



Maria Wesslerle foraging for fiddlehead ferns.

SPRING'S WILD HARVEST

By KATHY GIBBONS

Photos courtesy of Fischer Jex,
American Spoon
and The Cooks' House

NETTLES AND LEEKS AND RAMPS.
Oh my.

Springtime brings a bounty of natural, edible goodness to the woods - maybe even along the street where you live.

That's the thing about foraging for wild edibles. You have to know what you're looking for, what it looks like and how to find it.

And enough locals possess that knowledge to keep adventurous chefs (and themselves) supplied - even if it's just for a precious few weeks.

FORAGING FORERUNNER

Justin Rashid might just be the Northern Michigan king of foragers. Co-founder of Petoskey-based American Spoon Foods, Rashid built a regional food empire on the premise of local, wild ingredients.

He foraged long before wildflowers became de rigueur on plates in fine dining establishments.

In a family of six - it was a matter of survival ... and the easiest way to snatch some precious alone time.

"I'd go out and spend lots of hours in the woods," said Rashid, who grew up in the Petoskey area. "I started foraging because it was the easiest solo activity I could do."

That led to a young-adult attempt at foraging things like morels, berries and hickory nuts to supply chefs, including Larry Forgione in New York.

"I think Larry was the first (renowned chef) to go in with such a deep interest in things like this," Rashid said. "I'd say, 'Have you ever heard of fill-in-the-blank? (maybe juneberries),' and he would say, 'Send me juneberries.'"

The two became business partners and the rest is American Spoon history.

Even with 100-plus foragers supplying his company with ingredients, spring still finds Rashid in the woods. He continues to enjoy the solitude, and he cooks and eats what he finds.

"I can't not forage," he said.

FROM WILD TO KITCHEN

Forging relationships with foragers keeps chefs supplied in what the local fields and woods have to offer.

"It used to be that most chefs weren't interested at all - or they were just interested in morels,"

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“Foraging is beginning to change in popular culture,” said Fischer Jex of the Wagbo Farm and Education Center in Antrim County. “Where it was once seen as simple-minded peasants eating weeds, it is now a respected and fascinating pastime in the minds of the best chefs in the world.”



LEFT: A display from the Wagbo Farm’s annual wild edibles potluck. From left to right: dandelion, Japanese Knotweed, Ostrich fern fiddleheads, a Day Lily shoot and nettles. ABOVE: Foraged sumac on the soup at The Cooks’ House in Traverse City.



LEFT: Pheasant Liver Pate on toast with fiddlehead ferns and steamed greens. ABOVE: Morel mushrooms.

Mark Your Collection Calendars

Spring's Bounty Begins

By KATHY GIBBONS

Avid foragers know that the first item they're likely to be able to pick come spring are ramps, or wild leeks, in April. They're a member of the Allium family, like onions and garlic.

"It's a little spear coming up, red along the stem, green at the tip, and the bulb is small at that point," says Justin Rashid, co-founder of American Spoon Foods. After it matures along toward June, the ramp yields a blossom that compares to the flavor of chives.

Soon after that, watch for young cattail shoots.

"Wade out into wetlands, ditches,"



Speltz toast with melted sheep's milk cheese, tomatoes and fresh spruce tips.

Rashid said. "They look like a giant green onion and the inner bottom part

of the plant has a cucumber-like taste. It's great raw or steamed."

Still hungry? Watercress makes an appearance in a similar time frame - "anyplace where you have a shallow, very clear, running stream," Rashid said. In the same family as cabbage, mustard greens and horseradish, it's best picked by taking only the tips of the young leaves and leaving the bottom undisturbed.

Fiddlehead ferns surface about now. So do wild peppermint and spearmint. They are often

Recipes: From Forage to Food

Here are several recipes from American Spoon's Culinary Director, Chef Chris Dettmer using local foraged foods. The small g stands for grams, and there are 0.035274 ounces per gram and 28.35 grams in an ounce. You will have to do the conversions on the recipe you choose.

