

Raiding nature's larder

Wild food forager and cook
Caroline Davey is on a mission
to teach others how to make the
most of nature's bounty reports

James Rudman

IN SEARCH OF EDIBLES: Caroline forages in the hedgerows around Land's End, Cornwall

Walking in the Cornish countryside or along the seashore with Caroline Davey is an appetite-whetting experience. For the 43-year-old is using her extensive knowledge of plants gained as a botanist and ecological consultant and her passion for cooking to show people how to forage for and use wild plants.

'Historically, they were all our food and medicines. So we have kind of lost that link and I became interested in that,' she explains.

During her foraging expeditions around Land's End, she looks for edible plants or herbs in hedgerows and organically farmed fields, or along the coastline.

'All plants are better eaten before they flower,' says Caroline, as I join her on one foraging trip. Carrying a basket and harvesting scissors, she identifies the different plants seen, describes how and when to pick the edible ones and explains how they taste. She then describes how they will be used during the cooking

James Rudman

James is a staff writer for *Countryside* and loves rugby, travel and walking



demonstration that follows at her wild food cookery school Fat Hen, which recently opened a kitchen classroom facility near Land's End.

Fat Hen is named after an agricultural weed, a staple crop in Neolithic times and something found around edges of arable fields. Its leaves can be used like spinach, with the seeds originally used as grain, Caroline says.

She feels her wild food foraging and cooking courses, where everything is done communally, work well together by showing something tasty can be made from edible items collected from the countryside.

'Whether you are a gardener or a forager, when you have completed that journey from soil to plate during one day or one afternoon, then eating what you have just

picked, without going to buy it from the shops, appeals to something quite deep in our genetic ancestry,' she says.

But you need to know what different plants can offer. Take nettles, which Caroline picks in spring and autumn and describes as highly nutritious 'lovely savoury things' and 'one of our brilliant wild foods that is so overlooked'. She uses nettles just like spinach, blanches them and adds them to pesto, and says they can be used to make soup, tea, ravioli fillings, risotto and beer, have medicinal benefits, and are a cloth-making fibre.

Caroline really likes seaweed and says mushrooms are 'always exciting'. However, about 20 of the UK's 4,000 fungi species are 'really poisonous' and only another 20 are 'incredibly good' to eat. It is also important to know what seaweed species are edible, and when and where to harvest them.

The parsley plant family requires the most respect when foraging, says Caroline, because it contains two deadly species –

CAROLINE'S FORAGING HINTS AND TIPS



- Never uproot a plant without the landowners' permission.
- Be careful you know what can and cannot be picked, particularly avoiding poisonous plants.
- Always ask the landowner's permission to pick wild herbs and plants on private land and also discover how the land is managed.
- Avoid picking seaweed after a big storm due to potential of bacteria in the sea caused by the likes of overflowing sewers.
- Caroline's whole ethos is sustainable foraging. She only takes common plants, and always less than 30-40 per cent of each plant so it is left to grow. She only uses scissors so as not to tug the plants and uproot them.

After a year, Caroline tired of the supply side. However, she really enjoyed learning how restaurants used her wild food, particularly at The Gunard's Head gastropub near Zennor.

'I just realised that in the hands of very talented cooks, these ingredients can be really interesting,' she says.

Caroline realised she wanted to teach people about wild food foraging and cooking. In 2008, she started foraging and cookery courses, with help and inspiration from the chefs from The Gunard's Head.

Everything used for the cookery courses is either wild or sourced locally, including seafood supplied by fishermen in Newlyn and Sennen, and local hunters providing rabbit and pigeon.

Caroline feels there is an increasing appetite for wild food cookery and foraging.

'The type of people on the courses tend to be real foodies and are keen to learn about the ingredients, or gardeners who grow their own veg, or people who enjoy the countryside.'

Her first wild food foraging and cooking classes for children have already taken place successfully.

'I am also hoping to broaden the range of courses at Fat Hen to include more lifestyle-type courses where you not only forage your ingredients, but also hunt your own rabbits and pigeons, and fish off kayaks.'

Wild food continues to appeal to Caroline. 'There are some amazing ingredients out there if you know what to do with them.' 🌿

FURTHER INFORMATION

● www.fathen.org

FAVOURITE INGREDIENT: Caroline loves making use of seaweed in her cookery

VERSATILE: Nettles have a whole range of different uses

hemlock and hemlock water dropwort.

It is really important that people only pick something if they are 100 per cent sure what it is, she emphasises. 'You just don't take chances.'

Edible plants collected during our forage include rock samphire, wild apple mint and black mustard for a wild salsa verde, which will go with a mackerel that Caroline is cooking, and seaweed for a fishcake.

Knowing how to match and cook with wild food is crucial as plants can be bitter and strongly flavoured, Caroline explains.

These are some of the lessons taught at Fat Hen, which she relaunched earlier this year after taking time out for maternity leave. There is an increased range of cookery courses, including purely kitchen-based options on fish, shellfish and game, and wild Italian cuisine.

She leads some, while others involve local chefs, including Mark Devonshire, formerly head lecturer at Rick Stein's seafood cookery school for eight years.

The courses, offering hands-on cooking for up to 12 people, and also private dining events and other culinary demonstrations,

take place in a new, well-equipped, specially-designed kitchen in a purposely-converted barn. The facility is located close to the former farm building near Land's End where she lives with GP husband and fellow wild food fan, Frank, and their three young children.

The new facility enables Caroline to educate people about wild food without having to use the family's large kitchen to do it.

As someone who has always liked cooking and dabbling in wild food, she remembers being a young girl picking nuts and berries with her mother. However, it was her father dying from

bowel cancer when aged only 43, and she was 13, that really fuelled her interest natural food and healthy diets.

Caroline, who moved to Cornwall in 1998, spent 11 years as an ecological consultant, specialising in botany and protecting mammals. On maternity leave with her second child in 2007, she decided to find work that fitted in better with the children. Tapping into wild food's increasing popularity, she used her botanic knowledge for foraging and supplying west Cornwall restaurants with produce, including herbs and seaweeds.

fathen
THE WILD COOKERY SCHOOL