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# COUNTRY LIVING



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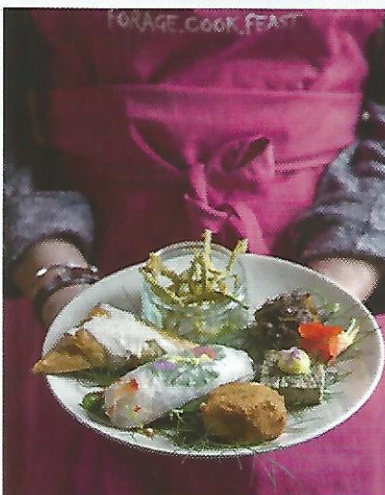
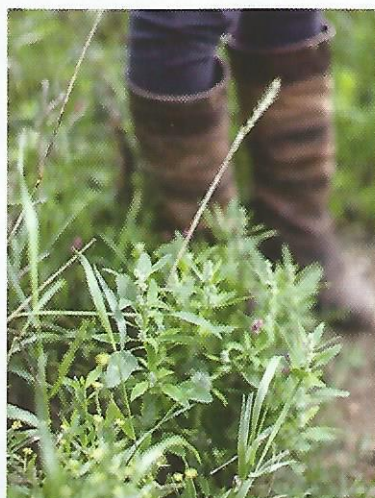
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SEW • COOK • WRITE • DRAW • MAKE • GROW



# Kitchen Table Talent

## THIS MONTH: THE FORAGER

In this series celebrating home-grown skills, we meet women making the most of their hobby, whether they're earning from their kitchen table or launching a fully fledged business. Plus, discover different ways to follow in their footsteps

WORDS BY KITTY CORRIGAN • PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS TERRY

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Caroline Davey dives into the hedgerow, mid-sentence, and plucks a stem of mugwort so her group of attentive foragers can sniff its rosemary-like aroma. The herb's mundane name belies its supposed magical powers, believed by the Romans to protect travellers from evil spirits and wild animals. Its use today is culinary, as an ingredient in focaccia – delicious dipped in oil flavoured with edible seaweed. Mugwort is at its best in August, when the flower buds are forming but not yet open, so everyone helps to pick a basketful, which will be dried for the following year.

The folklore connection with travel is appropriate for Caroline, as a modern-day hunter-gatherer with a passion for nature. Before she set up Fat Hen, her wild food cookery school in Cornwall, 12 years ago, she had led a peripatetic life. Born in Hong Kong to a father employed by GCHQ (the British security and intelligence organisation), she spent her childhood on the move as her parents were posted all over the world. Family holidays were spent on overland adventures through Asia – “My first experience of wild food was eating lotus seeds in Kashmir,” she says. Their years in Botswana, with trips into the bush, ignited her fascination for wildlife, and from an early age she was determined to work in conservation.

These days, her safaris along the Cornish coast yield wild plants that the uninitiated might overlook. The area Caroline forages can be found six miles from Land's End, near the village of St Buryan, where an ancient stone circle promises more magic. Here, the summer harvest provides sea purslane, samphire and ten seaweeds – “the most nutrient-dense food”, including dulse (“packed with iron and iodine”) and, an entirely different plant, pepper dulse (“the truffle of the sea”). All are delicious with fish and vegetarian dishes.

Fat hen, the plant that inspired the company name, also flourishes at this time of year. “When spring greens have started flowering and the leaves are no longer delicious, it is invaluable as a substitute for spinach in homemade pasta,” Caroline

#### THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE

On her workshops and courses, Caroline shares her long-held passion for local, sustainable

