



ANOTHER ESCAPE

OUTDOOR LIFESTYLE | CREATIVE CULTURE | SUSTAINABLE LIVING

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Foraging the Forgotten

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AS THE COLDER MONTHS SET IN WE OFTEN CRAVE HEARTY, SEASONAL FOODS ENJOYED IN GOOD COMPANY. WILD FOODIE AND ECOLOGIST CAROLINE DAVEY TAKES US ON A JOURNEY TO UNDERSTANDING HOW FORAGING FRESH WILD EDIBLES CAN SPICE UP OUR MEALS, REKINDLE RELATIONSHIPS WITH FORGOTTEN FOODS, AND RECONNECT US WITH NATURE.

As winter creeps its way across the British Isles, summer adamantly persists in the far reaches of Cornwall, the southwest peninsula and climatically the warmest part of the UK. From across the Atlantic Ocean the Gulf Stream delivers warm waters and warm air from the Caribbean, making Cornwall the only part of the UK with a sub-tropical climate. As such, plants typically uncharacteristic to British soil flourish: tall palms, tropical ferns, rare flowers, as well as more hardy coastal plants like rock samphire and scurvy grass.

Its varied coastline of high cliffs, hidden coves, and sprawling beaches supports an abundance of flora and fauna, and, thanks to the climate, it boasts some of the rarest variations in the country. On Cornwall's northern flank is the Bristol Channel and the Celtic Sea; to the south is the English Channel; and to the west lies a large expanse of the Atlantic Ocean, with the next westerly landmass being North America thousands of miles away. The warm coastal waters shimmer a shade of turquoise as seals play out in the blue and the coastal grasslands sway in the sea breeze.

Here, in this idyllic setting, wild foodie, botanist and ecologist Caroline Davey lives with her young family: her husband, three children and Mollie, their 13-year old collie. At their home in West Cornwall, a converted barn tucked away down a beaten country lane, Caroline set up Fat Hen, a wild foraging course and cookery school. Fat Hen, named after an edible spinach-like plant (not poultry) more commonly thought to be a weed than a healthy addition to the salad bowl, began in 2007. Caroline started by supplying restaurants with foraged items whilst she continued

her day job as a professional ecologist conducting surveys on the Cornish coast. In 2008, Caroline stopped supplying commercial kitchens – which she says had begun to strip the foraging experience of its authenticity – and began running courses, and, in 2009, she took on Fat Hen full-time.

With a colourful childhood of living between Hong Kong, Botswana and the UK, Caroline describes a youth of exotic foods and extraordinary eating experiences that she believes allowed her to develop a passion for food and an interesting perspective on how to source ingredients. “I had the privilege of some wonderful childhood travels that opened up the beauty of the world and nature to me. My first foraging experience was in Kashmir, India, eating the seeds of the lotus plants from the Nigeen Lake with *Mr Marvellous*, the flower seller, at aged 7”, says Caroline. She recounts memories of juicy ripe mangos, the pale aromatic flesh of lychee, gleaning berries, sweet chestnuts and field mushrooms; undoubtedly, her eclectic childhood helped cultivate her close relationship with wild food.

Her 12-year career as an ecologist, preceded by a BSC in Zoology and a Masters Degree in Environmental Impact Assessment, enabled her to hone her plant identification skills and gain a valuable understanding of the intricate network of ecologies on the coast. However, Caroline tells, “Although I loved my job as an ecological consultant there was something missing. I spent a lot of time outside recording habitats and species and I learnt a lot about the landscape and what the different plant communities can tell us about how the land has evolved,

however, the bit that was missing for me was the human-plant relationship. I wanted to know where we came into the picture.

I feel that in recent years we've become somewhat disconnected from nature, and nature is seen as a museum piece that we shouldn't touch but only look at. I became utterly intrigued by the wealth of edible and medicinal properties of plants and began to realise that there was a lifetime of learning to be had, and that these plants could be of huge benefit to our health."

