

Mini Specialist/Found Food: Stinging Nettles

Diners have experienced organic food and local food, now it's time for the next movement: weed eating

By: William R. Snyder

Like warning labels, plant names are succinct in their declarations. Death cap mushrooms? Not a good idea to add to a pizza. Poison Ivy? Leaves of three, let them be goes the old rhyme. And stinging nettles? Well, despite a moniker that describes exactly what will happen to a careless handler, foraging gourmands in Seattle are asking diners to ignore the name and enjoy the flavor.



"It's a distinctive taste, characteristic of edible wild plants in general: a bright green note that makes you sit up and pay attention, with a peppery zing. Imagine an untamed spinach," says Langdon Cook, a forager and author of the forthcoming, "Fat of the Land: Adventures of a 21st Century Forager."

In fact, many dishes that call for spinach can use nettles instead: lasagna and ravioli, for instance. And Cook makes an early spring pesto replacing the basil with nettles. His favorite recipe is Cream of Stinging Nettle Soup. "I caramelize diced onions, then add peeled and cut up potatoes and simmer in chicken stock until tender. I add the nettles toward the end with a dash of nutmeg, then blend right in the pot with an immersion blender. Heavy cream is floated on top," he says.

But about that sting (which can stay with you for hours), how does a forager avoid it? Cook suggests wearing rubber gardening gloves and a long-sleeved shirt and cutting the nettles a few inches below the top with kitchen shears.

Once in the kitchen, they must be boiled, steamed, or dried to neutralize the sting. (The sting is a potent mixture of formic acid, histamine, and serotonin.) Blanching them for a minute or two in a kettle of boiling water is the easiest way to get rid of it, Cook says.

Stinging nettles grow in moist woodlands, field margins, along streams, and on disturbed ground throughout most of the continent. "I find them most frequently in young, deciduous woods with alder, big-leaf maple, and cottonwood," he says. The season in the Pacific Northwest peaks in March, while they're just sprouting now on the East Coast. (*note: late April*)

Historically, stinging nettles have been used this time of year as a tonic to help transition the body from winter into spring. "A simple tea can be made by drying the nettles, which neutralizes the sting, and then pulverizing it," Cook says.

As for culinary traditions, the plant has been part of dinner menus since before man settle down to farm. Much of that history was forgotten in the last century, but Cook believes there is a nettle renaissance going on right now.



Stinging Nettles are an icon in what the foraging crowd is calling the next step in food movement evolution. “We’ve got slow food, organic food, local food—and now we’ve got wild foods,” Cook says.

Foraging for shellfish and animal items isn’t sustainable on a nationwide scale, but Cook and other foragers are advocating an increase in weed eating. Common weeds such as dandelions, lambsquarters, chickweed, watercress and, of course, nettles, are abundant, hearty and more nutritious than farmed crops.

“Think for a moment about the zillions of dollars spent on herbicides to kill these weeds so we

can eat less nutritious foods, and pollute our environment in the process. Everyone should be incorporating weeds into their diets,” says Cook.

Seattle is fast becoming the Vatican City of wild food hunters, with many of the region’s top restaurants incorporating found food items. Jeremy Faber, owner of Foraged and Found Edibles in Seattle, is running a successful company based entirely on wild foods. Whole Foods stocks numerous locally foraged wild foods and even Cook’s local Safeway carries common wild mushrooms such as chanterelles in season.

But to keep the gourmet’s attention, wild foods must be served in season. After all, for Cook the worst part of a nettle isn’t the sting, but when they’re harvested too late in the season. “They’re fibrous and grainy. Really, you should get them as soon as they’re up.”

For more recipes, check out Langdon Cook’s blog, [Fat of the Land](#).

*Stinging nettles can be purchased from specialty food purveyors who source and work closely with wild foragers, local Farmer’s Markets and the growers of specialty greens.