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Grasping the nettle

Fergus Drennan gets to grips with this delicate issue

According to a traditional country saying: "Gently pluck the tender nettle, And it stings you for your pains; Grasp it like a man of mettle – And soft as silk your skin remains".

In my experience, with bare hands, no matter how you grasp the nettle – especially if collecting substantial amounts, getting stung at least once is almost inevitable. And before you ask, no you don't get used to it over the years! Nevertheless, packed with a great range of vitamins and minerals – beta carotene, vitamin C, calcium, iron and magnesium amongst others, as well as being relatively high in protein – nettles are the forager's spring green *par excellence* and well worth pulling on the plastic or rubber gloves for.

Grasping them both literally and metaphorically then, let's make the most of this abundant, deliciously tasty and incredibly versatile spring plant. I want to offer just a few ideas for using nettles in the kitchen looking at three starters: deep fried nettle tops, nettle soufflé, mini nettle and goats cheese 'Kievs'; two main courses: Chinese nettle dumplings and nettle risotto. Finally of course, a drink: nettle and goji leaf tea.

First, a few tips on collecting nettles. Unless otherwise specified 'nettle' in all these recipes refers to the top 2-3, sometimes four, pairs of leaves collected as new growth before the plant (Common Nettle/*Urtica dioica*) comes into flower. Small nettle (*Urtica urens*) can also be used. The main collection period is March to May and October to November (not always quite as good). But they can also be collected during the summer months provided it is new growth (this can usually be harvested two weeks after completely cutting back). I've also tried most of these recipes with the very similar tasting member of the nettle family Pellitory-of-the-Wall (*Parietaria judaica*). It is sometimes slightly more bitter than the other two nettles but has the advantage of NOT stinging. Once cooked, stinging nettles lose their sting – even if the hairs remain intact eg when deep fried. Wash nettles before use. (Note: white and dead nettles will not work in these recipes.)



Pellitory-on-the-wall can be used in place of nettles.

Other good nettle starters: Indian style nettle soup; nettle omelette; nettle pancakes.

More nettle-based main courses: nettle and wild mushroom lasagne; nettle quiche; nettle, mozzarella and wild mushroom ravioli; nettle and potato curry. My other favourite use for nettles is in pesto with wild garlic leaves; in hash browns – made with grated potato that has had the water squeezed out, onion and seasoning; in Duchesse potatoes – essentially, mashed potato with added butter and sugar that is piped into a shape like a Walnut Whip (remember those?), brushed with butter and baked in the oven for 10 minutes and, finally potatoes boulangère – thin slices of potato layered alternately with sliced onions (and nettle tops) in a dish, almost covered with hot vegetable stock and braised in the oven for an hour – delicious!



Duchesse potatoes with nettle.

Crispy nettle tops

Let's begin with the simplest of all, which is perhaps more of an appetizer than a starter; deep fried crispy nettles.

Nettle tops

Oil (experiment with oils, I like sunflower oil with the addition of a little sesame seed oil)
Salt and pepper

METHOD

I usually do this without washing the nettles first so they're nice and dry. Simply throw a small handful of nettle tops into a wok of hot oil, pressing them briefly down into the oil with a slotted spoon; it takes no more than five seconds. Lift out with slotted spoon, season and serve. They should be green, translucent and crispy – not brown. Note: as you make small batches you can place them on absorbent paper on a tray, and place in a low oven to keep hot.

For a more substantial starter, mix deep fried nettles with tempura nettles and use the dip for the Chinese dumplings (below). Don't overmix the batter or let it stand but make just before cooking. Into a large bowl, sieve together 115g (4oz) plain flour, 1 tbsp cornflour and ½ tsp fine sea salt. Gently whisk in 200ml (7 fl oz) ice-cold sparkling mineral water, beer or cider. Dip nettle tops in batter, shake off excess and place in the hot oil until golden brown – turning once (approx 30 seconds). Don't overload the wok with too many at once though.

Right: Nettle tempura.



Nettle soufflé

To make 8 individual soufflés

350g (12oz) nettle tops
100g (3½ oz) wild garlic leaf (*Allium ursinum*) finely chopped
150ml (5 fl oz) béchamel sauce
15 slow-roast cherry tomatoes, roughly chopped
6 small-medium sized St George's Mushrooms, shallow fried and finely chopped
4 medium eggs (yolks and whites separated)
35g (1¼ oz) hard strong cheese (optional) such as Parmesan, 3 year old Gouda or goats cheese, grated, plus a little for lining the ramekins
Melted butter – enough to line the ramekins
Salt and pepper to taste

METHOD

Steam the nettles for five minutes, rinse to cool and squeeze out any liquid. Preheat the oven to 220°C (425°F, gas 7). Brush the inside of the ramekins with melted butter and coat with a little grated cheese. Divide the tomatoes and mushrooms equally between the ramekins, placing a little in the bottom of each. Heat the béchamel until soft and warm then mix in the nettles, wild garlic and egg yolks – adjust



seasoning if necessary. Beat the egg whites until stiff, then fold the nettle mixture into the egg whites and scrape into the ramekins, filling them to the top. Level off with a knife and run your

fingertip around the very edge of each ramekin to make a groove in the mix (helps it rise evenly). Sprinkle over a bit of grated cheese. Bake for 12 minutes and serve immediately.