To satisfy her intrinsic need to feel close to nature and unearth the hidden histories of wild edibles, Caroline began foraging. She explains, "the most important skill for a forager is to be able to identify the plants, followed by being able to locate them in large enough quantities to use them". Foraging should be a sustainable activity, never taking too much, leaving young plants to develop and encouraging replenishment. Caroline is very conscious

notes and amusing anecdotes. Upon the final slurp of their morning coffee, everyone heads out to the coast, which in West Cornwall is never more than a 10-minute drive away.

Clambering down the cliff-side path through dense overgrowth, the view opens up to display a panorama of tranquil waters lapping the light sand of Whitesand Bay, a small beach tucked away in a rocky bay between Land's End and the Cape of Cornwall. Empty apart from coastal walkers and a few locals, the only noise is the hushed sounds of white-frothed waves gently breaking on the shore and morning birds chattering in the hedgerows. Our foray takes us along the coastal path down to the beach, to rocky areas where seaweed sprawls across rock exposed at low tide, then back along the cliff top and onto the country lanes.

Almost immediately Caroline begins to point out wild edibles, reaching for plants that typically people wouldn't give a

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of this when picking items in the wild; she makes considered decisions on what to take and alternates between different sites to ensure healthy regrowth.

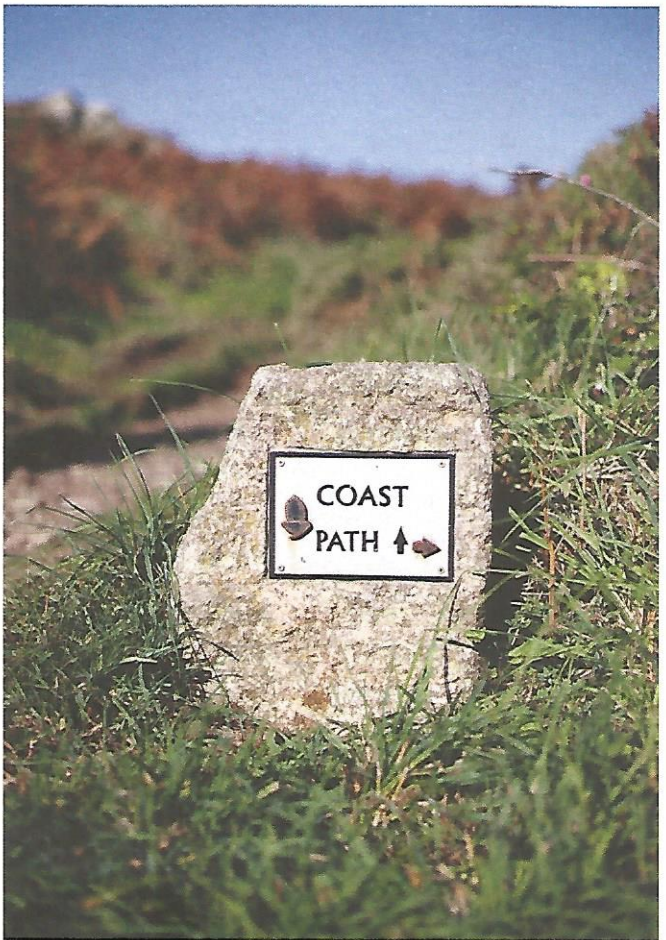
Today she is taking out an enthusiastic bunch of foragers to explore the Cornish coast. The journey begins with Caroline's welcoming smile and an introductory nuzzle from Mollic, who, as keenly as Caroline, does the rounds of greeting the guests. We meet in the barn where the cookery segment of the day takes place; the formerly dilapidated out-building was a work-in-progress for the Davey family for a number of years as they turned it into the beautiful space it is today. Flooded with natural light, it exudes a homely, country cottage feel: rustic oak floors, walls lined with wooden shelves that house rows of glass jars of foraged bounty, with steel saucepans and iron skillets hanging from whitewashed old stonewalls.

