



A Chef's
FORAGING
Guide to

• By Amelia Levin •



top: Puffball mushrooms
bottom: Hawk wing mushrooms
opposite from top:
 1. Gooseberries
 2. Salad of roasted beets at Woods Hill Table in Concord, MA

Chefs are going beyond sourcing from local farms to collect what’s in their own backyard. The ultimate expression of regional and indigenous cuisine, foraging for mushrooms, ramps, herbs, berries and more is becoming so commonplace among independent restaurants that the business of foraging is now as sustainable as the food itself.

Likely spurred by the influx of celebrity Nordic chefs and the growth of new Nordic cuisine, foraging has become as important as cooking for many chefs, some of whom have sourced these wild foods or even foraged themselves for years.

Into the Wild

“Years ago, I was serving hot house tomatoes in February and realized how flavorless and mealy they were,” says Rob Connoley, chef/owner of Bulrush STL in St. Louis, an avid forager

and author of *Acorns & Cattails: A Modern Foraging Cookbook of Forest, Farm & Field* (Skyhorse Publishing, 2016). “It led me down an existential rabbit hole of asking why I was serving what I was. The answer for me was to look at the historic indigenous people of the area, the Apaches, who lived year-round on the same land as me. I think every chef should ask themselves not if they can serve certain foods, but if they should serve those foods.”

Chef Curtis Eargle, CEC, AAC, executive chef at *Maryland Club* in Baltimore and member of the ACF Greater Baltimore Chapter Inc., forages for ramps and mushrooms in search of the best tasting, and best of all, free food. “Foraging is the ultimate fresh, local food-to-table,” he says. “Humans started off by foraging for wild edibles. There is something so basic about it, and it is the ultimate seasonal food that exists.”

The benefits go beyond taste. “For me, using foraged ingredients is not a gimmick, it’s a way to tell more of a story and give more purpose to ingredients,” says Chef Charlie Foster of *Woods Hill Table* in Concord, Massachusetts. In the summer, Foster works with a local forager to source *bolete mushrooms*, which he sears over high heat to bring out their natural creaminess and unctuousness

like a soft tofu or foie gras. He pairs them with black garlic and dry-aged beef from the restaurant’s farm in Bath, New Hampshire.

While chanterelles and morels are among the most commonly foraged mushrooms, there are over 10,000 species in North America, including such exotic finds as puffball, hawk wing and saffron milk cap. Other commonly foraged foods include watercress and nettles, prickly pear, gooseberries, wild raspberries and strawberries, mustard seeds, dandelion greens and other wild, edible plants.

Eat This, Not That

Still, it’s not that easy to just pluck whatever you find from the earth and serve it in a commercial setting. Foraging takes research, trustworthy connections, careful planning and other considerations.

“First and foremost learn what can kill you,” says Connoley. “There are hundreds of different types of small red berries each fall, and only a handful are safe to eat. A chanterelle has a look-

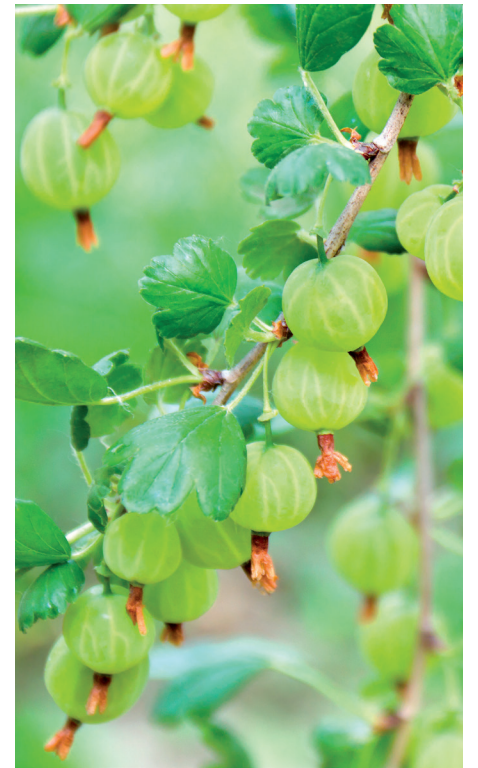
alike that is toxic. All plants have ways to guarantee proper identification, and many plants have similar plants that can make you very sick.”

While technically no health department restrictions exist against serving foraged produce in a commercial setting, it wouldn’t go over well if someone mistakenly ate the wrong kind of mushroom.

Eargle agrees. “Do not start foraging on your own,” he says. “Some edibles have poisonous lookalikes, some are edible when young, like poke weed, but are poisonous when older, and some just do not taste good as they mature.”

It’s also important to understand the land you want to forage on--is it safe and free of pollution and dangerous animals? Is it legal to forage in that area? Who owns the property and do you have access to gather food from it? These are all important considerations, according to Connoley.

Also, know the laws on gathering on public lands. “Some parks allow gathering and others don’t.



Scott McCurdy Has a Few Foraging Dos and Don'ts

- **Don’t** eat anything you are not absolutely sure of, study field guides and get to know local experts
- **Don’t** eat anything that is not from a clean source
- **Do** learn about non-edible plants that grow near edible ones in your area
- **Do** learn about look-alikes like Lily of the Valley and ramps



Courtesy of Woods Hill Table



Chanterelle Mushroom Ragout
Recipe courtesy of Chef Fred Brash,
assistant professor, Culinary Institute of America

I learned this recipe in France using chanterelles I foraged. Morels could easily be a great addition. This is a very creamy, stew-like sauce that goes great with pasta, rice, potatoes or chicken dishes.