Ramp Aioli

- 3 ½ oz. green garlic tops, chiffonade
- 7 oz. ramp tops, chiffonade
- 1 ¾ oz. wild watercress
- 2 lemons zest
- Salt
- 5 1/4 oz. mayo

Blanch green garlic tops in boiling salted water for 60 seconds, then add ramp tops and steam
cress and cook for 15 seconds more. Shock in ice bath. Drain greens and squeeze out excess water. Place in food processor with remaining ingredients and pulse till incorporated.

Spring Panzanella Salad

Torn sourdough croutons
Blanched asparagus tips, snow peas, snap peas, shell peas, fava beans, cattails
Pickled ramps
Feta cheese
Wild mint & watercress
White balsamic vinaigrette
Fleur de sel (French sea salt)
Cracked pepper
Combine equal portions of each of the blanched spring vegetables, the croutons, and a handful of mint and wild watercress to the mixing bowl. Season with the salt, pepper and a teaspoon of the white balsamic vinaigrette, and gently toss to combine. Taste to check seasoning. Spread the salad in a single layer on a large round plate. Top with rounds of pickled ramps, and crumbled feta cheese.

Blanched Spring Vegetables

Needed portion of each cleaned asparagus tip, snow pea, snap pea, shell pea, cattail and fava bean
Method: Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. For every liter of water add 1 tablespoon of kosher salt. Blanch each vegetable separately till done, but al dente, then refresh in ice water. Once chilled, remove them from the ice bath and lay the vegetables on a kitchen towel and refrigerate them.

Croutons

1 loaf sourdough bread
Olive oil and salt as needed
Remove crust from sourdough. Tear croutons into ½-1-inch pieces and place in mixing bowl. Toss with the oil and salt and lay out on parchment-lined sheet tray. Place in 350 oven for 25-30 minutes, stirring ever 5-10 minutes, until croutons are dry and golden brown.

overshadowed by northern Michigan's celebrity mushroom - the morel. Black morels come along in mid to late April, followed by the oh-so-popular and photogenic whites.

Fischer Jex, resident naturalist at the Martha Wagbo Farm and Education Center in Antrim County and a forager since childhood, loves morel season -- but not just for the morels.

"I use my mushroom hunts as the foundation for a greater, more diverse foraging foray," he says. "Wild leeks are popular and excellent and I pickle a lot of these when I can. My wild salads can include fresh basswood greens, dandelion greens and petals, ox-eye daisy greens, violets, wild leek leaves and maybe some smoked fish from the spring runs."

Wild arugula sprouts in May - everywhere, Rashid said.

"I've picked it walking down Front Street in Traverse City," he said.

Late May brings oyster mushrooms. Rashid says they're prolific on the trunks of dead poplar and aspen trees.

"They're a delicious mushroom with a kind of anise aroma," he said. "You've got to get them right after a rain, before the bugs beat you to it."

Jex waxes poetic about other items, including fresh spruce tips - available most of May.

"When young and neon green, they are soft, citrusy and great in a variety of dishes," he said. That means creations like spruce shortbread, spruce ice cream, spruce vinegar and spruce beer.

Only one word of warning, the experts say: forage sustainably.

"Whenever you harvest any plant, you want to be careful not to over-harvest it unless it's something very invasive like garlic mustard," Wasserle said. "You want to make sure it's there for future generations."

White Balsamic Vinaigrette

MAKES ½ PINT

- 1 ¾ oz. diced shallot
- Salt
- 5 oz. white balsamic
- 6 oz. extra virgin olive oil

Combine shallot, salt and white balsamic and let rest for 10 minutes. After shallots have softened, whisk in olive oil. Make sure to mix before dressing salad, as this will separate.

Dandelion Jelly

- 8 c. Dandelion flowers (green part removed)
- 7 c. water
- 1 1/2 c. honey
- 1/2 c. lemon juice
- 7 t. Pamoná's pectin
- 7 t. calcium water (it comes in Pamoná's brand pectin)

Get the water boiling and pour over flower petals. Let steep for 24 hours in the fridge. Strain out and press flowers using cheesecloth, coffee filters or a

French press.

Put this dandelion "tea" into a stainless pot and bring to a boil. Stir in honey until dissolved and stir in calcium water, lemon juice and pectin until dissolved. Pour into sterilized jelly jars. Process jars in a water bath canner for 10 minutes.

