

## Found Food | Fiddlehead Ferns

By: William R. Snyder

*A Brat Pack of chefs is coming of age in Montreal and redefining the city's cuisine with foraged foods*

Jean-Philippe St-Denis sits on the stoop outside of his restaurant, Kitchen Galerie, a Montreal spot



where the kitchen is part of the dining room and the chefs are also the waiters. St-Denis has become the face of a generation redefining the city's cuisine from opulence to local and rustic. He makes a broad declaration: "Simple food is the new food of Montreal."

It is simple, but that's like brushing off sketches by Monet as merely scribbles. In this case, the ingredient list is short but exceptional. A generation of young chefs has turned to the fruits of their Quebec forests to create a new identity for the city. In fact, if you were to draw a family tree for Montreal

cuisine it would include a Provencal grandparent and a locavore parent. Foraged foods are now the norm.

Perhaps more of a symbol of Quebec than the fleur de lis is the unfurling leaves of ostrich and lady ferns, called the fiddleheads (or since Montreal is a Francophone city, the têtes de violon).

"The fiddlehead is the first vegetable of the season. We buy as much as we can in the spring," St-Denis says. As a testament to their gourmet value, the first crop can reach \$10 a pound at the market.

Ostrich fern fiddleheads are found in damp areas of the Great Lakes, the Appalachians, New England, Quebec and the Maritime Provinces forests. Wooded riverbanks are reliable and many foragers will canoe a section of a stream, beaching the boat when they find a wild garden of ferns.

The unwritten ethic among fiddlehead foragers is to take three violin tops. A fern produces five to nine fronds per growing season, so harvesting more than three can jeopardize the plant's survival.



The measuring stick for fiddleheads is coinage. Pick a currency, but the head should be roughly the size of a silver dollar or a two-euro piece. Bigger than that and they start to toughen. By the end of the season, which is the end of May or early June depending on rainfall, the flavor becomes bitter, St-Denis says.

The fern does present one culinary problem: it's toxic. Though not nearly as bad as, say, fugu fish

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(which is lethal), raw fiddleheads can cause symptoms comparable to drinking water in a third-world country (nausea, vomiting, gastrointestinal pain). This is easily avoidable if the fiddleheads are boiled or steamed thoroughly. Of course, completely unrolled fern leaves should be avoided entirely.

“We boil it for about ten minutes,” St-Denis says. “It’s not a dish you want to serve al dente.” On the plant, fiddleheads are generally a pale green. By boiling the fiddleheads, not only is the toxicity neutralized, but the color becomes more vivid.



“They are extremely versatile but also powerful by themselves,” St-Denis says. Fiddleheads have the flavor of asparagus on performance-enhancing drugs. And while asparagus can become soggy in the pot, fiddleheads retain their texture: the shoots are firm and crunchy while the infant leaf buds almost dissolve in the mouth.

“You can make it with risotto but it’s best boiled then sautéed with butter and served on the side,” he advises. Match it with beef, pork or fish; the flavor complements all meats. Fiddleheads are

also served on pasta with a touch of cream, parmesan and garlic. And, never straying too far from French influences, a splash of cognac is often added.

St-Denis learned his technique in France, but found his cooking voice and a group of like-minded chefs while working at Leméac in Montreal.

“We all started at Leméac and now we all have our own places,” St-Denis says. Leméac, a French-style bistro, is like some setting for a John Hughes movie about Montreal cuisine. It’s the kitchen where a group of peers, all 25-35-years-old, were instilled with a provincial pride of Quebec ingredients. “Instead of looking for exotic stuff we started using what was right here,” St-Denis says.

“Fiddleheads are the classic Quebec dish for the spring,” he says. “But people are scared to cook them in the home because they don’t want to get sick. So they come to us. That’s what we do in Montreal,” he pauses and takes a drag from a cigarette. “We teach the customer how to eat.”

*All images courtesy of Langdon Cook/Fat of the Land.*