

Day One: Medicinal Food and Supernatural Berries

Contributed by Rebecca Lerner
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I started the day with a nourishing tea made of pine needles, rose hips, mint and mallow greens, all gathered within a half block of my apartment in the city. It was more like a broth than a tea, because mallow has a gooey quality that thickened the mixture and gave it a hearty texture. Mallow is a prolific weed that grows close to the ground on sidewalks all over the city.

It has rounded leaves and distinctive little fruits that look like green cheesewheels -- and they actually taste like little cheesewheels, too!

Herbalists consider mallow to be a moistening herb, and they use its roots topically to treat skin irritations and internally to soothe the stomach and respiratory tract. In western society we distinguish between food and medicine, but other cultures consider them interchangeable. The Ayurvedic tradition, for instance, closely links the diet to health, encouraging the use of herbs as daily tonics to support bodily functions and prevent illness.

Rose hips are widely known for their high Vitamin C content, but native people used all parts of the plant for a wide array of medicinal purposes. The flower petals are said to help heartburn, the roots treat diarrhea, and the seeds can be used to combat muscle aches, according to Gregory L. Tilford's book "Edible and Medicinal Plants of the West."

Lunch was pretty great: roasted chestnuts and dried figs from trees in the city. Emily Porter, an herbalist, teacher and friend, brought the foraged figs as a gift. They were by far the best thing I ate all day: super sweet! Emily helped me score the chestnut shells with a little "x" and we baked them for 20 minutes at 350 degrees Fahrenheit. Some came out hard and inedible, but fortunately a lot were nice and soft and chewy. The smell in the apartment was wonderful -- it reminded us of home-baked bread.

Emily also brought some dried chanterelle mushrooms. We soaked them in water and then cooked them on the stove in water and deer fat. Honestly, the deer fat was horribly stinky and I think I'm going to skip it going forward. It made otherwise tasty mushrooms so gamey I couldn't stand to eat them.

Hawthorn trees abound in Portland. The berries are full of little seeds, so I rinsed them and mashed them against a screen with a big spoon to strain the pulp out and get to the good stuff. Individually, the bright red berries are mildly sweet, but the pulp I made was tart and kind of bitter. I think it would be much more palatable mixed with some honey or agave. I ate both the fresh mashed berries and a baked version. I put the pulp in the oven at a very low temperature for two hours to evaporate the water and turn the texture into a kind of fruit leather. It didn't seem to make a difference in the flavor. I also tried boiling the berries, which had the effect of turning them yellow.

The native Nuxalk culture here believed that eating lots of hawthorn berries could make you susceptible to visitation by supernatural beings, according to Nancy J. Turner's book, "Food Plants of Coastal First Peoples." I have not had experiences like that before but I am open minded, and it will be interesting to see if, at the end of this week, I have any ghost stories to share.

The amount of food I ate was much smaller than I'm accustomed to, and I was hungry. I was definitely craving some regular food, especially coffee cake. I know the first couple days are usually the most challenging, so I'm considering it a passing inconvenience.

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TV coverage in Portland of Rebecca's wild diet:

koinlocal6.com

The Portland Oregonian, largest daily newspaper in Oregon: