Week of Wild Food - Day Six

Contributed by Becky Lerner
29 May 2009

Wild ginger root beer, dandelion coffee, and sustainability by the numbers

I broke my wild food "fast" last night with some Cliff bars and a great meal at a Thai restaurant. I finally had a restful sleep, too, so this morning I woke up feeling fantastic. I feel totally normal today, as if the past five days were all a dream! Thank you to those who e-mailed me to express their concern about my health -- I feel great!

Today I went into the woods with herbalist Emily Porter (www.wildheartshealing.com) and gathered wild ginger, which is in the process of becoming root beer as I type this. Wild ginger is a different species from the kind of ginger you see in the supermarket, but they have a very similar flavor and the same medicinal uses -- that is, ginger is good for relieving an upset stomach, expelling gas, and stimulating circulation. Wild ginger has a heart-shaped leaf that looks similar to violets (the flowers of which are edible) and wild or false lily-of-the-valley (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maianthemum_dilatatum). The latter requires caution, as some kinds of lily-of-the-valley are poisonous, although ethnobotanical literature suggests that indigenous people here may have eaten the berries of this plant. A good way to tell these three plants apart: when rubbed, wild ginger leaves release a pleasant ginger/citrus aroma, and also, the leaf veins make circular, roundish patterns; in contrast, violet has veins that branch out toward the edges of the leaves and lily-of-the-valley has parallel veins that do not branch. Check out the pictures for a visual comparison.

You can make a root beer with any pungent edible root or leaf. Two of the most popular choices are ginger and sassafras. What Emily and I did today was boil some water, rinse and chop up the leaves and roots and toss them in to the pot, let simmer until the mixture smells pungent (probably 20 minutes), and then remove from the burner and let it cool. Add a good helping of sugary sweetener, such as agave or honey, to taste. We used half a bottle of honey for roughly 2 litres of liquid. When it gets to room temperature, add in 1/4 teaspoon of champagne yeast and pour the mixture into a bottle, then cap it. The carbonation process can take as long as 12 hours, depending on the room temperature. If you use plastic bottles, you can tell the root beer is ready when the container feels hard because of the internal pressure. In this case it's best to cool the root beer before opening to avoid a carbonation-fueled mess.

To make dandelion coffee -- which is caffeine free and amazingly delicious -- separate the roots from the rest of the plant, rinse them off, chop them up and stick them in the oven at 350 degrees or so until you notice an odor like burnt chocolate chip cookies. When the roots look quite crispy, it's time to remove them. Then smush them up with a rock, a mortar and pestle, or a coffee grinder. Finally, put them in a coffee maker or put them in a tea ball and add boiling water. Voila!

Susan Meeker-Iowry of Maine, a Culture Change reader, wrote to me today to lament the unlikely viability of foraging as a sustainable lifestyle option, considering the massive human overpopulation problem we now have. Anthropologists say that before Europeans arrived in Portland, Oregon, back when the land was entirely wild, the indigenous population probably had a density of 1 to 15 people per square mile, depending on the season. The Portland, Oregon, area is now a city with plenty of pavement and a population density of about 4,000 people per square mile, according to US Census figures for the year 2000. So, just by the numbers, I have to agree -- unless you happen to live in the wilderness of Alaska, it's true that the land cannot support most of us in our natural state.

What, then, is the value of foraging or eating wild foods today? Besides being fun, I think the benefits are both pragmatic and spiritual. Wild foods can help you survive a future crisis. And they can be a money-saving and highly nutritious supplement to a primarily agricultural diet in the present. But I think the greatest gains are of a more spiritual nature. Foraging is a way of reconnecting with our ancestral roots and showing our fellow beings that we honor them, that we still

remember our place in the great Gaia.