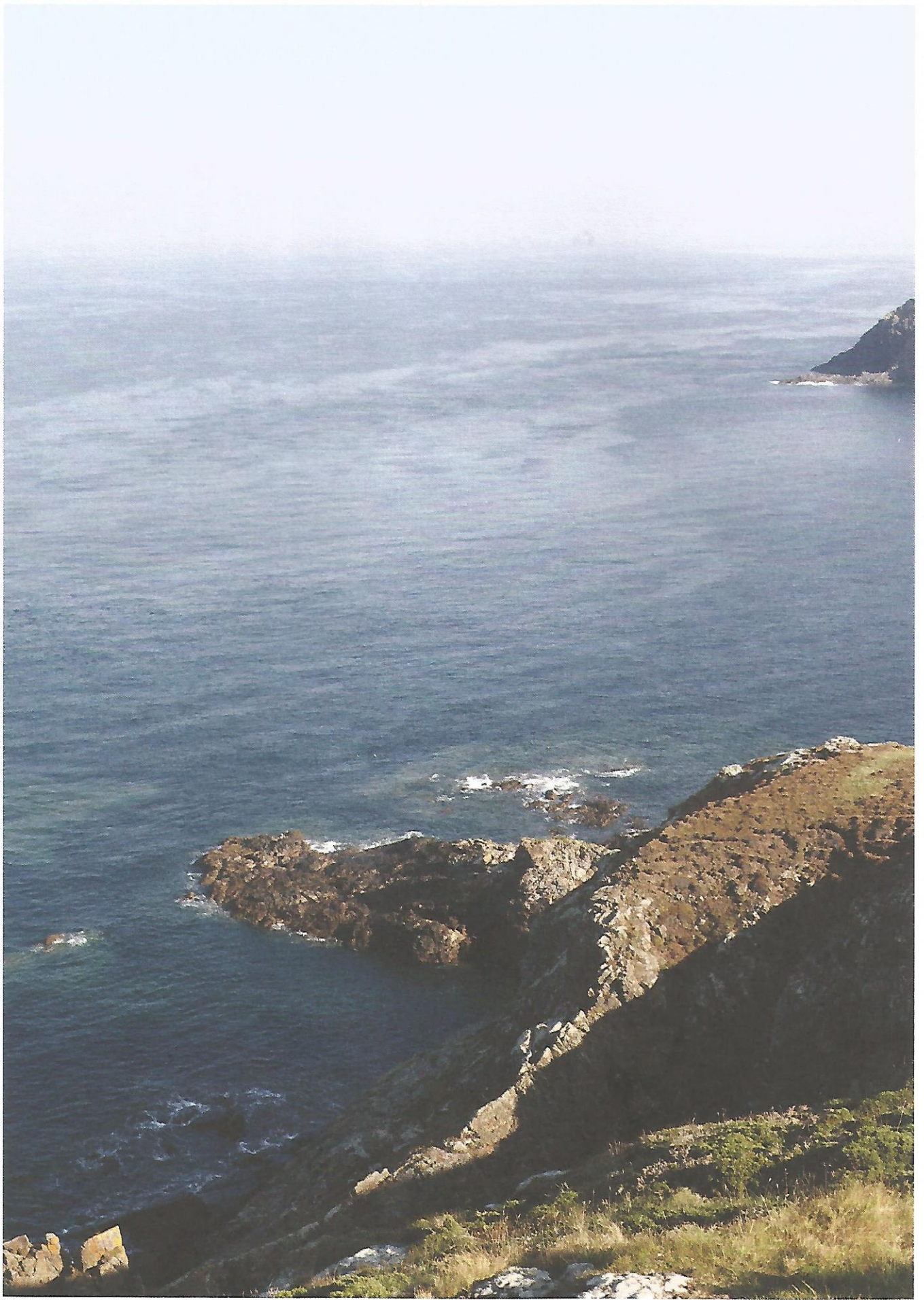
Without prompting, today's group quickly introduce themselves and enter into discussions of past foraging escapades, exchanging

second glance. Soon everyone is excitedly collecting strands of seaweed, clutching handfuls of salad leaves, and sampling wild treats – such as the perfumey, fig-like fruit from a plant originating from South Africa, the Hottentot plant (*Carpobrotus edulis*). From the coastline, the bounty includes smooth sow thistle, water mint, watercress, rock samphire, pennywort, dandelion, wild carrot, ragwort plantain, yarrow, sorrel of various kinds, wild horseradish, black mustard and apple mint. From the low-tide shoreline, seaweeds such as laver, carrageen, peppered dulce, sea lettuce and bladderwrack are retrieved – seaweed is a versatile ingredient that features in many cultures' traditional cooking; from Ireland to Japan it has been used to add flavour, depth and nutrition to dishes.