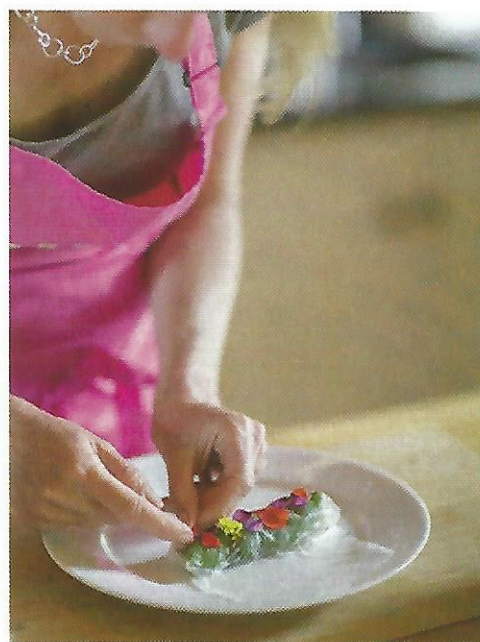
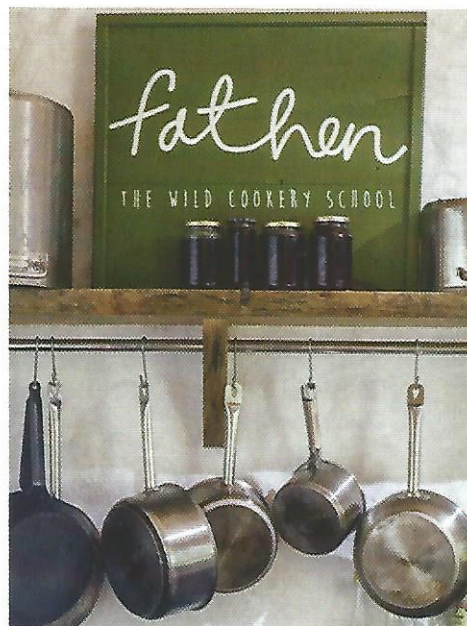
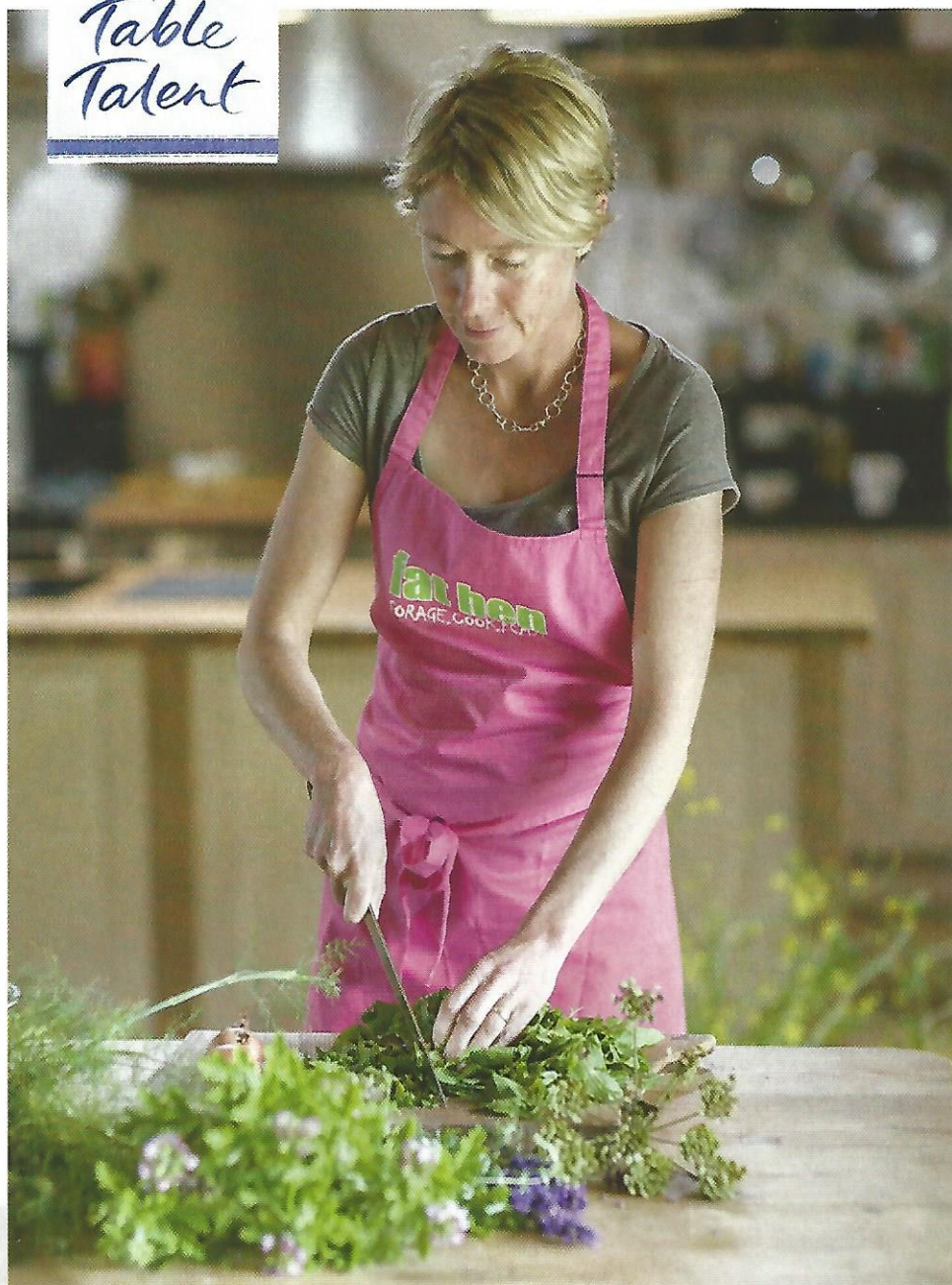
wild food with groups of other enthusiasts, taking them to discover the flora of Cornwall's beautiful landscapes



