

## FORAGING

# TAKE YOUR PICK

**Anne Armstrong** and her family take a walk on the wild side with expert forager Mark Williams to discover the delicious free treats nature has to offer



Fungi feast: a selection of edible mushrooms



Would you know your ceps from your chanterelles? Your blaberries from your brambles? What would you do with wood sorrel? Ever encountered hemlock water-dropwort?

Spend a couple of hours in the company of wild food expert Mark Williams and the answers to these questions – and many more – are enthusiastically revealed. And it's guaranteed that a walk in the countryside or along the shore will never be quite the same again.

I wasn't sure what to expect on accepting an invitation from Mark, of Galloway Wild Foods, to go foraging with my children in the beautiful location of Cardoness Estate near Gatehouse of Fleet. It's safe to say that the closest all of us had been to foraging for food before had been in the family veg patch or the kitchen cupboards. So on a beautifully sunny Saturday morning Jen, Kit and I set off on a new adventure.

We were in safe hands. Mark has been an avid forager since stumbling on his first patch of chanterelle mushrooms when he was 16. His fascination with wild foods has made him an expert in the field, helping shape his career and his spare time. He led a fungi foray for Savour the Flavours' Flavour Fortnight last year and was amazed when 100 people turned up, prompting him to set up his own foraging website.

He says: "The success of that event reflects a huge upsurge of interest in wild food foraging in recent years. Not only does it reduce food miles and allow people to truly 'eat local', but it is great fun for all ages and provides delicious gourmet food – for free!

"We are fortunate that our corner of Scotland is one of the finest areas in the UK – and quite possibly the world – for foraging. The mild, sheltered climate and huge range of habitats means we boast a stunning range of delicious free food."

After a refreshing glass of Mark's elderflower Champagne – made from locally sourced elderflowers of course – and a fortifying sip of sloe gin for the adults, we set off. We were hardly out of the car park when Mark spotted some ceps growing in a patch of grass by the roadside.

"Mushrooms are the star of the show," he says. "A lot of people get into foraging through mushrooms. Ceps are the king of the edible mushrooms; a perfect cep is the tastiest mushroom of all.

"But insects like ceps as much as people do, so you have to check them for holes – if you find them full of holes, they're no good for you. These mushrooms are very popular in continental Europe – the Italians call them porcini – and you don't have to go deep into the forest to find them."

A few steps further on and there's a blaerry patch, unfortunately with few ➡



Mark collects chanterelles; below: Anne tries common sorrel







Mark shows Jen and Kit how to locate and collect safe-to-eat mushrooms such as this cep, the 'king of edible mushrooms'

berries for us on this trip. Eagle-eyed Jen was already hooked by this point, having been tasked with carrying the basket for the day's finds, and managed to find one of the few berries available, with great delight.

It soon became clear as we meandered along the woodland walk that free food is in abundance, if you know what you're looking for. As Mark says: "We are surrounded by delicious foods. But the rule of thumb is never to eat anything unless you are absolutely sure of what it is."

A guided walk like this one is ideal for getting an insight into what to look out for and what to avoid – especially when poisonous plants like the deadly hemlock water-dropwort grow happily alongside edible species.

Mark's top tips for would-be foragers include taking a good guide book with you, and not being too ambitious; pick a few species which don't have sinister lookalikes – like wood sorrel, wild garlic and chanterelles – to help build your confidence.

In terms of where you can and can't search for wild foods, Mark says most foraging is fine if exercised with care, research and respect for other land users and landowners, with our 'right to roam' enshrined in the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003.

He says: "The really interesting thing about foraging in this country is that all people really forage for is brambles, whereas on the continent it's part of the

**'Foraging is addictive and you can do it all year round. It's using all your senses and totally tunes you in with your environment'**



The children enjoy non-alcoholic Champagne made with elderflower, below



culture. It's like we've had this disconnection with foraging and what I'm trying to do is get people connected with it again.

"One of the reasons for an upsurge in interest recently is that celebrity chefs are using a lot of wild foods, and people are starting to wake up to it here."

Now living with his wife Cara in Gatehouse of Fleet, Mark grew up mostly on the Isle of Arran, where he discovered his love of foraging, and has worked as a restaurant manager, chef, and full-time forager. His day job now is as a sales manager for regional dairy company Rowan Glen. With Galloway Wild Foods, Mark is also now spreading the word about foraging through his website and organises a number of wild food events, from fundraising forays to child-friendly woodland rambles and full weekend gourmet extravaganzas.

For this year's Flavour Fortnight, he led a group of artists on a foray to provide inspiration for them to create works of art for an exhibition at Devorgilla Gallery in Dumfries, running from September 3-17.

On our walk, Mark's interest in the gourmet side of foraging was evident from the many tasty recipes he suggested for the plants we discovered in the woodland and down on the shore. As well as ceps and blaeberrries, we came across brambles, chanterelles, wood sorrel (looks like clover and is great for sprinkling on mushroom dishes), sea radish, a lush patch of sorrel leaves,





Picnic time: Jen, Kit, Anne and Mark enjoy a piece of Mark's famous Mile High Wild Pie (below) on the beach at Cardoness

reedmace and meadowsweet, to name a few. Although the tide was in, we were assured cockles and razor clams, or 'spoots', are well worth the hunt in more favourable conditions.

With a healthy appetite built up from walking, we settled down in a beautiful sandy cove next to Cardoness Chapel for a delicious picnic lunch, which included Mark's spinach, watercress and sea beet quiche and his Mile High Wild Pie, packed full of ingredients such as chanterelles, ceps, sea beet, eggs and locally grown spinach and potatoes.

Mark says: "I've always enjoyed cooking and I'm really into the gourmet side of foraging, rather than the survival aspect. If you're a gourmet, all the ingredients are out there.

"Foraging is addictive and you can do it all year round. It's using all your senses and totally tunes you in with your environment."

As we headed back home, Jen and Kit reflected on a fun day out. At seven and five, they are at the younger end of the groups Mark caters for, but they thoroughly enjoyed the experience, albeit with a detour to the adventure playground half way round. Jen even concluded it was one of her "best times ever". And family walks at home have taken on a whole new dimension, with extra care always being taken to look out for tasty treats lurking in the undergrowth. D&G

■ For lots more information about foraging and wild foods, see Mark's website: [www.gallowaywildfoods.com](http://www.gallowaywildfoods.com).



The pie is made with chanterelles, ceps, sea beet, eggs and locally grown spinach and potatoes



Kit spots one of nature's finest fruits, the bramble