sea Spaghetti Himanthalia elongata (a selection of long fronds) and/or Dabberlocks Alaria esculenta (cut out the long midrib to use)
- Egg Wrack Ascophyllum nodosum (a few cut length between the bladders – save the bladders)
- Sugar Kelp Saccharina latissima (a few cut strips from the centre)
- Sacchoriza polyschides (a few cut strips or thin parts of fronds)

Method

- 1) Toss the seaweed strips in the fruit juice and leave for 1 hour
- 2) Steam the Himanthalia, laminaria and Sacchoriza for 10 mins, the Ascophyllum and Alaria midrib for 30 mins to soften seaweed

3) pat dry

4) Prepare pastry: Pulse the flour, butter, cheese and laver flakes in a food processor to form a ball. Place in small plastic bag/cling film and refrigerate for an hour.

5) Roll out the dough on a floured surface to form a rectangle about 1mm thick

6) Lay a strip of seaweed along one edge of the dough (1 mm from the very edge), pressing it in gently. Roll over to encase, run a thin knife below to loosen and cut away encased strip. Repeat with the rest of the seaweed.

Placing seaweed on the rolled out pastry prior to wrapping and cutting.



Finished cooked straws. Note: I over cooked these – should be more golden brown.

7) Cut the encased pieces into 3 inch (7.5 cm) pieces using scissors and arrange on a greased baking tray. Chill in fridge for 30 mins and preheat oven to 190 °C

8) Bake until golden brown – approx 10 mins

9) Transfer to cooling rack. Serve hot or cold as a snack or starter.

Oyster Thief (Colpomenia peregrina). Geographically distributed around most of the coast other than the East and South East (although I found a small one growing off the Essex coast on 2nd Aug), the body (thallus) of this seaweed consists of a thin brown ball typically 3-7 cm across (occasionally up to 15 cm). It usually grows epiphytically on other seaweeds subtidally down to 3 metres, although is frequently encountered floating around. It tears like paper in comparison to the similar looking and more gelatinously textured Leathesia difformis.

To my mind, its hollow ball-like structure shouts out to be stuffed and baked. I like to precook a thick mixed seaweed and seafood risotto, stuff it in the sacks, and then braise in a covered dish for 30 minutes.

Note: I know nobody other than myself who has eaten this seaweed.



Oyster Thief (Colpomenia peregrina). Specimen found floating and is 12cm across its longest part.

Dead Man's Fingers

(Codium fragile).

Sometimes I'm inexplicably drawn to certain plants and fungi. I can't stop thinking about them; they even inhabit my dream world. Codium is one such species, being, ally, friend? Of course all seaweeds are unique but, risking absurdity, with its army-green colouring, branching soft and velvety/spongy and supposedly 'finger-like' thalli, it really is uniquely unique. Like many seaweeds it's extremely versatile in its culinary uses, and can be used raw or cooked for salads, rice dishes etc. In Korea it has a traditional use as a hot beverage: Chonggak Tea – unusual but tasty. Simply cut to leave the main stem, wash well to remove sand and salt, sun-dry till crisp or use a food dehydrator/low oven, grind to a fine powder and use between 1 heaped teaspoon-dessert spoon full per cup (according to taste).



A mature cluster of Codium fragile 12 inches across

Note: an interesting exercise is to competently distinguish between the native subspecies C.fragile ssp.atlanticum and the native C.fragile ssp.fragile. The two excellent books Seasearch Guide to Seaweeds of Britain and Ireland by Francis Bunker et al and Green Seaweeds of Britain and Ireland by Juliet Brodie et al are a great help in this regard – as is a compound microscope.



Dead Man's Fingers/ Green Sponge Fingers (Codium fragile): a young specimen growing among thongweed 'buttons'.

Furbellows (Sacchoriza polyschides) is a large kelp found at the low water mark and shallow subtidal on moderately exposed shores, mainly in the west and south west. It has very distinct ribboning above a large and curious looking bulbous holdfast. It grows up to 3 m.

Although the main frond can be eaten in numerous ways, it's the bulbous holdfast that has the more interesting texture and appearance. Nevertheless, from a sustainable harvesting point of view, I would strongly discourage pulling individual specimens, holdfast and all, from the rock. During the summer months just such specimens can be found freshly washed up. Provided it looks and smells very fresh, take this as a rare treat and make the most of it. I like to chop the hold fast into large chunks, boil for 45 minutes in seaweed stock and serve as a Japanese-style side dish with oysters, bean-curd and a dipping sauce.

Note: I know of nobody other than myself who has eaten the holdfast of this seaweed.





Furbellows holdfasts.

Every little (bit of drying) helps! Drying Sugar Kelp and Furbellows while waiting for the train at Pembroke station.

Hawthorn (Crataegus species). I most frequently encounter and thus make use of common hawthorn (Crataegus monogyna), the fruit of which work very well as described here. However, it's



Haws on the tree

Raw Hawthorn Jelly

Collect the fruit when fully red and ripe in August and September (if you pull them down off the tree and most of the stalks are still attached that's a good sign that the pectin content will be high

– later in the autumn it will have broken down, making it impossible to make a raw set jelly). Given you'll need to add liquid to successfully mash the fruit, coupled with the fact that they don't have an especially interesting flavour, I always use wild fruit extracts as both liquid content and flavour enhancer. (I saw Ray Mears in his wild food series using water – that's fine to begin with, after all you'll want to know what the unadulterated flavour is like, but honestly extracts make it infinitely

better). So, using hands or a potato masher, mash a minimum of 2/3rds haws with a third of another flavoursome juicy fruit. Blackberries, bilberries, wild cherries, mulberries, sea buckthorn berries (with additional honey) and Japanese rosehip extract, or even a mixture of apple juice and brandy all work excellently in my opinion. Push the pulp through a sieve (the texture is right if it doesn't drip through but, rather, you need to take it off with your fingers), mix in extra sugar or honey if desired, and place in a suitable mould. It should set solid in between 20mins- 4 hours. Alternatively, why not try this.....