Yield: 15 portions

Ingredients

- 8 oz chanterelle mushrooms, cleaned and sliced
- 8 oz shiitake mushrooms
- 8 oz oyster mushrooms
- 2 oz unsalted butter
- 1 T chopped shallots
- 1 T chopped garlic
- 1 T salt
- 1 T freshly ground black pepper
- 4 oz sherry wine
- 1/4 cup demi-glace
- 2 cups heavy cream
- 1 T fresh tarragon

Method

1. In a large skillet, sauté mushrooms in butter over medium-high heat until they begin to soften, about 5 minutes.
2. Add shallots and garlic, continue to cook until mushrooms are tender and have released all their liquid. Season with salt and pepper.
3. Add sherry and carefully ignite with a long match or barbecue starter, shaking pan gently until flames subside. Continue to cook until liquid evaporates.
4. Reduce heat to medium and add demi-glace and cream. Cook until just heated through and thickened.
5. Adjust seasoning if needed and stir in tarragon. Remove from heat and serve.

Generally, a visit to the park ranger will show that you care enough to ask and will grant you permission since the laws against commercial gathering are focused on commercial gathering wholesalers like mushroom pickers,” Connoley adds. His favorite foraged recipes to make include acorn croquettes and financiers, cattail salad and wood ear mushroom consommé.

Forage with a Friend

To serve safely foraged foods, find skilled foragers you can trust to source for you, or to teach you the ropes the right way. Some specialty distributors sell safely foraged foods and many herbalists understand foraging and the plants that are safe for human consumption.

If you want to get started on your own, Eargle suggests joining the local **mycological society** to learn how to identify mushroom species, work with local nature centers, take classes or attend seminars on foraging at post-secondary schools. Some companies and organizations offer foraging tours where you keep what you reap.

In addition, most cities or states will have online websites or other resources like the “Wild Edibles of Missouri”

Facebook page, where chefs can ask questions and get help identifying plants, according to Connoley. Many of these sites will alert you when certain foods are ready for harvesting throughout the year.

Shane Graybeal, chef at Sable Kitchen & Bar, Chicago, has foraged since he was a kid by learning from his father and studying regional field guides over the years. He forages for pineapple weed, which is a wild chamomile that tastes like pineapple-infused chamomile tea that he makes into a gelée and serves with cured scallop crudo, shaved radish and toasted farro.

In the spring, he’ll forage for cattail stalks, which taste like sweet Jerusalem artichokes when sautéed in butter and pair nicely with Alaskan halibut. He’s also used wood sorrel to add an intense pop of herby flavor to roasted fish or deviled eggs. And dandelion greens, which grow everywhere in the Midwest, are best plucked when young (because they’re less bitter) and add a nice crunch and grassiness to salads.

But be wary of hemlock, he warns, which can look like wild chervil, but is very poisonous. “The general rule is if you think you can identify something, try a small piece and wait seven days to see if you have a reaction, but also save that specimen so you can have others help you test it,” he says. “Just because something is toxic doesn’t mean it will kill you. You could just end up with a stomach ache. I found out I have a hyssop allergy this way. The issue with serving foraged foods is most people

don’t know they have an allergy to wild foods until they try them once.”

Chef Foster often gets solicitations from farmers with bushels of foods they have foraged, but he’ll usually take pictures and send them to his expert forager to make sure they are safe. One fall, he made pizzas out of huge puffball mushrooms by cross-hatching and searing them on a plancha before adding various toppings.

When foraging himself, he sticks to sassafras root, which is easy to find and safe to eat when cooked down and made into a root beer-like glaze with white pepper, orange peel and tamarind for pork rib chops.

Chef Eargle forages for ramps to make pesto and risotto. He sautés chanterelles with bacon and corn, makes tarts with wild asparagus, salads with chickweed, fattoush with purslane, and soup with stinging nettles. Earthy morel mushrooms pair perfectly with foie gras in pate form.

Foraging can be fun every month of the year. Most mushrooms come out between July and mid-October, while April is the best time for morels and many other plants. And while it’s easy to go nuts over these delicious foods, the practice of foraging requires moderation.

Some studies have indicated that popular wild plants like ramps may be in danger of being depleted, so it is important to keep the sustainability of wild ingredients top of mind, according to Scott McCurdy, product sales and culinary trainer, US Foods, and ACF

National Member. Take enough to satisfy your palette but leave enough behind to repopulate for future seasons.

Aside from field guides and perhaps a mentor or guide, “foragers don’t need any specific tools, but a cheap pocket knife is always helpful for gathering mushrooms or pruning buds and flowers,” says Connoley. “More important is proper storage containers to get the foraged ingredients from the woods into the kitchen in a way that keeps them from wilting and bruising. I often pack in recycled produce flats for big mushroom days, paper lunch sacks for berries and tupperware lined with wet paper towels for leaves.”

Don’t Forget Hiking Boots

“Foraging means my 14-hour days in the kitchen are broken up by two-hour hikes every morning,” says Connoley. “This also helps me maintain my physical and mental health as a chef.”

Foraged foods will continue to be the wave of the food future. “We have so much around us if we just take the time to look at it,” says Graybeal. “We all know what romaine lettuce tastes like, but when you get out and start working with wild foods that have not been genetically modified, it often doesn’t taste like anything you’ve had before. It’s food just the way it was meant to be.”■

Amelia Levin is an award-winning food industry writer, certified chef and cookbook author. Her work has appeared in a variety of restaurant industry trade magazines as well as in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Health* and *Cooking Light* magazine.



left: Cattails
top: Prickly pears