



**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)

# Light my fire!

Strike a match and let ancient fragrant alchemy work its magic – yes, smoking is good for your health, says **Fergus Drennan**



**W**herever there is smoke, so the popular saying goes, there is sure to be fire – the doomsayer's fire of flaming and inevitable disaster. It was with some trepidation then that I began this article, wanting, as I did, to harness the alchemical magic of smoke to transform, enrich and essentially marry a whole range of predominantly wild foods to the unique flavour that the art of smoking can impart. Yet, aware there will be fire, I want it only to be that of your imagination fired with the burning desire to grab your smoker and get creative! Already then you probably know what all the following foods have in common: wild garlic bulbs, marsh samphire, hard boiled eggs, dulse, Japweed and wrack seaweeds, chanterelle and parasol mushrooms, sweet chestnuts, sea bass, trout, oysters, cheese and, finally, seaweed bread?

Yes, they can all be smoked as can virtually any food. The two most important considerations for me are: is it safe to do so and does it taste good? Having only ever smoked fish and seaweed before – both delicious, this, for me, is wonderfully experimental, a new cooking adventure on which you are warmly invited to saddle up and enjoy a wild ride.

## Smoking basics

Food items can be cold-smoked (at 10-26°C) or hot smoked (82-115°C). Frequently a combination of both methods is used as cold smoking doesn't cook food. Hence ready-cooked foods can be cold smoked or items safe to eat raw – although to do so safely an initial period of brining is necessary for fish and shellfish. Cold smoking is often carried out as a preliminary procedure to impart a rich depth of smoky flavour prior to hot smoking and, hence, cooking.

There are an infinite number of ways to make a suitable smoker.

I will describe three small-scale ones, but one could use a fridge or even a converted shed. Basically, for cold smoking the container to be filled with smoke is separated from the source of heat used to set the wood smoking. For hot smoking the heat source is directly below or even inside the container. Temperatures can be measured using a thermometer, although experience allows for guesswork to be quite accurate and adequate. The smoking of meat will not be dealt with here. Suffice to say, greater care and accuracy of temperature measurement is required, as is a meat thermometer.

Hardwoods prepared as sawdust or chippings are the best for smoking: oak, beech, sycamore, ash, hawthorn, apple, plum etc. Some of these can be purchased online, from timber merchants or even at a pet shop. I've an old wood plane from a boot fair that I use to make woodshavings from a supply of logs.

## Making the smoker

I used just what was to hand: an old dustbin, a biscuit tin, a 10kg olive tin, a tin can, old barbecue base and a camp stove. The containers were burnt by making a wood fire inside to remove any toxic coatings.



Burning wood down to hot embers in the old barbecue base. Note the wood shavings on top of the removed metal plate. This is put on top of the hot embers.



The hot smoker in action. Used for quick hot smoking. For longer hot smoking a continuous flame from a gas ring would have been necessary with the smoker being adapted accordingly.

**Mushrooms:** Chanterelles (*Cantharellus cibarius*) and Parasol Mushrooms (*Macrolepiota procera*).

One of the big lessons of wild food cookery is that you work happily with what you have, not what you wish you had – but can't find! My intention here had been to work with some more robust bracket fungi available during the summer. Alas, neither tender Chicken of The Woods (*Laetiporus sulphureus*) nor young Giant Polypores (*Meripilus giganteus*) were to be found. Nevertheless, both chanterelles and parasol



Burning the containers.



Making the hot smoker by cutting a hole in the galvanized dustbin base before drilling holes in the side to slide in supporting rods for the wire racks.



The cold smoker. Excess smoke escapes from the holes drilled into the sides for wire tray-supporting rails.



Cold smoker showing proving bread and wood chip box on camping stove (on continuous but low flame). Smoking takes place with the lids on. Note, a hole was cut in the side of both tins to fit the tin can



Items to be smoked, from left to right and top to bottom: Trout, sea bass, bread dough, oysters, Japweed, dulse, serrated wrack, marsh samphire, eggs, cheese, parasol mushrooms, chestnuts, wild garlic bulbs, chanterelle mushrooms.



Fish after cold smoking ready for the final hot smoking in the old biscuit tin.



Hot smoked oyster in cleaned shell. Note, oysters should only really be used – especially from the wild – when there is an ‘r’ in the month.

mushrooms are a good choice. The former can be eaten raw, and are well known to be good that way, the latter should be cooked.

I used a mixture of dried chestnut shells and small beechwood chips, cold smoking the mushrooms for four hours at around 30°C – adding a fresh handful of smoking material every 45 minutes or so. After this they were hot-smoked for 15 minutes. Both the chanterelles and parasols (minus stalks) were left whole and soaked in cold water for 15 minutes prior to smoking. This prevented them from drying out.

My rating: smoked chanterelles raw 6/10, cooked 9/10; smoked and cooked parasol mushrooms 8/10.

**Seaweeds and samphire:** Dulse (*Palmaria palmate*), Japweed (*Sargassum muticum*) and Serrated Wrack (*Fucus serratus*).

I selected the healthiest-looking tenderest fronds of each seaweed, rinsing in the sea to remove any sand immediately after collecting. You could just bring it home and wash under the tap. Personally, seaweed without a natural coating of salt just isn't as tasty, smoked or not. I cold-smoked these suspended from wire for four hours at about 30°C. Halfway through the process I removed the seaweed,



Dried fennel stems.

plunged it into sea water for a few minutes before returning it to the smoker – this prevented drying out. I used oak shavings, adding a large handful after every hour. The samphire took six hours of cold smoking and 10 minutes hot smoking.

