



# THE WILD SIDE

If you go down to the woods today, you're sure of a big surprise – or so the song goes. For professional forager **Fergus Drennan** every trip to the wilds offers a big surprise and ends with marvellous things to eat, as *Ian Evans* discovered.



**T**o get a taste for the foraging experience a group of Chef Magazine readers joined Fergus for a day out in the 'Garden of England' where he showed what can be eaten amid the undergrowth and what most definitely can't. On a misty November morning we gathered in a wood near Whitstable in Kent where Fergus was relishing a rare wet day in an otherwise unseasonably warm autumn.

Courses such as this give an introduction to the 'dos' and 'don'ts' of foraging, while participants were recommended books like *The Forager Handbook* by Fergus' former business partner Miles Irving for solid advice. Before the course, he handed out wicker baskets and scissors to collect the produce and a fact sheet with how to decide whether a mushroom is safe with telltale signs on the cap, stickiness, colour, where they grow and if they secrete when cut.

We started among the trees looking for fungi but didn't have to wander far. At the edge of the car park was a resplendent red, golf ball-type fungus of the fairy-tale genre which opens out like an umbrella when mature. "However, this fly agaric is also poisonous but that doesn't stop some chefs cooking it provided the toxins are removed," said Fergus.

It was then further into the wood with our guide listing off mushrooms and fungi as we trod carefully through the wet leaves. Velvet shank, puffballs, woolly milk caps, penny buns, brown rollrims, wood blewits with their unusual blue hue – we found them all and more in different shapes and sizes ... and toxicity. Fergus' encyclopedic knowledge explained the different varieties, how to identify them, edibility and their dangers.

Where most of us see weeds, he sees food to be boiled, fried, pickled, sweetened or just eaten raw. He advised: "Learn to identify and cook with a few common weeds in your garden: procumbent yellow sorrel, dandelions, hairy bittercress, stinging nettles and experiment with different techniques: lactofermenting, candying, wilting, deep frying, whatever seems appropriate.

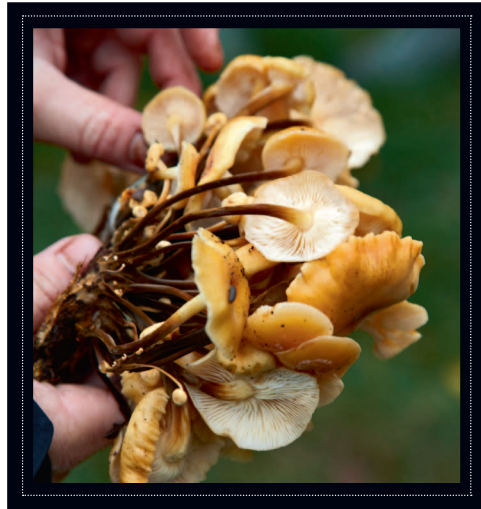
"But never eat anything you find unless you are 100 per cent sure, otherwise you can get ill, sometimes seriously, and on rare occasions you can die from the toxins. It's vitally important you know your stuff."

Examining a brown roll-rim he said: "Sometimes I have my own name for them and this one I call the 'super s\*\*\* scary mushroom' because this can do serious damage. In places like Poland they eat them but the problem is they build up in your body and when you eat too much, they start breaking down your red blood cells and you die a horrible death. The problem is everyone is different and you don't know how much you can eat. I wouldn't touch them," he warns.

Knowing what you are eating is the key message supported by the National Poisons Information Service which up until November had dealt with 120 poisoning cases involving fungi, 45 of which were classed as moderate or severe. The previous year the unit recorded 316 cases, mainly due to a bumper crop because of mild, wet weather and in 2009 the figure was 123.

Dr John Thompson at the NPIS said: "The mushroom season is underway in earnest which is why we need people to be aware of the potential dangers involved in this activity. While many mushrooms growing in the wild are delicious and





**Feedback**

"Thanks for yesterday it was a very inspiring day – we learnt so much about the plants around us and how to use them in our menus, as well as learning new techniques about foods we already cook with. Definitely interested in coming on another foraging course in a different season."

Jim Wealands

"The event was absolutely amazing and delivered so much more than I was expecting. Fergus' enthusiasm to share his vast knowledge to other people is unheard and unseen. His respect and energy is contagious, and I would recommend this course to every chef."

Vladimir XXXX

"Thank you kindly for all the effort you put into making Monday's Foraging Day with Fergus such a success. It was an ideal introduction into Fergus' world and was as informative as it was informally enjoyable. It was welcome to learn that Fergus is currently writing a book since he imparted so much information to us all that we feel will greatly assist potential amateur foragers such as ourselves."

Theresa and Phil Blythin

safe to eat, it is not always easy, even for people with experience, to differentiate between toxic and non-toxic species."

Fergus has been foraging for more than 20 years after starting by accident as a four-year-old when looking for food for his tortoise Creep: "I'd go down to Wimbledon Common looking for food for Creep to eat. I sometimes laugh that it was the tortoise that 'taught us'."

Since then he has become one of the country's most respected foragers and earned a degree of notoriety when appearing in the Roadkill Chef programme on the BBC four years ago. As well as taking courses, Fergus forages for food, selling the produce at markets and to restaurants. On his website 'Wild Man, Wild Food' he displays a wealth of recipes using foraged meat, plants and berries.

But beware those chefs who claim to be selling foraged produce which is more wholesale than



wild. "I was out at a restaurant with my sister where they advertised some mushrooms as wild but they were not. She said to say something so after a bit convincing I did and they told me to speak to the chef," said Fergus. "When I went into the kitchen and saw evidence of packaging in the kitchen, well, the chef was very apologetic and we had free wine and a meal."

After a morning in the wood and full baskets of edible produce, we travelled to another wood for lunch. In one upturned oil drum barbecue Fergus set to work cooking up a three-course meal largely from foraged, free produce. Starters was a slightly spicy rosehip and beetroot soup – not to spilled down white tops – followed by mushroom tagliatelli and finished off by apple and sea buckthorn crumble with custard washed down by a variety of bitters from local brewer Shepherd Neame. Unusual ambience? Yes. Tasty? Yes. Unusual flavours? Yes. Dull? Absolutely not.

From the woods we moved to wasteland on the outskirts of Herne Bay where in-between the abandoned tyres and fridges, Fergus showed us another life to what seemed like a clump of weeds and brambles. Fruit leather made from rosehip, goose grass coffee, Alexanders (a vegetable brought over by the Romans), cow parsley – not to be confused with the similar looking but poisonous hemlock, burdock, chickweed, hawthorn berries which can be pulped and eaten as a jelly, elderberries – the list and uses were endless.

And then it was off to the coast at nearby Beltinge and perhaps Fergus' favourite plant sea buckthorn growing alongside wild apples within mist and earshot of the coast. In the fading light he pointed to other plants such as maritime spinach, nettles, gut weeds and the humble blackberry bush whose stems can be harvested and sweetened to give a nutritious snack.

But for chefs or anyone else wanting to forage, the rules and advice are straight-forward from Fergus; "It's okay to pick the four Fs – foliage, flowers, fruit and fungi – on public land provided the plants are not protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act. Other land you must ask a landowner's permission." He added: "I only encourage small scale non-commercial foraging because that can increase understanding of your local environment. In turn this can encourage us to value and protect that environment and work to prevent the greatest threat to plant biodiversity, which is the loss of habitats."

For more information about Fungus visit [www.wildmanwildfood.com](http://www.wildmanwildfood.com)

