


FOOD

Seaweed has a wealth of culinary uses



Martin Hesp meets the author of a new book that celebrates the joys of shoreline foraging

Harvesting the shore

Life in general might be full of mysteries, but one place where unanswerable puzzles don't exist in such profusion is within the world of food and drink. We consume things because of simple reasons like availability or seasonality – or how delicious an item might be or the nutritional benefits something might give us. There are very few uncertain topics in the annals of human diet. But having said that there is one huge edible mystery that surrounds we folk who live in the Westcountry. And that is why we have no tradition of consuming the countless millions of tonnes of nutritious seaweeds which grow around our shores.

Of course, there is the notable exception of laver-gathering on the North Devon coast, but why is it that we turn our backs on all the other many edible seaweeds when people like the Northern Irish and the Scottish have been chomping away at the

green harvest of the foreshore for centuries? Alternatively, you could look at Japan – a sea-bound nation not entirely unlike ours – where seaweed-eating has always played a major part in what is one of the world's most healthy diets. When the people of Britain were faced with hunger or starvation in centuries gone by, why didn't they bring home the bladderwrack or the dulce as well as the bacon?

This puzzle becomes even more unfathomable when you learn that, unlike land plants, only a tiny handful of seaweeds are poisonous and most of them grow in deep water away from the shore.

If you spend a day with one of this region's top seaweed experts, as I did recently, the mystery deepens. Rachel Lambert showed me seaweed after edible seaweed, and each was more delicious than the other – so why weren't our forebears collecting these things and using them in their cuisine? Perhaps we will never know. Rachel hasn't been able to find an answer, although she has looked into the history of seaweed eating. One thing I will say, though, is that I cannot imagine we will continue shunning this free bounty after

next week when her new book, *Seaweed Foraging in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly* comes out. It is full of amazing recipes for easy-to-find seaweeds and I am looking forward to giving them all a go. The excellent book follows in the tracks of last year's *Wild Food Foraging in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly*. Both are full of colour photographs, tips and good commonsense advice as well as recipes.

Rachel has long been connected to the concept of food-foraging in West Cornwall where she gives classes and leads hikes.

"The first book came out in May last year and we sold out in six months," said Rachel as we descended to a Cornish beach where she has permission to pick seaweed for her kitchen. "The first print of 2,300 was gone by the end of year – and it's a small publisher so there was no national media attention. I'd wanted to write a book for a long time because I must have been teaching people information about seaweed for seven or eight years. And I wanted a book that would be both meaningful for people and also for me as a way of passing on what I know in practical way."

As we strolled down an ancient leafy lane

towards the cove, Rachel reached for the hedge to give me an example of what she meant. "Here's some Alexanders – it appears in loads of foraging books, but you tend to only have one photo of the plant, whereas we have four of it in its different stages of growth. I'd carefully watched Alexanders develop over a year, observing its cycle of growth as it flowered and went to seed. It was that kind of experience, which I've worked on for years, and it gave me the confidence to both teach people and write about a plant. Because I think it is all about the details. I took a group out last Sunday and showed them, in great detail, three poisonous plants. If you do that then you know what to avoid. There are other plants that look a bit like Alexanders, but it has a glossy leaf and is hairless – so in the books I do bullet points that feature all those details. It's not just the photos we rely on. And seaweed is a lot less perilous to eat because so few of them are poisonous. You do need to know about the water quality – and to do that you can check out the local beach guide or the Surfers Against Sewage website. And I really do rate local knowledge. Second, you should pick

Nori rice balls and rolls

In Japan nori is not cooked, instead it's used raw or toasted. I think this is just as tasty, if not more so. Here's a quick alternative to bought nori sheets.

Ingredients

Serves 4, makes 32, 8 each
 1.2 kg cooked sushi rice (500 g uncooked)
 Fillings for 3 types of sushi
 100 g smoked or raw* fish fillets, cut into thin slices or squares*
 Cooked prawns (1 per piece)
 Raw vegetables; ½ red pepper, ½ avocado, ¼ cucumber, ¼ a carrot, sliced in strips
 Squeeze of lemon juice (onto the avocado to stop it going brown)
 10 g dried laver, ground
 Small bunch of parsley, finely chopped
 2 tsp toasted sesame seeds

Method

Use half the freshly cooked sushi rice, cooled, each for the balls and rolls. Put the ground laver in a shallow, dry bowl, so it's easy to use.

For the rice balls: You'll need wet hands to handle the rice. Food-grade cling film is useful unless you're experienced at making rice balls. Take 2 tablespoons of rice and place in the centre of a square of cling film, pull in the corners to contain rice and twist (squeezing out any air) until you've made a ball of rice.

Remove the ball from the cling film with wet hands and continue until you've made 16 balls and used about half the rice. Dip about 12 balls into the bowl of laver, just covering the top of each ball with seaweed. Continue to decorate these with, for example; a square of fish, or a prawn, topping with a small piece of red pepper. Return the balls into the piece of cling film, twisting it again to secure the decoration in place.

