



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

Curds away!

Fergus Drennan brings us a few words about curds. (Let's take a leaf out of his book!)

On June the 22nd I'll be beginning my second attempt to live on entirely wild/foraged food for a year. When I tell people that the diet will be predominantly plant-based this usually elicits one of two questions: 'How will you get enough carbs?' and, 'What about protein?' Carbohydrate is relatively easy to come by; obtaining sufficient protein on the other hand is more problematic. One answer to the challenge lies in the wild food adventure that is leaf curd production – the extraction of protein direct from multiple leaf varieties. Actually, in 15-20 years' time I wouldn't be surprised to see leaf curd supplementing, if not replacing, meat as the most common source of protein nutrition. Before then, forward-thinking mechanical engineers must devise equipment that can extract the protein more efficiently than that which is currently available. Still, in the meantime, and on a small scale, let's experiment and have fun with leaf curd!

What exactly is leaf curd?

Leaf curd or leaf concentrate isn't just protein. It also includes vitamins and minerals such as vitamin A (as beta-carotene), iron, calcium and essential micronutrients. The resulting dry fibrous residue can be composted or, better still, made into card or paper – edible paper in fact! Given that the curd is so nutritious, it has been produced on a small scale in countries where malnutrition is endemic. Given, also, that over half the population in this country is seriously overweight; I reckon that counts as bad or 'mal'-nutrition. So let's get to work!

At present I have successfully used Wild Garlic (*Allium ursinum*), Alexanders (*Smyrniololus atrum*), Ground Elder (*Aegopodium podagraria*) and Stinging Nettle (*Urtica procera*). The flavour of the first three is intense, consequently the finished curd from these combines well with the milder-tasting nettle curd in a ratio of 1:6.

How to make leaf curd

First, collect young and tender leaves. 12kg (26 1/2lb) of stinging nettles will give about 1kg (2lb) of damp crumbly curd; for wild garlic it is slightly less at 12kg:800g but the flavour is super-intense and a little goes a long way.

The aim is to break open as many of the leaf cells as possible to release the protein. This is best



Place leaves in liquidizer with water



Liquidize the leaves

achieved if the leaves are washed and used as soon as possible after collecting.

The three most convenient small-scale methods involve either liquidising the leaves in a blender, passing them through a meat mincer or feeding them into a blade-mounted juicer. The latter two methods will give you a little juice and much wet pulp that then needs to be squeezed in a cloth to extract the juice.



Strain through a pillow-case

I prefer to use the liquidising method. Place about 250g (9oz) of washed and roughly-chopped leaves into the liquidiser and top up with water – spring water preferably. Blend for a minute or so to produce a fine pulp. Repeat this process until all the leaves have



Squeeze out all the liquid



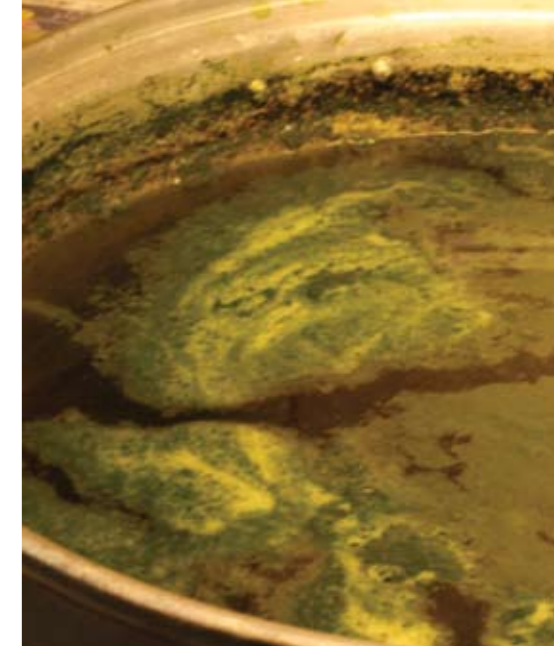
Boil the liquid



Curds and whey in silk cloth ready for straining



Curd remains in cloth



Protein coagulates and floats or is distributed as bits throughout the liquid



Strain off the liquid to leave curd in cloth

been processed! If using wild garlic, after 2-3 times using fresh water, strain out the solids and use the same liquid to blend the next batch of leaves.

