

searching for seaweed

FORAGING FOR A FEAST ON THE SEASHORE

Words by **Sebastian Oake**

Seaweed has traditionally come across as something slightly unpleasant. It's been an unwanted hanger-on at a family day out on the beach; a nasty surprise during a dip in the sea; a weapon of choice for small boys. The thought of actually eating the slimy growths on rocks might leave a lot of people feeling distinctly cold and clammy.

It's all a little unfair on what is essentially a rather delicious vegetable that just happens to grow in the sea. In East Asia, Japan especially, seaweed has long been considered a delicacy. Now things are changing here. Top chefs are serving seaweed in their restaurants - Heston Blumenthal has suggested it should be used to put more taste into hospital food, and increasingly people are looking at what grows on our own beaches and seeing dinner. Seaweed is no longer the monster from the deep.

Seaweeds, and we should really use the plural, are a whole branch of marine life featuring some fascinating members with equally fascinating names. Consider bladderwrack and gutweed, for example. Their claim to have a place in the kitchen is a strong one - rich in vitamins and iodine, they are also said to contain more iron than red meat and more calcium than cheese. And they are almost fat-free.

You can make quite a feast from seaweeds – soup, salads, savoury cakes, stir-fries, blanchmanges and even

home-made crisps. One person who knows this well is Caroline Davey, who runs a wild food foraging and cookery school called Fat Hen near St Buryan, where she lives with her husband and three young children. "Seaweeds are a huge resource and incredibly nutritious," she says. "Eating them is now making a massive comeback here."

Caroline is an ecologist who has taken her love of nature to a new height – she loves to put it on a plate and eat it, too. She runs wild food walks, forage and feast days in conjunction with the Porthminster Beach Café at St Ives and the Gurnard's Head near Zennor, plus gourmet wild food weekends based at her home, where she is currently building a new cookery school kitchen, part-funded by a grant from the Rural Development Programme for England.

When I ask if she remembers the first time she foraged for seaweed to make a meal, she recounts a warm tale from 13 years ago. "I was on a beach in Wales with my husband-to-be," she says. "We gathered sea lettuce and fried it there and then in butter. We ate it alongside some mussels we'd found, which we cooked in white wine and onions." It sounds idyllic and rather romantic. No wonder they got married afterwards.

Caroline explains that up to 35 different types of seaweed have been used for food around our coast, but she herself gathers purple laver, sea lettuce, carragheen



(also called Irish moss), dulse, pepper dulse, gutweed and kelp. "Laver is one of my favourite foods," she reveals. "I make it into savoury cakes with caramelised onion, lemon juice and crispy bacon, coat them in breadcrumbs and fry them in oil."

I can certainly vouch for laver cakes. In Scotland two years ago, I gathered laver myself from rocky beaches on Mull, made them into cakes and served them with a salad of sea lettuce. It was so delicious, I ate exactly the same the next night. Less successful were the crisps I made from roasted kelp. My partner pronounced them "revolting" and they ended up in the bin. "Kelp crisps are not as nice as those made from laver," Caroline tells me before adding she uses kelp to make stocks for soups instead.

It goes to show, as with any new recipe ideas you can have misses as well as hits. Overall, though, seaweeds offer a new direction in rather exquisite tastes, arguably nothing less than haute cuisine. So for seaweeds, don't see weeds, think légumes de mer. 🌊

For more information about Fat Hen and its range of courses, visit www.fathen.org
Seaweed is also available to buy from Falmouth forager Rory MacPhee, the first person to be licensed to sell seaweed in England – visit www.falassa.co.uk

INFORMATION

- ▶ When foraging for any wild food, always be sure what you have before eating it.
- ▶ It's generally acceptable for you to forage for your own consumption on the seashore, but it's best to check with the beach owner - often the local council or National Trust.
- ▶ Only forage where the water is clean and clear, and there are no obvious indicators of possible contamination, such as outflow pipes.
- ▶ Avoid loose seaweed and look for living plants still joined to a rock. Never pull them off completely - just cut a small amount off well above the hold-fast using scissors and then move on. That way the plants will recover.
- ▶ Always wash seaweeds well in fresh water.
- ▶ For further tips on wild food foraging, see Food for Free by Richard Mabey.



CAROLINE DAVEY'S RECIPE FOR Roasted crispy laver seaweed

MAKES ENOUGH FOR TWO AS AN APERITIF TO ACCOMPANY A GLASS OF CHILLED WHITE WINE

Ingredients

Ten good pieces of laver

Sesame seed and sunflower oil/rapeseed oil

Flaked sea salt, chilli flakes or crushed sesame seeds with sugar and salt to season

Method

- Wash the laver seaweed thoroughly and squeeze out excess water
- Mix with the oil in a large bowl
- Spread out onto baking trays (don't pile on too thickly)
- Roast in the oven at 180C for about 30 minutes. Keep checking on the laver. If it sticks together, tease it out so it cooks evenly. When crispy, it is done.
- Season and enjoy