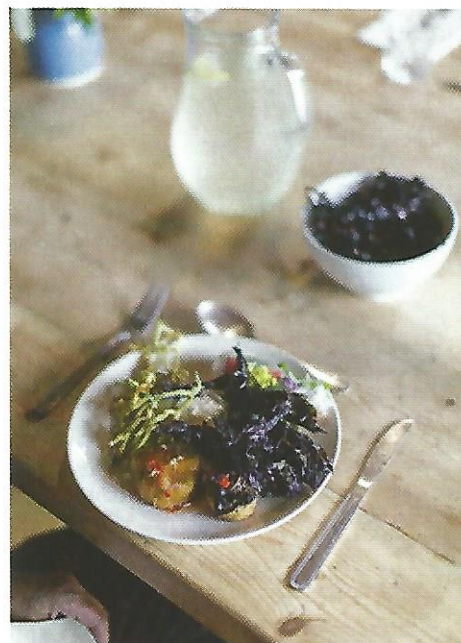




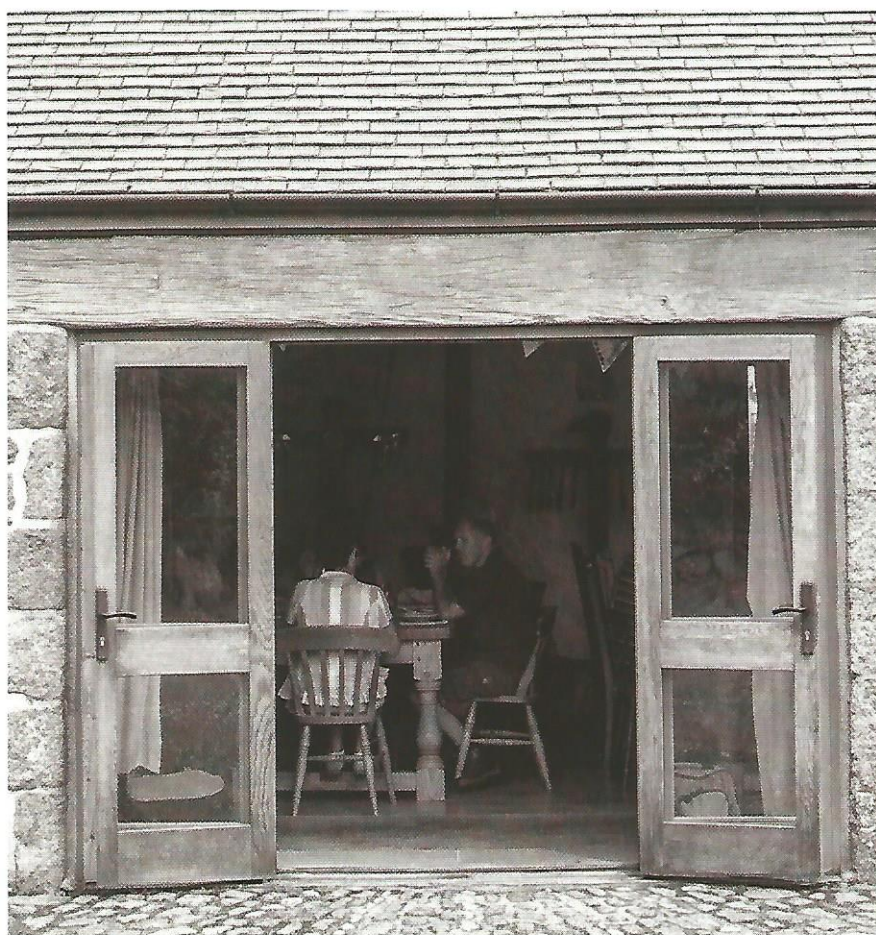
## Kitchen Table Talent



**THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE** Caroline uses foraged ingredients to create delicious dishes in The Goat Barn, showing course attendees how they can conjure up similar meals themselves, before sitting down to enjoy them and each other's company







explains. This is a favourite main dish on her courses; everyone gets the chance to knead the dough and make strands of tagliatelle, which are then hung to dry on an old-fashioned pulley clothes-dryer until ready to be cooked, when they will be topped with fresh crab. Fish and seafood are collected from a local fisherman by bicycle and taken in a coolbox down a winding farm track to The Goat Barn, the school's HQ. There, regular chef Andy will prep the dishes to be enjoyed later, with added supplies picked by the group during the morning's ramble. The dessert is in progress – pannacotta made with milk and cream from local cows with gelatine replaced by carrageen seaweed as a setting agent. There's smoked rabbit to start – procured from Woody, the local huntsman, who supplies to order.

"I used to do all the cooking myself," Caroline says, "but last year Andy turned up as a volunteer through HelpX [an international scheme where workers are paid in food and accommodation] and now I book him for all my courses." These amount to 40 each year, ranging from 'Forage, Cook and Feast' to 'Game Cookery' (venison, pheasant, rabbit and squirrel), 'Fish and Shellfish' and 'Make, Bake and Decorate'.

Not everyone is confident about identifying common species, so it's reassuring to know that Caroline is a trained zoologist and ecologist. That's how she ended up in Cornwall, working for a firm of environmental consultants, which she continued to do while her hobby grew into a business. She advises against gung-ho collecting without an expert guide – in human or book form – because the most attractive plants can be deadly. You might, for example, spot some cow parsley and see a celery-like plant growing next to it. This could be hemlock water dropwort, which causes vomiting and convulsions if eaten. Similarly, foxglove leaves can cause a fatal heart attack. But you are doing nature a favour if you pick three-cornered leek, a substitute for spring onions and chives, as this is an invasive plant; by removing it you are helping bluebell habitats that would otherwise be smothered.

