

On roadkill, seasonal foraging, and getting by with a little help from my tribe

Contributed by Rebecca Lerner
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If I had waited until this week to gather the food, I'd be in trouble. It took myself and a group of eight people at the wilderness skills school TrackersNW more than a day to turn a few buckets of acorns into flour in September. We had to crack the shells with a hammer, extract the nutmeat with our fingernails, grind it, boil it twice in a big vat to get the bitter astringent properties out, and then strain it and dry it.

I am fortunate to have a container of the flour ready to use now — otherwise there'd be very little time to search for food, but lots of calories expended.

The other jar I'm excited about has deer fat, which is fantastically more caloric than any wild greens could offer. It comes from a beautiful roadkill doe I helped a butcher friend process in his backyard. It was an uncomfortable experience to be part of, but also an interesting one. Laid out on her side, the animal reminded me a bit of the family dog back home in New Jersey. I felt a mix of fondness and disgust as I wrapped my arms around its body and lifted it up for my friend to hang from a ceiling beam so the blood could drain out of the gutted abdominal cavity. I had my body pressed up against the deer's back, my hands red and sticky. I felt the odd impulse to be gentle with it, as if careful handling would somehow matter to a deceased animal. Maybe it was part of honoring its body. I must admit that my stomach felt clenched and queasy at the thought of eating the doe. It's certainly easier to see a jar of its fat on the shelf, because it resembles mayonnaise. Cooking with it is going to be an adventure — I just hope my enzymes cooperate, since I haven't eaten a bird or a mammal in 11 years.

This time, I will last all seven days. Because of the lessons I learned from my wild food experiment in May about the importance of storing wild food as it becomes available, I have a pantry stocked with edibles that are no longer in season, such as chanterelle mushrooms, stinging nettles and acorns.

I am extremely fortunate to have a community of wonderful friends here in Portland, Ore., who helped me get wild foods during foraging jaunts over the summer and fall months. I'm starting with chestnuts, hazelnuts, black walnuts, acorn flour, dock seeds, hawthorn berries, mushrooms and even fat from a roadkill deer. This means I should have enough caloric fuel to sustain my foraging, cooking and processing efforts this week. I can't wait to get some crab apples and rose hips and scan the patch of grass across the street for my apartment for wild greens. Last time I looked, there was amaranth and mallow. The most exciting adventure this week will be an expedition to get a native root vegetable called wapato, which grows under water.

My diet for this experiment is loosely modeled after the native diet of the first peoples of the Pacific Northwest, which was heavily weighted toward meat and only lightly supplemented with greens. The calories came from fish, aquatic animals and deer, with vitamins and minerals from the inner parts of tree bark, seaweed, nuts, berries, shoots and roots -- and according to Nancy J. Turner, author of "Food Plants of Coastal First People."

When not doing survival experiments, I like to eat a pesco-vegetarian diet with copious amounts of Mexican food and occasional protein shakes. While I prefer not to eat animal products, the truth is that raw vegetarianism simply isn't feasible as a wild diet in the Pacific Northwest. The land in each region offers a limited selection, and survival requires that you conform to what it gives you.

It can be empowering to embark on a survival challenge totally solo, but that won't do much to answer questions about sustainability. Foraging is extremely time intensive, so community is an essential resource for anyone interested in a long-term wild-food diet -- hence the ubiquitous tribe structure of hunter-gatherer societies. If you'd like to hear more about the importance of community in foraging, check out a fascinating podcast I did with QuirkyNomads.com.

I am very grateful that I have a tribe of friends to help me this week. For Thanksgiving dinner, I will be joined by herbalist Emily Porter, and primitive skills enthusiasts Gabe Shaddy-Farnsworth and Ariel Marguiles. Other members of my tribe are Tony Deis, founder of the TrackersNW wilderness skills school, who contributed knowledge and chestnuts, and Jason H. Craban, a musician and TrackersNW instructor who showed me how to identify hawthorn berries and harvest dock seed.

Stay tuned for tomorrow's blog on Day One of the experiment! I'll be posting photos and stories about what I eat, how I prepare it, and what I forage on the street.

Do you have a suggestion, feedback or advice? I love to get e-mails from Culture Change readers at RebeccaELerner@gmail.com

Are you wondering why I'm doing this project? Read "How Foraging Can Set You Free," an essay I wrote for Earth First! Journal.

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See the press release for this series: [Can a Portland Woman Survive On Wild Food for Thanksgiving Week?](#)