Day Seven: Wild Thanksgiving and Final Thoughts

Contributed by "Wild Girl" Rebecca Lerner
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Together, my forager friends and I spent five hours preparing our wild Thanksgiving feast. We sipped lemonbalm tea as we worked, crafting a colorful spread of nourishing foods that were totally local, money-free, and produced 100% compostable waste. Most impressively, our dinner actually tasted good!

I never would have guessed it, but boiled rose hips are even better than cranberry sauce. The red-orange dish is a similar texture and flavor, yet naturally sweeter. To make it yourself, wash the rose hips, then remove the seedy core and little hairs surrounding it. Put the sliced berries in a pot, add water, boil and simmer until the mixture is soft and thick, and voila!

I cracked black walnuts with a rock as chestnut-breaded venison sizzled in the pan, filling the room with a delectable scent. It tempted even me, a pesco-vegetarian who has rarely liked the flavor of mammal meat. Since it was roadkill, I couldn't have moral objections to eating it, so I chose to taste it. Honestly, it was delicious. I never imagined that roadkill would be so tender. I ultimately spit it out because I didn't want to risk sickening myself with meat after avoiding it for so long. My friends who ate it, though, considered it the highlight of the meal.

We also ate baked cattail roots; steamed wapato bulbs; oven-baked biscuits made of chestnut, acorn and dock seed flour with elderberries; roasted chestnuts; raw black walnuts; baked breaded mushrooms and boiled mustard greens. To drink, we had apple cider, lemonbalm tea, and Juniper beer.

Surrounded by forager friends whose heart-filled enthusiasm kept me going through all seven days, I couldn't pick a more fitting finale for a week of wild food.

When I started on Friday, I was determined and optimistic, but I wasn't sure what I was in for. As it turned out, the lessons I learned in May adequately prepared me to make it through. I didn't waste any calories wandering around looking for food because I had scouted my neighborhood in advance. I wasn't beholden to the bare trees because I stocked my pantry in advance, gathering stinging nettle over the summer and chestnuts and black walnuts in September and October. And I had the support of a tribe of forager friends who share the belief that survival is a cooperative endeavor. Together we gathered and processed more edibles more efficiently than I could have on my own. They also generously offered gifts of plant foods they had stumbled upon, like sumac and feral prunes. I could have continued another week, if I had wanted to to continue eating foods that were less palatable than I'd like.

In yesterday's blog I wondered whether ancient indigenous people had different expectations for flavor and texture than we do now. They may have, however, there is also some evidence to suggest that they sometimes cultivated wild plants for flavor. It's hard to know, but speculating is interesting.

I wanted to keep the project local enough to stay relevant to the realistic constraints of a survival situation, but if I had expanded the range of the project to include the coast, I could have included sea salt, seaweed, and an abundance of fish and shellfish. Some friends did offer to give me fish they had caught in local rivers, but these were farm-raised fish that had been stocked in the waterways, and that didn't exactly seem "wild."

It can be difficult to define wild food. I tried to stick as much as possible to the indigenous diet here, but I also wanted to highlight non-native weeds and other plants that we don't tend to think of as food, like rose hips. My aim was to reveal hidden abundance and show that the Earth feeds us naturally. We don't have to dominate the land to get what we need. To paraphrase my friend Ariel Marguiles, "The sun warms the Earth and never once does it say, 'But what did you ever do for me?' " The Earth gives us living gifts of food and medicine and asks nothing in return.

Agriculture brought overpopulation. Overpopulation threw the natural system out of balance, creating scarcity. And now, instead of cooperation, the world economy is based on competition, greed and domination.

Politicians propose wiping out the last remaining wilderness to build roads and drill for oil, because they don't recognize nature's inherent value to provide for us. They have forgotten that the Earth is a natural welfare system with free food, free housing and universal health care. Even environmentalists, much of the time, build their campaigns on sentimentality and aesthetics. Mankind has lost its way.

Fortunately, the world is filled with the vestiges of a more harmonious past. Wild plants are a link to what once was and what could be. To forage is a beautiful thing, for it is a proclamation that you remember where you came from, that you acknowledge another way.

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