— Fischer Jex

Pickled Ramps

MAKES ¾ PINT

- 4 oz. ramp bulbs
- 9 oz. white wine vinegar
- 1/3 oz. salt
- 1 ½ oz. sugar
- 1 ¾ oz. water
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 T. pink peppercorns

Method: Place all ingredients in sauce pot and bring to a boil. Reduce to a simmer and cook until ramps are tender and cool at room temperature. Keep refrigerated.

— American Spoon Foods

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Rashid said. "But it just continued to explode. Now it seems like every serious chef worth his or her salt is very interested and open to purchasing locally foraged fruits."

And then some. The most innovative chefs fashion menus around the short-lived supply of wild edibles, sometimes changing dishes by the day.

Eric Patterson, co-owner and co-chef at The Cooks' House in Traverse City, relies heavily on forager Clay Bowers, also of Traverse City, to deliver the wild goods each spring.

"There's all kinds of cool stuff out there," Patterson said. "There are little tubers - it's like a potato. We get wild carrots every now and again, and cattail shoots. He has brought us wild sorrel before, wild roses, and of course all of the wild berries. Whatever our little forager drags in, we use. Clay really knows what he's doing."

That includes knowing when and where to find the best stuff. Come spring, Bowers spends about four hours a week foraging for everything from Lion's Mane mushrooms to wild

Wild Edibles Potluck May 24

The Martha Wagbo Farm and Education Center in East Jordan will host a Wild Edibles Potluck at 1 p.m. May 24. After the meal, experts will discuss common wild edibles found in northern Lower Michigan. Topics include learning to identify, harvest and prepare the local wild foods of May.

There is no admission fee, though donations are encouraged. The center is located at 5745 N. M-66.

hazelnuts. He loves digging up wild root vegetables including parsnips, and Jerusalem artichokes.

"In the spring, I will be looking for those life-giving greens ... dandelion greens, I like a lot, Lamb's quarters are good ones, though they come up a bit later," said Bowers, who works full-time at Right Brain Brewery and also teaches foraging classes. "Everybody knows wild leeks - they grow everywhere around here.

"Wild amaranth. There's all kinds of stuff. The further you go in the season,

it keeps changing."

That's what makes it interesting, Bowers said.

"There are some edible plants that will only last two weeks," he said. "It's truly seasonal eating."

A forager showing up at the back door in the afternoon is good enough to prompt chef-owner Martha Ryan at Martha's Leelanau Table in Suttons Bay to develop a new special for that evening.

"I always try to buy a little bit if I can so they come back again," Ryan said.

In fact, using wild local ingredients almost requires a chef to go with the flow.

"Sometimes it comes really fast and a lot so you have to use a lot and freeze," she said. "I look at it as a two-week window."

In addition to the unexpected knocks on the door, Ryan relies on other purveyors to bring certain ingredients.

"I have somebody in Leelanau County who not only brings me black walnuts, but takes them out of the shell," she said. "Once you taste a fresh black walnut, you never want to buy

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anything else again.”

The nuts typically end up in the hands of the pastry chef, or served fresh on a salad.

Ryan also looks forward to deliveries of fresh morels. So does the Rowe Inn in Ellsworth, which receives morels from a variety of foragers including Terry Downing of East Jordan.

“It’s usually from May 1 to May 25,” said Downing, who’s been foraging for morels and selling them for about eight years. “I heard they were worth some money, it’s good exercise, and I just like to be outdoors.”

Patterson said when The Cooks’ House

opened six years ago, he and partner Jennifer Blakeslee “opened with a pretty basic menu.” But their customers have become as adventurous as they have.



Justin Rashid of American Spoon

“We started putting on items to see how people would react,” Patterson said. “Now we’ve gotten to the point

we can put anything on the menu and our clientele responds fantastically.”

That fits with what’s happening nationwide and beyond,” he added, describing a pop-up restaurant in San Francisco that cooks with only ingredients that have been foraged within a two-mile radius of each location. Forager Maria Wasserle cites Noma in Copenhagen, voted top restaurant in the world three years running, with a menu built around foraging.

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