Garnish with parsley or sprinkles of sesame seeds. Vary the decorations of the balls. For the remaining balls, carefully cut each in half (within the cling film is easiest), sprinkle the cut surfaces with

laver, then put the ball back together, re-twisting in cling film before decorating, as above.

For the nori rolls: Cover a sushi mat with cling film, wet hands and spread half the remaining rice across the mat. Use a dry spoon to sprinkle the whole surface of rice with a covering of ground laver. Next, arrange fillings in lines across the laver-covered rice – for example, cucumber, then carrot, then avocado or fish. The fillings should cover about one-third of the sheet of rice, starting about 2.5 cm from the end of the mat closest to you, and finishing in the centre. Take the closest end of the mat, lift it over the fillings, making an 'n' shape and pressing down to firm it up; continue to roll the rice over to the end of the mat. Remove the mat, keeping the cling film in place. Using a wet, sharp knife, neaten the ends of the roll, then cut into 8 pieces. Remove the cling film and sprinkle individual rolls with sesame seeds.



laver – and I adapted the way they deal with it.”

As we walked out over the rocks to the tidal pools, I pointed out some bladderwrack and suggested it was the one the seaweed everyone knows.

“It is and in the book I've got an Asian based noodle soup with chicken in a bladderwrack stock. But I've also done it as a form of pickle – just to show how amazingly adaptable seaweeds can be,” said Rachel, picking up another altogether different seaweed.

“This is pepper dulce and it is the strongest flavoured that I pick here in Cornwall – and I love using it.

“Some of my recipes are cutting edge. I'm quite proud of that because I am not copying anyone else, even if I am looking at other people's traditional ways with seaweed. For example, I do a lobster bisque with carrageen, which is really delicious.”

And so our day out by the seaside continued – and I have to say it was one of the most fascinating days out I've had in 15 years of writing for this newspaper.

The only downside was that I didn't get an inch closer to understanding why the people of this peninsula have rarely harvested this easy to pick gift from the gods.

Seaweed Foraging in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly by Rachel Lambert is published by Alison Hodge of Penzance at £6.95. For more details visit alisonhodgepublishers.co.uk and wildwalks-southwest.co.uk

seaweed fresh. Don't pick up something loose and unattached that looks tired.

“The third thing is that some seaweeds are tasty and some aren't. Go ahead and experiment. In my new book there are 16 edible seaweeds which should be easy to find around these coasts. I've highlighted ones that are tasty and they're ones that have been picked for thousands of years.

“There's just one family type that is poisonous and two of those grow much deeper out to sea. I don't understand what happened historically with seaweeds and why people don't seem to have traditionally eaten them down here. In Scotland and Wales they eat various seaweeds and in North Devon they eat laver – but in Cornwall we don't seem to have that.

“There are some seaweeds like the brown ones which are highest in iodine that you can't eat too much of. So some are good to have as a condiment – and some as a vegetable. Laver, for example, is an umbrella title for 70 species worldwide. Five are found around the Cornish coasts – so even within that one species you get a wide variety of flavours. In my book I've done a Japanese Nori – which is their name for

Pickled bladderwrack

Three pickles to choose from, from al-dente to soft textures.

Bladderwrack pickle

Ingredients

For 300 ml jar
 150 g fresh tips (including swollen ends if available) bladderwrack
 1 tsp of spices (mix of mustard seeds, cumin seeds, coriander seeds, black peppercorns)
 1 clove of garlic, sliced
 100 ml filtered watert
 100 ml white wine vinegar
 1 tsp sea salt
 1 tsp sugar (optional)t

Cucumber and wrack pickle

Ingredients

20 g dried bladderwrack tips (60 g fresh)
 200 g cucumber, peeled and finely sliced
 1/2 inch fresh ginger, peeled and finely sliced
 50 ml white wine vinegar
 50 ml filtered water
 25 g brown sugar
 1 dsp sea salt

Kohlrabi and wrack pickle

Ingredients

250 g kohlrabi (peeled and diced)
 10 g dried bladderwrack (30 g fresh)
 2 cloves of garlic (sliced)
 100 ml vinegar
 100 ml filtered water



1 tsp fennel seeds
 1 tsp coriander seeds
 1 tsp sea salt
 1 tsp sugar (optional)

Method

For the bladderwrack pickle: Wash bladderwrack tips and pack them into a clean, sterilised jar. Add spices and garlic. In a small saucepan combine vinegar, filtered water, sugar and salt and bring to a boil. Take off heat and pour over the seaweed in the jar*. Wipe any vinegar spills from the rim with a clean towel and put on the lid. Place in the fridge for 1-3 weeks before using. Can keep up to 6 months.

*Use jars with plastic-lined lids, or line metal lids with greaseproof paper. For the cucumber and wrack pickle, and the kohlrabi and wrack pickle: Follow instructions as above.