As well as advising to pick "above dog height" and keep away from main roads or fields that have been sprayed with chemicals, ➔

## MORE WAYS TO TURN YOUR TALENT INTO TURNOVER



### SURVIVE AND THRIVE

Beth Knight was working as an outdoor pursuits instructor in Derbyshire when she met her husband-to-be, Pete, a trainee at the time, and took him caving. An unusual first date, but one that led to them setting up their own company in 2009, so that they could pass on their passion for the countryside they love.

Peak Instruction offers a range of outdoor activities that include bushcraft and survival skills. "Families get to build dens together with natural materials, light a fire without matches and purify water in the wild," Pete says. Beth leads many of the courses herself: "We don't have an expensive building to maintain – all we need is a vehicle and an equipment store, and a woodland that we lease." ([peakinstruction.com](http://peakinstruction.com))



### WALK THE LANDSCAPE

Suzanne and Ian Newman have run Wiltshire-based Footpath Holidays since 1992, offering guided and self-guided hikes in seven locations from south-west England to the Scottish Borders. "Britain offers an enormous variety of scenery in a small area,"

Suzanne says. "On a ten-mile stretch in Exmoor, for example, you can experience woodland, moorland, pasture and coast." The husband-and-wife team employ leaders with an interest in wildlife, landscape and rural culture in addition to map-reading and people skills. Adapting to changing requirements, they also offer guided walks without accommodation for those who prefer to book their own or have a campervan. Their daughter Heather has just graduated in countryside management and is joining them in the business, making it a true family affair. (01985 840049; [footpath-holidays.com](http://footpath-holidays.com))