



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](http://www.wildmanwildfood.com)

# Let's all go nuts!

I think it really is true that foraging can drive you nuts, says **Fergus Drennan**.



**N**ature is so generous throughout the year that her abundant gifts can be quite overwhelming. The autumn is no exception; indeed, it is the season of abundance par excellence. So, focusing on just one aspect of this bounteous plenty, let's all give in and go nuts: walnuts, beech nuts, ginkgo nuts, acorns, hazelnuts, pine nuts and chestnuts!



Green walnuts

## Walnuts

Recently I tallied up all the visible walnut trees in my local area. There are 56, 18 of which are on waste ground or in the hedgerow along public footpaths. They are, then, just waiting to be discovered.

English walnuts ripen through September – often sold as 'wet walnuts', reaching their full-flavoured glory as they fall to the ground in October. Gathered and dried (shelled or unshelled) over a low heat and stored in a non-metallic airtight container, the nuts keep extremely well. In fact, preserved this way they are so superior to any foreign imports as to make such nuts seem rancid and disgusting in comparison!

Oil can be extracted from the walnuts by grinding and compressing – either after roasting or without roasting. I've used a screw press and a workbench vice. In the latter case the nuts were put in a concertinad aluminium box with tiny holes in the bottom. It's a lot of work for not a huge amount of oil but the flavour is superb. The nut residue can be used for sauces, cakes, biscuits and pastry. Between the stage in July when the nuts are green and without an inner shell – and are superb for pickling or making a liquor – and the wet walnut stage there is one other possible time for using them. That time is early to mid-September when the nut is fully formed but still soft – soft as pâté. That's when I make the following recipe.

## Rich wild mushroom and soft walnut pâté

- 1kg (2lb) parasol or field mushrooms
- 450g (1lb) mixed richly flavoured mushroom eg other Agaricus species, blewits, horn of plenty, orange birch boletes, a cep or two etc
- 450g (1lb) soft walnuts
- 2 large onions
- 1 large sweet red pepper
- 30g (1oz) chives
- 30g (1oz) wild chervil or parsley
- 60ml (2 floz) dry walnut liquor or dry sherry
- 25g (1oz) butter
- 2 cloves garlic
- 2 tsp balsamic vinegar
- ½-1 tsp sea salt
- ½-1 tsp milled black pepper
- Pinch of ground nutmeg
- Olive oil



### METHOD

First prepare the walnuts. Gather from the tree while still in their unbroken green outer casing. Bash the nuts with a hammer or give each one a firm stamp with the foot to reveal the inner nut (or boil for 30 mins, allow to cool then, wearing kitchen gloves, break off the now blackened outer cases and open with nut crackers or special walnut opener). Extract the inner nut and remove the flesh from the thin and bitter outer yellowish skin. Continue until you have 450g (1lb) of soft walnut flesh.

Chop the pepper in half and deseed. Peel and halve the onion. Place on a roasting tray and roast in a hot oven for 30 minutes. Chop the parasol

mushrooms and place in a saucepan and pour over the walnut liquor or sherry. Cover, bring to the boil and then cook for 15 minutes until the mushrooms have released all their liquid. Remove from the heat and tip contents into a muslin cloth or open pillowcase-lined bowl. Once cool enough to handle squeeze out as much liquid as is humanly possible and discard the dry residue. Return the liquid to a clean pan and boil down until you are left with about 1 tbsp rich mushroom extract.

Fry the mixed fungi in the butter until all liquid has evaporated, and then add in the chopped garlic, chives and chervil. Shallow fry for another minute.

Put ALL the ingredients into a food processor or liquidizer and blend to a smooth paste. Taste to see if it requires more salt and pepper. If so add a little more and liquidize again.

Grease a small cake tin and spoon in the pâté, firming down. Bake at 190°C (375°F, gas 5) for 45 minutes. Cover and cool. It's now ready to put on toast, crackers and savoury biscuits etc. It will keep in the fridge for a week or two if covered. After baking I usually remove the top skin and spoon the pâté into hot sterilized Kilner jars. These are then returned to the hot oven and heated for another 30 minutes. Once cooled, these keep unopened in a cool dark place for a long time.

## Pine nuts

About every five years a large Stone Pine (*Pinus pinea*) in a cemetery near me provides excellent nuts when it produces cones 3-4 times the usual size. However a ladder is needed to take full

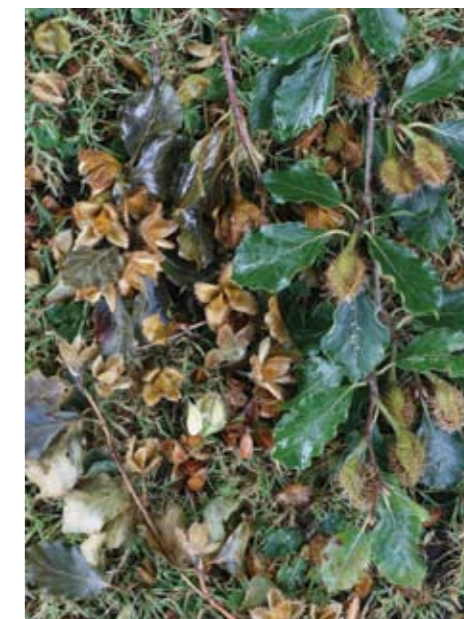
advantage of such cropping. Left until they fall, only about 20% of the nuts will be left in the cone. Given this is such a rarity I always make a few jars of really good pesto to celebrate the occasion.