Hawthorn, Crab Apple and Rowan Jelly

Makes 2 x100mil/4floz jars

INGREDIENTS

250g Haws

250g Rowan Berries

250g Crab Apples

160g Sugar

2pt Water

METHOD

Remove stalks from all the fruit, wash, halve the apples and place all the fruit in a pan with the water. Bring to the boil and continue boiling for 15 minutes. Turn off the heat, mash the fruit and pour the pulp into a muslin cloth or pillow case lined bowl. I find having a set of pillow cases to hand especially for this sort of thing to be very useful. When the juicy pulp is still hot but not too hot to handle, squeeze out as much liquid as possible. Return this to the pan, simmer and dissolve in the sugar and boil for approximately 15 mins or until a few drops placed on a cold plate develops a wrinkly surface



Ripe rowan berries on the tree



Windfall crab apples under the tree in a ditch

when you scrap it off after about a minute. Have ready hot sterilised jars (immerse and boil in water for 5 mins). Pour in hot jelly and seal ready for serving with venison and other meats.



Straining the juices and water from the mashed pulp using a pillow case.



All finished!

Great Plantain (Plantago major)

The ripe seeds of great plantain are a joy to harvest. I remember stripping the seeds from stems on childhood walks, and never imagined I'd still be doing it as the mature and sensible adult I've

now become. To make collection worthwhile you need to find a good spot. The edges of well walked paths and bridal ways by rivers and open country are good places to look. In such locations the swaying seed spikes can sometimes be so prolific as to disappear into the distance as far as the eye can see. The best time to look is late August (down South) and throughout September. Grasp the base of fully brown looking seed spikes and pull upwards along their length. After collecting a good quantity into a bowl, rub for a minute or so between the hands to remove seeds from



Great Plantain seed spikes growing on the edge of a foot path.

papery outer casings. Finally sieve or winnow to remove seeds. I like to do what I call giddy winnowing: While standing in one spot, slowly tipping the seeds and chaff from a small bowl to a larger container, turning around continuously in the process. The movement creates sufficient movement of air to blow away the chaff. Don't go to fast though or you'll fall over! The seeds, once boiled in a little water and cooled are excellent as the base for a salad dressing. Alternatively they can be sprinkled on bread prior to baking or ground down to flour. And finally, the funeral!



Putting another handful in the tub



Tub of unwinnowed seeds (it took 1 hour to fill).

Black Bryony (Tamus communis).

Due to the high steroidal saponin and calcium oxalate raphide content, all parts: root, leaves and fruit, of Black Bryony, according to Michael Wink et al 'Mind-Altering and Poisonous Plants of the World', when ingested, can lead to a burning sensation in the mouth and throat, vomiting, diarrhoea, gastroenteritis, skin irritation; and ingestion of large amounts can be fatal. Then again, Hungarian country people have used

(externally) the freshly dug root to treat rheumatic conditions, whereas Dalmatian Croats are recorded as eating the young, apparently raphid free shoots as a vegetable (Dietrich Frohne et al, Poisonous Plants 2nd ed). Being our only native and wild member of the yam family, Ray Mears and Gordon Hillman, in their TV series 'Wild Food', sought to investigate and process the roots following the methods used by Australian Aboriginals to process the closely related Cheeky Yam (Dioscoria bulbifera). This involved roasting, steaming, grating and leaching in running water. The results they say were inconclusive and left little starch content.

I used the same process I apply to Arum maculatum tubers, namely: wearing rubber/latex gloves to prevent skin irritation, scrub clean (and peel, in the case of Bryon), liquidize 2-300 g batches of chopped root with a litre of water, pour all liquidized root into a 40 litre capacity plastic tub, top up with water and stir thoroughly. This is left for 4 hours or more until the starch and other solids settle at the bottom. With a siphoning tube take off the water from within 2cm of the sediment, before topping up the whole tub with fresh water and stirring thoroughly with a stick or long spoon to mix it all up.

This siphoning and topping up process is repeated 10 times, after which the sediment is strained through a silk cloth (without squeezing), before final drying in a low oven or food dehydrator. The final solids are ground to a fine flour. The fresh root I gathered weighed almost 2kg.

I forgot (irritatingly) to weigh the final flour but, to give some idea of quantity, I used them (with 30% wheat flour) to make 8 standard-sized sweet shortbread biscuit fingers. These were tasty. I ate them all over 2 days without any ill effects. This whole exercise was worth the effort from the interest value alone, but otherwise

certainly not. It was a spontaneous decision to seek permission to dig the Black Bryony root, unfortunately I only had a (cutlery) fork with me. As



a result, the root took two hours just to excavate and, of course, many additional hours to fully process.

Black Bryony (photo 16th July) found scrambling over hedges, shrubs and woodland-margins. In August the (poisonous) berries will be green, in September red, and in October - once the leaves have died back, will be strung up in the hedgerow like ornamental beads. The tuber can be dug (with permission) at any time but is probably best early spring, autumn and winter (mark it with a stick in the autumn before all above ground parts die back).



Black Bryony root before peeling.



Black Bryony root after peeling.