



Kelp is at hand

Seaweed is delicious, nutritious, a veritable cure-all and just one of the reasons **Fergus Drennan** does like to be beside the Great British seaside



In July 2006, with smoking hot oil-filled wok in hand, I carried out an undercover survey disguised in medieval attire. I was offering free deep-fried seaweed to the curious hoards attending a Kentish medieval fayre, and a young lad from the Shires who was trying seaweed for the first time exclaimed sincerely, spontaneously and without prompting, 'Wow! This tastes better than chocolate!'

On that day, 39 children tried seaweed and 39 gave it the thumbs up. A year later, this time disguised in a burdock leaf suit (pictured, above left), I carried out a similar survey in Camberwell, London. Again, the statistics spoke of seaweed's supreme delectability: 11 out of 11 children liked it. Of the 208 people who tried seaweed samples on both occasions, only one person disliked it. From this small survey it can be concluded that 99 per cent of adults like seaweed, 100 per cent of children like it and one in 50 thinks it tastes better than chocolate.

Aren't statistics wonderful? Here are some more. Two of the greatest seaweed-loving cultures on Earth, Japan and China, have coastlines of 18,486 miles and 11,160 miles

respectively. And yet with a UK coastline 11,072 miles long, and blessed with one of the richest areas for seaweed in Europe, we have never really developed as a seaweed eating culture, despite the fact that Wales excels in the art of the laverbread, Ireland knows how to knock up a mean carragheen dessert and the Scots are partial to a wee bit of dulce.

What exactly is seaweed?

Seaweeds are mostly marine but can also be brackish water algae, ranging in size from the microscopic up to 50m in length – the largest in Britain being *Laminaria hyperborea*, a 2m-long member of the kelp family. They are categorised according to colour: red, green and brown. Although they photosynthesise in the same way as plants, the similarity ends there. Rather than from soil, they draw all their nutrients from the surrounding water and have holdfasts, stipes, lamina, fronds or blades as counterpart to the more familiar roots, stem and leaves of land plants. In fact, it is their ability directly to absorb and concentrate nutrients and other substances in this way that makes seaweeds both incredibly beneficial for human health

and a possible source of toxicity. The latter is a real problem if inadvertently and regularly eating seaweeds gathered growing in areas of heavy industry – including nuclear facilities.

Collecting and storing seaweed

For sheer variety rocky coastlines are best, but as long as there are a few exposed rocks, your chances of finding a good variety increases dramatically. Ideally, collect only the freshest seaweeds: ones firmly attached to a rock. Seaweeds with a stipe should be cut a few centimetres from the frond base to allow for regeneration. It's important to time your visit to the coast to coincide with the new and full moon. Different seaweeds grow at different tidal zones across the beach and at this time the tides are very low on most shores, thus revealing the full variety of seaweeds in your location. Tide tables can be purchased from fishing tackle shops (for the year) or found online. See www.bbc.co.uk/weather/coast/tides

Most seaweeds are at their nutritional height when gathered in June and July, and the opportunity for solar drying is not to be missed. While others are sunbathing, lay out a



blanket and cover with a single layer of seawater-rinsed seaweed. Turning over once, most seaweeds can be dried in two days of full sun. Stored in airtight containers it will last up to a year; dried to brittle in a low oven it will last far longer. Simply rinsed in the sea it will keep in the fridge for a week. The Japanese often pack fresh seaweed in salt before refrigerating, which will make it last for months – just rinse it before use. All seaweeds are edible except *Desmarestia*, *Asparagopsis* and *Bonnemaisonia* varieties, which contain unpleasant compounds. Familiarise yourself with these and it's plain sailing from then on.

Cooking with seaweed


Seaweeds can be eaten raw – for instance as a kraut or dressed with vinaigrette – or cooked: deep-fried, shallow-fried, boiled, steamed or smoked. One of my favourite ways is to deep-fry them down on the beach. All seaweed can be cooked in three to 15 seconds in this way and tastes fantastic. Your oil needs to be smoking hot and the wok not overloaded; add a handful of seaweed at a time after squeezing out as much water as possible.

There is a marked difference in flavour between the various colours (red, green and brown) but also within families: bladder wrack, serrated wrack, egg wrack and channelled wrack have flavours uniquely their own. My other favourite method is to use sheets of green sea lettuce or brown laver to

wrap wild fennel-stuffed fish fillets and cook on hot embers in a buried sand or shingle oven.

Seaweed for health

Seaweed baths are wonderfully therapeutic due to their high mineral content, while there is something deeply sensual about bathing with your partner when she suddenly turns alluring mermaid! Such therapeutic visions offer a wonderful distraction from the other painful conditions that seaweeds can help alleviate, such as rheumatism and arthritis. Consumed regularly, seaweed can also help improve poor thyroid function (consult a doctor if on medication for this), improve circulation, relieve allergies, restore vitality and generally cleanse and detoxify the body. Its high concentrations of zinc and vitamins A, B, C and E make it a potent remedy for poor skin conditions. I personally became convinced as to the genuine health benefits of seaweed during my first attempt to eat nothing but foraged foods back in 1995. At the time I was cycling around Ireland for three months. Seaweeds were my daily staple and sped me along at 70 miles a day with energy and enthusiasm. More than 10 years later it's the seaweed baths that appeal to my aching limbs! And last July on a high-seaweed 100 per cent wild food diet I managed to halve my bad cholesterol in a month.

Finally, let's not forget that soil loves seaweed. As mulch or in a compost heap it's a veritable miracle grow! 



If you're not the foraging type, see our list of fruit and vegetables in season **p 57** and shopping guide **p 84**

In season

Seaweeds

Sea lettuce
Laver
Carragheen
Dulse
Beanweed
Maiden's hair
Dabberlocks
Gutweed –
Enteromorpha genera
Kelps – *Laminaria* genera
Wracks - *Fucus* genera



Land plants

Parasol mushrooms
Giant puffballs
Fairy ring mushrooms
Wild cherries
Blackberries
Mulberries
Cherry plums
Bulrush pollen
Marsh samphire

Above: Seaweed is a good source of zinc and vitamins A, B, C and E
Right: Pick your blackberries now to make into jam



Reading

Seaweed: A User's Guide by Sonia Surey-Gent and Gordon Morris

On the web

British Phycological Society
www.brphycsoc.org
Seaplant Handbook
www.surialink.com/handbook/index.asp

Contact me

For information or to get in touch, visit www.wildmanwildfood.co.uk