With full baskets, the group head back to the barn where the cooking soon gets underway. The sound of fresh produce sizzling on the griddle penetrates the room and steam rises up from hot pans. The kitchen fills with rich aromas, from blanched greens to delicious smells akin to those of kitchens in Greek coastal towns.







THIS EMPOWERMENT TO BE MORE EXPERIMENTAL IN OUR CULINARY WAYS CAN, THROUGH SMALL ADDITIONS OF UNUSUAL INGREDIENTS, EASILY ADD NEW DIMENSIONS AND COMPLEX FLAVOUR PROFILES TO OUR MEALS. BUT COOKING WITH WILD FOOD NEEDN'T BE COMPLICATED; IT CAN BE ADDED TO SIMPLE DISHES LIKE HOMEMADE PASTA OR BREADS – AS CAROLINE DEMONSTRATES THROUGH HER FRESH NETTLE TAGLIATELLE AND SEAWEED FOCACCIA.

Before long, the clinking of cutlery on porcelain plates begins and people who started off strangers share snippets of their lives with one another, breaking bread and revelling in the mouth-watering food they've jointly prepared. Immersed in unexpected conversation and in the midst of new friends, they quickly devour their freshly picked, healthy and seasonal selection of foraged finds.

Caroline hopes her courses will inspire the rekindling of relationships with forgotten foods, like Alexanders plant (*Smyrniium olusatrum*). Found on cliff tops and in seaside hedgerows, Alexanders plant is native to the Mediterranean and was brought to England by the Romans, who called it 'the pot herb of Alexandria'. Fully edible from root to flower, its flavour has been described as between celery and parsley, and even in the autumn when the plant goes out of season, black spicy seeds similar to pepper can be harvested. Rose hips are another near forgotten food; they are one of the richest plant sources of vitamin C, with a higher concentration than citrus fruits, and during World War II people would make rose hip teas and syrups to stave off illness and stay healthy. There are many other similar examples of foods that once were prevalent in the British diet that have slipped out of favour. "Each plant in our landscape has its own story of how it came to be where it is. I love these stories. Some plants out there were once important vegetables, but in a flicker of the evolutionary timeline they were erased from people's memories yet still live on in our landscape, readily available as food stuffs if we want them."

Fat Hen has received much praise and draws foraging and wild cooking enthusiasts from all walks of life and all corners of the country. Caroline's courses focus on getting people outdoors, connecting them to nature and bringing them closer to their food.

She encourages people to incorporate more unusual ingredients into their diets and make cooking and eating more interesting experiences. This new way of thinking shines the culinary limelight on, for example, wild cabbages and fresh seaweeds, which then become the focal elements of home cooked meals, rather than the store-bought conventional centrepieces of the modern day dinner plate.

This empowerment to be more experimental in our culinary ways can, through small additions of unusual ingredients, easily add new dimensions and complex flavour profiles to our meals – which is one of reasons that foraged items appear so regularly on high-end restaurant menus. But cooking with wild food needn't be complicated; it can be added to simple dishes like homemade pasta or breads – as Caroline demonstrates through her fresh nettle tagliatelle and seaweed focaccia.

Wild food helps to guide a healthy seasonal way of eating and it connects us with nature in the most intrinsic way: for nourishment and sustenance. Not only does eating locally and seasonally provide us with the freshest foods for free, it can also provide us with essential nutrients at the right times of the year. Through the colder months, a time where it can become tempting to hide away indoors, foraging can keep us tethered to the land, help us become more creative with food preparation, get us outdoors and increase our winter wellbeing. Humans have evolved with the seasons and one of the best ways to stay in touch with nature is to work with it. •

(Before foraging, it is important that individuals can correctly identify plants, understand the laws around foraging, and know how to act in a responsible manner).

