



Sun, sand and seaweed



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

Fergus Drennan gets out his bucket and spade and goes in search of edible seaweeds.

Summer is the absolute best time for collecting seaweeds, and with a number of inspirational cookbooks and guides published this year, now could not be a better time for getting your feet wet!

This is my second article on seaweed for *Country kitchen*. The first (August '09) can be seen on my website (www.wildmanwildfood.com) and includes a few health and safety issues. Legally the situation is somewhat complex. See John Wright's excellent little book (details below) for the head-scratching details. Also check for lists of Biodiversity Action Plan and Red Data Book species before harvesting anything. There may also be issues with where you collect, if they are Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) or National Parks. Permissions to gather, when and where necessary, may also depend on whether you are collecting for your own consumption or for sale (please don't do the latter!). If in doubt call your local Natural England office or contact the marine section of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC). For water quality information, call the Environment Agency.

From the 690-odd seaweeds (not all edible) that are found in UK waters, I've chosen a handful to work with, selected to show just how versatile, creative and fun seaweed cookery can be.



Eggwrack seafood parcels



690-odd seaweeds (not all edible) are found in UK waters.

Eggwrack seafood parcels

- 450g (1lb) mixed fresh seafood
- 1 glass dry white wine
- Juice of half a lemon
- Salt and pepper
- 1 tsp double cream
- 20-30 medium-sized bladders of eggwrack *Ascophyllum nodosum*
- 225g (8oz) plain flour
- 1 large egg, beaten
- 300ml (1/2 pt) ice-cold beer or cider
- Oil for deep-frying
- 100g (3 1/2 oz) dabberlocks *Alaria esculenta*
- 100g (3 1/2 oz) sea lettuce *Ulva lactuca*
- 1 tsp sea-rinsed *Blidingia* seaweed powder
- Tartare sauce

METHOD

- 1 Boil/steam the washed seafood for a few minutes in a covered pan with a little wine. Then, when slightly cooled, shell and chop finely.
- 2 Boil the chopped seafood in a couple of tablespoons of wine, the juice of half a lemon, and a little salt and pepper for another minute or two until virtually dry.
- 3 Transfer to a small bowl and mix in a tablespoon of double cream. Refrigerate for 30 minutes.

4 Cut 2.5cm (1") bladders from fresh eggwrack, trimming the edges with scissors, and boil for 20 minutes. (Allow a few more than you need as some will not return to shape.)

5 Make a small slit in each bladder, along the midline at one end. When you squeeze the sides to stuff it, it should look like a mini whale! (Don't slit along the smooth side of the folds as the flesh will turn in and look like a large coffee bean - impossible to stuff.) Carefully stuff each one with the creamy seafood, without enlarging the slit.

6 Mix up a light tempura batter using the flour, egg, beer and seasoning, and toss all the stuffed eggwrack bladders in the batter.

7 Remove a few at a time with a slotted spoon and deep-fry them in hot oil, turning occasionally, until golden-brown.

8 Serve on a bed of crispy deep-fried dabberlocks (after cutting out the midrib to use in other recipes) and sea lettuce, dusted with *Blidingia* powder, with tartare sauce alongside.



Blidingia marginata and *B. minima* can be found covering upper to mid-shore rocks and boulders, almost like green hair. Although tubular, the strands are fine, like filaments, and consequently don't become full of sand. I therefore prefer to use this rather than gutweed *Ulva intestinalis* - but you could also use sea lettuce and related species. Wash it in seawater to retain its saltiness before drying it in a low oven or food dehydrator and powdering it. Dabberlocks *Alaria esculenta* can be enormous, growing up to 5m (16ft) long. It has a distinct northern and western distribution pattern and is commonly found at the lower intertidal zone and in deep rock pools on very exposed and wave-battered shores. Use very freshly washed-up specimens or cut to leave one-third of the basal frond.



Chocolate seaweed nests

100g (3½ oz) long wart weed *Gracilariopsis longissima*
 1 litre (1¾ pt) Grand Marnier
 115g (4oz) organic fairtrade dark chocolate
 3 or more small egg-shaped eggwrack bladders (trim the edges with scissors to achieve this)
 115g (4oz) organic fairtrade milk chocolate
 A little cream (optional)
 115g (4oz) organic fairtrade white chocolate

METHOD

1 Wash the *Gracilariopsis* in a bowl of tap water, changing the water several times. Boil it for 5 minutes (it will turn from red to green). Lay it out on a non-stick tray and dry it in a low oven or dehydrator. This takes 1 hour at 52°C (125°F) in a food dehydrator.

2 Carefully, without breaking it, submerge the now dry wiry seaweed in a shallow tray containing all the Grand Marnier. Leave to soak for 3 hours. Shake off excess spirit and freeze for a few hours.

3 Melt the dark chocolate in a small bain-marie (a pan immersed in hot water). Dip

in a pastry brush and paint a round chocolate disk on a non-stick surface, approximately 2mm (⅛") thick. Then place all the chilled *Gracilariopsis* in the chocolate pan. Rapidly turn it over with a fork to mix all the chocolate in and around it.