Note the variation in size of the pine cones. The large cones yield plenty of pine nuts.

## Beech nuts

Another seed said to produce good oil (and eating in small quantities) is that of beech, known as beech 'mast'. The nuts – about the size of pine nuts, are only produced in significant quantities every 3-5 years. Where I am in the south east of England it looks set to be a very good year. The challenge – as with most nuts, is to get them before the squirrels!



Beech nuts (July windfalls) ready Sept/Oct.



Ginkgo is easily recognized by its distinctive leaves.

### Ginkgo nuts

One more unusual nut is that of the Ginkgo tree (*Ginkgo biloba*) – often planted in parks and gardens. The female, when pollinated by a nearby male, produces good crops most years – although the nuts aren't as big as those sold for consumption in the tree's native China. Look out for them in October when you will probably notice them first due to the nauseating stench of the fallen ripe fruit. Remove this, wearing gloves, and roast the nuts for 15 minutes in their shells before cracking and peeling the inner nut. In Asian cookery they're used in a vast range of dishes – soups, with meat and poultry, in vegetarian dishes, as well as desserts. Raw they are slightly toxic so cooking is advised. Also, don't collect from roadsides – where the pollution-tolerant tree is often planted.

### Hazelnuts

*Corylus avellana*, the common hazel or cobnut, grows wild in Britain but there are many other *Corylus* species to be found planted as ornamentals in public places – *C. maxima*, the filbert and *C. colurna* the Turkish hazel for instance. The nuts of the latter two species are often considerably larger. I prefer to harvest them in September just before the nuts turn brown. Collected while still firmly in their outer papery casing they can then be left for a few days after which they easily slip out. After shelling (I use my teeth), use them as you would pulses such as in this hazelnut and wild mushroom risotto pictured below. The nuts were boiled for 15 minutes and cooking liquid thickened and incorporated into the final dish.

Once fully mature they are excellent for storing for later or for making nut yoghurt.



Shelling hazelnuts (*C. maxima* 'Purpurea').

## Thick nut yoghurt

Makes approx 1½ pts

350g (12oz) hazelnuts

1 tbsp honey

1 handful of dried sun-blanchd carrageen seaweed

1 dessertspoon of live natural yoghurt or 2-3 probiotic capsules

1.7litres (3pt) water



#### METHOD

Liquidize 250g (9oz) nuts in 568ml (1pt) of water for two minutes then strain through a fine cloth. Boil for one minute, cover and cool to blood heat. Pour into a sterilized thermos flask adding the live yoghurt or probiotics from the capsules. Fasten the lid, shake and leave for 8-10 hours. Boil the ready sun-blanchd off-white carrageen in water for 30 minutes.

Strain off the liquid and reduce to 600ml (1pt) if it's more than that.

Liquidize whilst hot with the remaining nuts for three minutes or until really smooth. Squeeze through fine muslin (or simply leave as it is) before mixing with the yoghurt and chilling. Note: most of the probiotics sold as 'live' are actually dead!

### Acorns

Acorns tend to be produced in abundance on alternate years. This year is excellent in the south. Gather as soon as they fall in October. They are easy to shell (carefully) with a sharp knife for small quantities. The halves can be roasted for coffee or boiled in about five changes of water to remove the bitter tannins prior to using them as a pulse or pulping and mixing with wheat flour for biscuits and pastry. For large scale (80+ kg (170lb)) flour production, roughly grind, winnow and place 10kg (22lb) batches in



Large quantities of acorns are swiftly collected.

double-lined pillow cases. To remove the tannin lower these into a free-flowing river for six weeks – near to the bank and staked down, before washing, drying and grinding to a fine flour. This takes several stages in which any remaining shell can be sieved out. Small batches can be bagged and left in the toilet cistern for a month. The rich slightly nutty flour can be used for pastry without additional wheat flour. However, in that case, it must be shaped and moulded to the pie dish as there is no gluten to give binding elasticity.



Chestnuts in their shells.



Making acorn pastry flans.

### Chestnuts

More starchy than the other nuts, chestnuts really are excellent for making sweet, rich and sustaining flour. I use it every day to make chestnut 'porridge'. Dried for a few days over a low heat the outer shell can easily be removed by hand-crushing. The nut can then be ground to a fine powder. But, of course, perhaps nothing beats simply roasting them or making a luxurious Irish coffee.

## Irish style sweet chestnut coffee

#### Serves 1

- 2 handfuls raw chestnuts in shells
- 2 tbsp dry chestnut liquor or Irish whiskey
- 1 tsp brown sugar
- 1tsp chestnut syrup
- 2 crushed Pro Plus caffeine tablets (optional)
- 2 dessertspoons double cream

#### METHOD

Dry the chestnuts on a radiator or similar low heat until hard. Crush outer shell to remove nuts and roast them at 220°C (425°F, gas 7) for 20 minutes. Grind and roast for a further five minutes. Use to make a coffee in a cafetière with the optional crushed tablets. In a bowl, lightly whip the cream together with the chestnut syrup. Heat a stemmed glass over a pan of steaming water for a few seconds – to prevent cracking. Place liquor and sugar in the glass and add the coffee leaving room for the cream. Spoon this over to float on the top.