Once all the leaves have been pulped, tip the leafy pulp into a pillow-case resting inside a large bowl. Strain out the liquid and squeeze the residue to get out as much liquid as possible. Place this green liquid in a stainless steel pan and bring to the boil for one minute. The protein will coagulate into solids. Once it has cooled a little, strain through a fine cloth – I use silk, squeezing until no more water will come out.

If using wild garlic leaves the strained liquid can be used as a stock base for soup. It can be bottled for subsequent use (NB: with many, if not most, leaves the liquid is not safe to consume regularly.)



Half way through drying it's time to break up the lumps that can be seen here

How to store and use the curd

Fresh curd should be used as soon as possible although it will keep in a sealed air-tight container in the fridge for a few days. Dividing into cubes and freezing or mixing in 200g (7oz) of salt per kg (2lb) and then refrigerating also works well. Drying is possible in a low oven, above but not in contact with, a radiator or in a food dehydrator. Nevertheless, it should be manually crumbled up halfway through the drying process; this avoids the formation of

apparently dry lumps that remain moist inside. I tend to mix it with salt and use small pieces as stock cubes or freeze and thaw to use as fresh.

So, after all this effort how can it be used? Well, it's surprisingly versatile. I have used it in all of the following ways: spicy Indian sauces, risotto, vegan burgers, salsa, savoury seaweed mousse, pesto, bread, pasta and noodles, pastry, pancake mix, soup, stews, as a salty spread, pâté, stock cubes and even to make green fried eggs!



1kg of wild garlic curd



Making wild garlic curd pasta



Cooked pasta in colander



Cooked pasta with wild St George's mushrooms

Pasta

Place 2 medium-sized eggs, 80g (3oz) fresh leaf curd (preferably from wild garlic), 300g (10oz) of plain flour and a pinch of salt in a bowl. Mix together and knead vigorously for 10 minutes. Roll out and cut to size using a pasta machine.

Cook for 1-4 minutes (depending on thickness) in boiling water. The pasta shown here is served simply with St. George's mushrooms, a stirred in egg, a little cream, some goat's cheese Gouda, salt and pepper.

Pesto

Take 50g (1¾ oz) of fresh nettle curd, 50g (1¾ oz) fresh wild garlic curd, 50 lightly steamed tender nettle tops, 10 medium-sized common sorrel leaves, a small handful of grated Parmesan, 6-8 tbsp olive oil, a little salt, pepper and lemon juice and blend to a pulp. Divide between clean jars and refrigerate.

Card

Finally, take the residue from your leaf curd experiments and turn it into card embedded with wild garlic seeds. Use this to make envelopes. Send to your friends. They can plant the envelopes and start their own wild garlic crop. Alternatively use to make card and then boxes to present gifts of wild leaf pesto. Alas, plant card and paper is beyond my remit here. But here's a picture anyway!



100% wild garlic leaf box with nettle and wild garlic pesto and envelope



Bilberry leaf kombucha tisane with bilberry leaves and SCOBY mat

Bilberry leaf kombucha tisane

Kombucha tea is associated with impressive health claims. These may or may not be true. I just like it. This is one of my favourites.

Bilberry plants (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) can be found in open woodland and moors on acid soil.

- 1 SCOBY mat (Symbiotic Colony of Bacteria and Yeast): the kombucha
- 2 litres spring water
- 1 litre bilberry leaves – loosely pressed down in a measuring jug
- 10 tsp sugar

METHOD

Bring all the water to the boil and stir in the sugar. Turn off the heat and stir in the bilberry leaves. Leave to stand for at least 30 minutes or until just warm. Then strain into a clean bowl. Place the SCOBY on top and cover the bowl with a clean dry tea towel. Secure with string or elastic. Leave at room temperature for 2-4 weeks, depending on the level of sweetness/acidity desired. The tisane is generally ready when the SCOBY has divided in two. Give it to a friend. Bottle and refrigerate. Serve chilled. Unused SCOBY can be immersed in a little tea and stored in a covered non-metallic container in the fridge. SCOBYs can be made at home, however, the tradition is to pass them on to friends or anyone who wants one for free. Hence, there are a number of websites where they can be obtained for no more than the postage costs.

Here's a good one:
www.kombu.de/suche2.htm#uk
 Enjoy!