4 Now for the messy part! Pick up the chocolatey seaweed mass, pulling and squeezing it through your hand to remove excess chocolate. Divide it into four to six stringy/ropey pieces. Lay these in a ring on top of the edge of the chocolate disk, allowing each piece a few minutes to set in place before adding the next one. Make it look as nest-like as possible. Leave to set (approximately 1 hour).

5 Boil the eggwrack bladders for 30 minutes in two changes of water and pat dry. If they fill with water, squeeze it all out.

6 Melt the milk chocolate, adding a little cream if you want a soft truffle-type centre. Make a small incision in each bladder and pipe in the melted chocolate (use a bit

of greaseproof paper or baking parchment to make the piping bag). Allow to cool in the fridge for an hour.

7 Melt the white chocolate, one-third of the bar at a time, in a small deep ladle over a pan of hot water. Using a pin, dip one chocolate-filled bladder into the white chocolate to coat it. Support it, suspended from the pin, until it is dry (I stuck the pin into a block of cold butter still in the pack). Clean out the ladle and melt the next third of the chocolate. Repeat until all 'eggs' are covered. Place the eggs in the nest.

8 Enjoy the madness of it all!

● *Gracilariopsis longissima* is probably widely distributed, but under-recorded. It does particularly well on the North Kent coast and, when not broken free, will be found attached to small pebbles across the whole intertidal zone. It seems to prefer silty/sandy beaches.

Seafood seaweed noodles

Serves 2-3

450g (1lb) fresh laver
 100g (3½ oz) long wart weed *Gracilariopsis longissima*
 300g (10½ oz) mixed seafood: mussels, crab, prawns, squid etc. (these can come in precooked frozen packs – great but don't refreeze)
 50g (1¾ oz) sea beet, shredded
 50g (1¾ oz) marsh samphire tops
 50g (1¾ oz) dulse, shredded
 1 red chilli, seeded and finely sliced
 2 shallots, finely sliced
 A bundle of vermicelli rice noodles
 2-3 tbsp oyster sauce
 1 tsp cornflour
 Seasoning
 50g (1¾ oz) mixed fresh parsley and coriander, finely chopped

METHOD

1 Boil the thoroughly rinsed laver in a few pints of water for 1 hour. Strain to leave a pint of stock.

2 Rinse the *Gracilariopsis* and boil it for 2 minutes in water, then throw the water out.

3 Gently fry the seafood, sea beet, samphire, dulse, chilli and shallots for 5 minutes.

4 Boil the laver stock. Add the precooked *Gracilariopsis* and the rice noodles. Boil for 2-3 minutes and strain.

5 In a small bowl mix the oyster sauce and a cup of water into the cornflour.

6 In a clean pan combine all the ingredients except the herbs and boil to thicken. Season to taste and serve sprinkled with the chopped parsley and coriander.

● This also works very well as a Thai noodle soup with coconut milk, Thai spices and a few more chunky vegetables.



Jamaican Irish moss drink is renowned as an energising aphrodisiac drink in the West Indies. Experiment and enjoy the benefits!

Jamaican Irish moss drink

Renowned as an energising aphrodisiac drink in the West Indies, this recipe has countless variations. Some don't require milk but use rum or wine instead; others have nuts such as cashews blended in. Experiment and enjoy the benefits! This may also work with grape pip weed *Mastocarpus stellatus*, as both can be used when making Irish moss desserts.

1 large handful of sun-blanching and dried Irish moss *Chondrus crispus*
 ½pt milk, or more to adjust to desired consistency
 1 can unsweetened condensed milk
 2 tbsp honey (or more to taste)
 85g (3oz) pre-soaked linseed
 Pinch of nutmeg, to taste
 Pinch of cinnamon, to taste
 Half a vanilla pod

METHOD

1 Place the Irish moss, milk, condensed milk, honey, linseed, nutmeg, cinnamon and scraped-out vanilla seeds in a pan. Simmer, stirring regularly, for 30 minutes.

2 Liquidise until smooth, and serve hot or cold. Whisk up before serving if drinking cold (perhaps adding a little extra milk and honey).



Essential resources

Seasearch Guide to Seaweeds of Britain, Ireland and the Channel Isles by Francis Bunker, Juliet Brodie, Christine Maggs and Anne Bunker. Marine Conservation Society, July 2010. This was not yet published at the time of writing this article, but I have seen parts of it on Francis's computer. It is a great photographic ID guide covering over 120 seaweeds identifiable by eye or with a hand lens. This will definitely be the standard amateur guide for some time to come. They've even given all the seaweeds common names as well – some quite amusing.

● *Irish Seaweed Kitchen* by Prannie Rhatigan. Booklink, 2010. This book is simply inspirational!

● *Edible Seashore: River Cottage Handbook No. 5* by John Wright, 2009.

● www.wildmanwildfood.com/pages/seaweeds.html – seaweed information on my website.