Day Six: The Challenge of Palatability

Contributed by "Wild Girl" Rebecca Lerner
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Identifying, locating and gathering enough wild edibles is only half the challenge of eating them. Figuring out how to process them efficiently and then prepare them in a way that makes them palatable has been an interesting quest. As a people, our civilization has lost so much knowledge about how to live off the land directly that there doesn't seem to be any information on how to do it. There are books with recipes that include wild food, but it is very rare to come across a recipe that is 100% wild.

This is understandable considering that hardly anyone is a full-time hunter-gatherer in the Pacific Northwest of the United States anymore. When our food comes from gardens and mega-farms, why would we talk about the intricacies of cooking wild plants?

On Day One of this wild food challenge, Emily Porter and I looked at our heap of hawthorn berries with curiosity. We knew that it was supposedly possible to make fruit leathers out of them, but we had no idea how to strain the pulp and remove the seeds. The berries were firm and a hand-cranked food mill wasn't passing the thick mixture through its holes. We tried boiling the berries to soften the texture, but it turned the color from bright red to pale yellow, and the mild flavor went from barely sweet to bland. I tried pressing them against a cheese grater, but the holes were too big and the seeds came through. What ultimately worked best was mashing the berries against a fine screen by fist. This turned out to be very tedious and irritating to my skin, but with patience, it worked. Then there was the question of how to make the pulp into a fruit leather. I divided the pulp into strips and baked them on a cookie sheet on low heat in the oven for a couple hours. The result was a hardened, thick and somewhat chewy texture with a tart flavor. It was edible but not exactly good. I wished I had found some wild honey to toss in to the mix.

Emily and Henry Stanley actually tried to get some wild honey this morning but they were thwarted by angry bees with potent stingers.

Culinary machines make processing so much easier. I had trouble, initially, transforming chestnuts into flour. After I baked and shelled them, I couldn't figure out how to grind them into a fine flour. I tried to chop them by hand with a knife into little pieces and then grind them with a rock and block. But this didn't work with hard ones and the rock didn't exactly grind. Next I tried an electric coffee grinder. This worked but made a coarse flour. What was most effective in the end was a Vitamix loaned to me by Henry, a permaculture educator.

Cooking with nut flours also took some maneuvering. When you add water, acorn flour forms a thick paste, but it has a bitter aftertaste. Chestnut flour has a sweet flavor but doesn't stick together with water alone – it needs some kind of bonding agent to work as a dough. I found that the best compromise is to mix the two and add something sweet. I used black walnuts and, sometimes, the saliva in my mouth after chewing licorice fern roots. I didn't include the roots themselves because none of the reference books mentioned anyone actually swallowing them, just chewing them like gum.

This experience has caused me to wonder if my taste buds are simply too demanding. At times, even though I have been hungry, I haven't had an appetite for the food in front of me. Black walnuts and wapato are fantastic, but I wonder if wild food on the whole once tasted as good as modern food. We take for granted the abundance and variety of available flavorings we have now.

This is the longest I have ever gone eating wild food exclusively. I feel as if I'm on some kind of cleanse. Today I felt low on energy so I canceled plans I had made to go mushroom hunting. I stayed home and slept a lot. My mood is positive and I feel clear-headed, but I am definitely hungry. I crave protein. I can't wait to eat eggs, tofu and salmon again.

For Thanksgiving, my friends and I are preparing a wild food feast. We will dine on wapato; cattail; rose hips; yellow dock seed; apple cider; wild mustard greens; wild mushrooms (oyster, hedgehog, chicken of the woods and chanterelle); hawthorn berries; lemonbalm tea; hazelnuts; stinging nettle; roasted chestnuts; black walnuts; and chestnut and acorn flour. Some of them will also eat venison from a roadkill deer they butchered. They will bread it in chestnut and acorn flour, encrust it in black walnuts and hazelnuts, and fry it in deer fat. I am abstaining from the meat, but I will report what they have to say about the resulting dish.

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

TV coverage in Portland of Rebecca's wild diet:

koinlocal6.com

The Portland Oregonian, largest daily newspaper in Oregon: