

MANOR

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SOUTH WEST

The *hot* Issue

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by the pool

Rosie Lowe
on the couch

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48 hours
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Wild dining

Getting the kids to eat their greens can be a nightmare – unless you're on a **Fat Hen** foraging course, when they'll be munching them straight from the hedgerows. Words by *Fiona McGowan*

My five-year-old son picks a leaf from the edge of the muddy track, carefully inspects the base where it connects with the stem, then stuffs the whole lot into his mouth, chewing happily. "Mmmm – lemony!"

He smiles up at me. This is a child who will not eat any form of salad, for whom the mere smell of spinach, kale or any other leafy greens makes him gag. My eight-year-old daughter squelches through the mud, waving a piece of white-flowered wild garlic at me. "This is actually a three-cornered leek. I love it!" And she chews happily on the garlicky green stem. At home, she would balk at eating anything flavoured with garlic, and anything vaguely spicy is enough to cause histrionics.

What is going on here? We are participating in a child-friendly foraging experience with the Fat Hen foraging and wild cookery school. Run by wild-food aficionado Caroline Davey, with some input from her three lively children, it's an incredible eye-opener. Located west of Penzance, en route to Sennen Cove and Land's End, Caroline's handsome farmhouse and renovated stone barn lies halfway along an unprepossessing rough track. The children pile out of the car and join several others milling about on a big climbing frame and an even bigger trampoline until we're all beckoned into the barn by the tall, lean figure of our host.

I have never eaten raw nettles. Apparently, you fold them into a little package with the underside exposed and the stingy side inwards. Maternally, I fuss over my son's folding and make sure that he pops it into his mouth with the correct care and attention. His eyes widen as he chews. "It doesn't sting," he says in surprise. I am more lackadaisical in helping my eight-year-old, however, and she cries out in pain. She's stung the inside of her cheek and tears seem imminent... It's my turn – I fold the leaf carefully and put it in my mouth. Immediately a shock



Fiona's daughter Freya tries a sorrel leaf

of pain shoots into my tongue. Tears prick my eyes as I stoically chew the leaf and swallow it. I feel slightly dizzy with the pain and sympathise with my daughter. First foraging test: slightly failed. Feeling vaguely numb in my head and wondering if nettle stings have some sort of hallucinogenic effect, I sit down for the next course.

Most children, I'll wager, have never made pasta from scratch. It turns out to be surprisingly straightforward, but more time-consuming than the majority of families can handle. Gently educating the assembled children on the uses and benefits of nettles (great for allergies and arthritis, among many other ailments), Caroline whizzes up a big bowlful of nettles in the blender and then mashes up a load of beetroot. "We're going to make red, green and white pasta," she explains, before setting the children loose with big bowls, eggs, loads of expensive-looking Italian pasta flour and plenty of table space to get cracking. And mixing. And kneading. The tricolour of pasta dough having been child-handled for the correct length of time, the lumps are wrapped in cling film and we are ushered outside. This being Cornwall, wellies and waterproofs are, of course, *de rigueur*. With my tongue still throbbing and my head a little woozy, striding out into the damp Cornish morning is something of a relief.

"My first experience of foraging was in Kashmir as a seven-year-old," says Caroline as she leads us out of her garden and towards a path bordered by hedgerows. "We were staying on a houseboat, and the local flower seller used to take me out on the lake in his flower-filled shikara boat to pick the seeds of the lotus plant." The magic has stayed with her – and the travels around the world as a child gave her an experimental ethos. She talks about how she still salivates just thinking about the smells of the Hong Kong street markets. But it was the pivotal and hugely traumatic loss of her father to bowel cancer when she was just 13 that formed the root of

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Caroline's combined passion for wildlife and ecology, imbued with those formative years of travelling and experimenting with varied foods, has finally led her to this remote spot in West Penwith.



PHOTO: JAMES BONDEN

Caroline Davey showing how to make fresh pasta

her interest in nutrition. Her combined passion for wildlife and ecology, imbued with those formative years of travelling and experimenting with varied foods, has finally led her to this remote spot in West Penwith, surrounded by a group of children grasping a motley array of wicker baskets.

Sorrel, we learn, is found in hedgerows everywhere. It is a long, tender, oval-shaped leaf with the distinctive feature of having two 'ears' where the stem meets the leaf. My son picks a leaf and looks at me. "Is this right?" I look at Caroline, concerned that I will somehow poison my child. "Yes," she smiles in her non-effusive but confident way. He nibbles it and then tears great big chunks off. I hide my surprise and watch all the other children happily munching on leaves (and all the other parents hiding their surprise). We wander along the hedgerow, for all the world like people from a century or more ago – albeit a bit more luridly dressed in our bright Gore-Tex. The children stack up wild garlic, navelwort ("Navel is another name for the belly button," says Caroline. "Oh yes, it looks like an inny," responds one of the children) and sorrel leaves in their baskets. We stand by and watch as Caroline digs around in the soil for pig nuts. "They have the same sort of leaves as carrots," she says, pointing to a small, fine frond. "But the carrot family has some very deadly plants as well, so never pick this unless you are told it's the right one." Finally, after a lot of fingernail-blackening grovelling, she unearths the root. The 'pig nut' has the appearance of a small hazelnut. It is covered in mud. "We'll take this back and wash it, and you can all try it," says Caroline, putting it in her wicker basket. My daughter is carefully filling her basket with leaves, while my son is stuffing them in his mouth. His tongue is turning yellow.

Back at the farmhouse, the children shed their boots in a massive muddy pile. Hands washed, it's time for the next stage of the tagliatelle-making: rolling out the pink, green

and yellowish lumps of dough, then pressing contrasting coloured pieces into them, and using fabulous old-fashioned metal mangle devices to squeeze them and shear them into strips. The children drape each variegated strip on a drying rack in front of the woodburner while the water boils. The wild garlic is blended with hazelnuts (the children gorge on handfuls of nuts – "That'll spoil their appetite," I mutter to myself), parmesan and a little oil and lemon to make a delicious pesto. Within minutes, a salad of sorrel and navelwort, drizzled with a garlicky dressing, is served with steaming fresh tagliatelle, richly coated in foraged pesto.

Watching Caroline's children devouring the pasta and salad while mine miserably pick at their plates is enough to make me weep. While they're happy to chew on wild garlic, sorrel and navelwort that they've picked from the hedgerow, the moment it's presented as a 'meal' on a 'plate', they want nothing to do with it. They love Caroline's homemade elderflower cordial, though – and the creamy homemade vanilla and blackcurrant ice cream is enough to bring smiles back to their rosy cheeks. Energy replenished, they storm back outside to bounce and climb and scream and shout and kick and argue and laugh. And guess what? Every child went all that time without ever looking at a screen. Job well done. **M**

fathen.org

FAT HEN

Fat Hen is a plant that was eaten as a vegetable from Neolithic times until the 16th century, as it's rich in vitamin C and its seeds were ground to make flour. It is now regarded as a weed, as it hosts insects that can damage crops and is thought to spread a virus that is damaging to crops.