Mini nettle and goat's cheese 'Kievs'

500g (1lb 2oz) nettle tops
100g (3½ oz) full-flavoured soft goat's cheese, chopped into small (1cm/¼") cubes
100g (3½ oz) seasoned bread crumbs
1 egg, beaten
Salt and pepper
Optional extras: garlic butter, slow-roast cherry tomatoes

METHOD

Steam the nettle tops for 10 minutes, rinse to cool, squeeze out the juices. Chop the nettles finely, place in a bowl, season with salt and pepper and thoroughly mix in the egg. Half fill your palm with a compressed ball of chopped nettle, press to fill your palm and place a cube of cheese or cheese and tomato in the centre. Enclose with chopped leaf. Gently perfect the ball by rolling between the palms then roll in breadcrumbs. Deep fry until golden brown and serve on a bed of mixed wild and not so wild salad leaves. Do some with cheese in the centre and some with garlic butter.



Nettle and St George's mushroom risotto

This is fine without the mushrooms, although without them it is better as a starter rather than as a main course.

Serves 1-2

500g (1lb 2oz) nettles (top 6 or so pairs of leaf with stalk is fine)
1-200g (3½-7oz) nettle tops
100g (3½ oz) St Georges Mushrooms (in season late March-May)
1litre water
300g (10½ oz) carnaroli risotto rice
60g (2¼ oz) butter
200g (7oz) shallots, finely chopped
5 spring onions or a large handful of crow garlic (*Allium vineale*) leaves, finely chopped
1-2 tbsp full fat soft cheese
Salt and pepper

METHOD

Bring water to the boil, add the 500g of nettles and simmer in a covered pan for 10 minutes. Allow to cool somewhat then strain into another pan extracting as much liquid from the nettles as possible (discard nettles). Bring to the boil again and use to blanch the 1-200g of tender nettle tops for one minute. Strain (but keep liquid) and refresh nettles in cold water, chop very fine and set aside. Season the cooking liquid with salt and pepper to taste (you should be left with about 800ml/1½ pt). This is your stock. Slice the mushrooms and gently shallow fry or boil in a little water until tender and set aside. Bring the stock the boil and in another pan gently cook the shallots for three minutes in the melted butter. Stir in the rice and cook, stirring, for 3-4 minutes. Add the boiling stock a ladleful (100ml)



at a time, stirring continuously until each addition of liquid has been absorbed (approx 18 minutes). Two minutes before the end stir in the chopped nettles, spring onions/crow garlic and

mushrooms. Finally, mix in the soft cheese.

Note: if you prefer a more vibrantly green risotto, use ordinary vegetable stock rather than nettle stock.

Chinese nettle dumplings

Makes 2 portions (about 12 per portion)

500g (1lb 2oz) nettle tops
1 large leek, roughly chopped
1 large onion, roughly chopped
Small piece of fresh ginger, finely chopped
2 tbsp vegetable oil
Salt and pepper
100g (3½ oz) white flour
Approx 40ml (1½ floz) water

Dipping sauce

100ml (3½ floz) vinegar
60ml (2 floz) soy sauce
30ml (1 floz) sesame seed oil
4 large crushed cloves of garlic

METHOD

Place the nettles, leek, onion, ginger, vegetable oil and seasoning in a food processor and blitz for a minute. To make the dumplings (like mini Cornish pasties rather than conventional dumplings), mix the flour and water to produce a firm, non-sticky dough. Divide this into thumb-sized pieces (approx 6g). Form them into small firm balls by rolling between the palms of the hands. On a lightly floured work surface, roll them out into thin (1mm) discs about 7cm (3") across – or just roll out all the dough and use a circular cutter. It must be very thin. Hold each disc in the palm of the hand and place a heaped teaspoon of filling in the middle. Fold two ends over, above the filling, and pinch firmly together to seal. Now, holding the dumpling from the sealed top, on each side, push up slightly to create a small fold from the underside, then, bringing the edges together, pinch round to seal. You should end up with what looks like a completely sealed miniature Cornish pasty. These can now be boiled for five minutes or parboiled and shallow fried for five minutes. Mix the dip ingredients in a bowl and have ready.

Tips

If doing this quantity it's best to have one person rolling out the dough whilst someone else puts in the filling. You don't want the rolled out dough-discs to become too dry otherwise they won't seal properly (also, too sticky and they'll be impossible to handle). Also, keep them ready on a dry, clean tea towel or well-floured surface prior to cooking (not touching). These dumplings are great because they can be adapted by varying the filling with whatever you like – sweet or savoury. Try wild fruit dumplings (sweetened dough) with wild fruits served with syrup and ice cream. Meat dumplings are also good – especially if you use ready-cooked leftovers.

Nettle and goji leaf tea

Goji or Duke of Argyll's Tea Plant (*Lycium barbarum*) is a widespread, introduced deciduous shrub – particularly abundant around the coast. The leaves, appearing in March, are good for tea – or salad, before the plant comes into flower or whilst still in flower but before any of the berries have started to form. On its own it actually tastes like a cross between green tea and nettle tea so is well worth using like this. Nevertheless, I like to mix the two to get the health benefits of the nettles as well. Nettle tea, according to Julie Bruton-Seal and Matthew Seal in their lovely book *Hedgerow Medicine*, is

a good remedy for anaemia, bleeding, diarrhoea, gout, fluid retention, both low and high blood pressure, coughs, allergies, regulating breast milk production, skin problems, high blood sugar, and is just a great tasting spring tonic.

To make nettle and goji leaf tea, infuse 5-6 nettle tops and a small handful of goji leaves per cup in a teapot of boiling water for 10 minutes. Both types of leaves can be dried on newspaper in an airing cupboard, low oven or food dehydrator and stored in paper bags for later use.



Goji growing wild. Use the leaves before the plant sets fruit.