Rating after smoking: Dulse raw 10/10, shallow fried 8/10; Japweed raw 3/10, shallow fried 5/10; Serrated Wrack raw 8/10, shallow fried 7/10; Marsh Samphire 4/10. It was very tasty and the low rating simply reflects the fact that steamed and served with butter, lemon and pepper is still, by far, the best way to eat it.

**Fish:** trout and sea bass  
I gutted and washed both fish, turning the bass into two fillets whilst leaving the trout whole with the head intact. All the fish were then soaked in brine

for one hour. I cold-smoked these suspended on wire at the top of the smoker for four hours with the seaweed at 30-ish °C. The trout required the use of two small sticks wedged inside to stop the flesh sticking together; this way the smoke could circulate over all parts. They were then hot-smoked in the most simple of smoker set ups: using an old biscuit tin. Here I used a handful of beech wood chips and dried wild fennel stems. These were placed on top of fully-heated barbecue charcoal initially brought to temperature by burning in the tin for a quarter of an hour. The bass fillets took 15 minutes to hot-smoke and cook at about 80-85 °C with the trout requiring 20 minutes. It's good to hot-smoke fish on a rack rather than hanging up, then, if they do overcook, there is no danger of them breaking up and falling down onto the smoking material. Ratings: trout 9/10; bass 8/10.

**Eggs, oysters, and cheese**

The eggs were hard-boiled and allowed to cool before shelling. They were then cold-smoked for five hours. The oysters were scrubbed clean and plunged into boiling brine for 10 minutes. After being removed from their shells they were left in cold brine for half an hour and then hot-smoked with the final hot smoke cooking of the bread. The different cheeses: Caerphilly, mature goats' cheese Gouda and Kent's Winterdale Shaw mature cows' milk cheese, were cut into slices of about 1/2 cm thick and cold-smoked for two hours.

Ratings: eggs 8/10 – delicious but could have been smoked longer or sliced prior to smoking perhaps, although that may have dried them out; oysters 7/10 (probably 10/10 if cold smoked for 2 hours first); cheese 9/10 all varieties.

**Sweet chestnuts, wild garlic bulbs**

The sweet chestnuts were rehydrated from my dry stores. These and the fresh wild garlic bulbs took the longest to smoke due to the former's firm and smoke-impenetrable texture and the latter's intense pungency. Both were cold-smoked for 10 hours and hot smoked for 30 minutes.

Rating: chestnuts 10/10; wild garlic bulbs 8/10.



Cold smoked cheese – delicious!

**Seaweed bread**

I followed a basic bread recipe and added two tablespoons of powdered laver and two tablespoons of powdered sea lettuce to the flour. I proved the bread for two hours in the cold smoker before cooking for 30 minutes in the hot smoker.

Rating: 5/10. Good seaweed flavour but surprisingly unsmoky. Also, proving in the cold smoker worked but not as well as when more conventionally done. Much more experimentation needed.

What next I wonder? Smoked pheasant? Definitely! Smoked olives incorporated into a tapenade? Umm... probably. Smoked blackberry ice-cream flambéed immediately on serving with strong homemade blackberry liqueur?

For more sensible ideas and inspiration check out Keith Erlandson's wonderfully-informative little book: *Home Smoking and Curing*.



Oysters hot smoking with the bread.



## Chamomile wine

I had intended to make Maitrank according to a traditional French recipe. You take a sweet white wine, add some dried sweet woodruff (*Galium odoratum*), leave to infuse for a few weeks and then serve well chilled on a hot summer's day – May Day to be more precise. Alas, I couldn't find any and didn't have time to go up to my friend's wood in Inverness which is liberally covered with the pretty leaves. Nevertheless, it occurred to me that, as a general principle, infusing flowers and herbs into wine is a fantastic trouble-free way to make a country wine – all the colour and flavour without all the potential wine-making mishaps and initial investment in equipment. Lazy! Simple! Fun!

Below then is a recipe for Chamomile-infused wine, but you could equally use all sorts of things: fennel, Alexanders, lime blossom, elderflower, rose petals, meadowsweet or honey flowers for instance.

**INGREDIENTS**

One large handful of fresh Chamomile (*Chamaeleum nobile*) or Corn Chamomile (*Anthemis arvensis*) or even the related Scented Mayweed (*Matricaria recutita*) and Pineappleweed (*Matricaria discoidea*). One bottle of delicately-flavoured white wine. I usually prefer super dry wines, but sweet works best with flower infusions. 0-2 tablespoons sugar (depending on taste and original sweetness of the wine).

**METHOD**

On a dry sunny day collect a large handful of flowers. Hang up indoors to completely dry out for a few days or spread out on a newspaper and leave in a warm dry place – an airing cupboard is ideal. Once dried, tip a small amount of wine from the bottle to make some room for the sugar and flowers. Firstly, add the sugar and shake until it's all dissolved, then carefully – so you don't break them all up, add all the flowers to the wine. Leave on a sunny windowsill for 2-3 days before chilling and serving. Use a tea strainer or hold a piece of muslin tightly over the top to filter out the flower parts as you pour.