**Blogs**

**Category: Seasonal food**

**To do: Research facts, add and find photos, what are they rich in, the root thing is it true? I & C.**

**Wild Salad or Salad on the Wild Side**

From a window in an apartment we regularly rented in Tuscany I used to watch an old man and woman in a field opposite us. Early in the morning before the sun became hot they would work bent double picking something from the ground and putting it into a plastic bag. I was never able to ask them exactly what it was they were collecting but knew from Giancarlo that his parents did the same. It was their daily salad.

The leaves the old couple loved were probably chicory, dandelion, rocket and a soft relative of the thistle family. There may also have been wild mint, nettles, fennel and salad burnet.

Photo of various leaves

I know from reading Hattie Ellis’ brilliant book What to Eat? 10 chewy questions about what to eat??? That we should all be eating a more diverse group of leaves rather than just the typical spinach and lettuce that we all reach for in the supermarket. I also know from old foraging friends that these wild leaves are probably far more nutritious than their purpose-grown counterparts. This is because they have grown naturally, had time to take in more nutrients, if wild have probably not been subjected to pesticides and may well have longer roots to absorb more minerals from the ground. Overfarming, fungicides and pesticides wreck the soil and we therefore may not be getting all the goodness from our leaves that we once were from our naturally nutrient rich soil.

I now add edible weeds from our garden or from a walk such as jack o’er the hedge and dandelion. Dandelion leaves are excellent in smoothies, full of antioxidants, high in calcium and iron and one of the richest sources of betacarotene, folic acid, niacin and vitamins E and C. And much cheaper than buying spinach.

Jack o’er the hedge – whizz it up with olive oil, pepper and salt. Also know as garlic mustard. Really good in potato salads and with eggs. Full of vitamins A and C.

I’ve stopped looking at them as weeds and encourage them to grow. I like the mild garlicky flavour from jack o’er the hedge, the white flowers in salads and the gentle bitterness of dandelion. I pick the young leaves and give them a wash in cold water before using.

Photo of Jack o’er the hedge and dandelion

**Quinoa Tabouleh**

Serves 4 to 6

80g quinoa

30g ? herbs and leaves such as parsley, jack o’er the hedge, mint, dandelion, coriander,

Juice of a lemon

5 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

Salt and freshly-ground black pepper

Tomatoes or red pepper

Spring onions

Cucumber

Garlic

**Wild fennel and what to do with it**

I hadn’t realised until we stayed with friends recently how much I relied on the herbs outside my backdoor. Mamma mia, no herb garden! In every Italian household, even the tiniest city apartment you usually find a pot of basil, chilli or rosemary growing on a windowsill ready to be picked at the last moment. Ok, maybe I am spoilt (my mother used to tell me I was), we have a bay tree, rosemary bushes, parsley, mint and thyme all within easy reach of my kitchen and I use them every day. Roast potatoes are not the same without rosemary, new potatoes taste better dressed in parsley and mint butter and gravy, soups and stocks will lack their warm spicy notes without bay leaves.

Not wishing to be an herb-obsessed diva for a moment, but I became so frustrated at the thought of no herbs I went out with a torch in the dark to see what I could find nearby their house. Spidery fronds of wild bronze and green fennel tickled my face as I walked, I knew their aniseed flavour well and instantly picked them. Next I found rosemary creeping over someone’s wall and I am afraid a piece simply broke off in my hand! Then nettles, my gloved hand grabbed the tips and I made off with my booty.

Back at the said friend’s house I popped the rosemary sprigs under the potatoes roasting in the oven, added the nettle tips to the peas and tucked the fronds of fennel into parchment paper parcels with the salmon. Happiness. The flavour is back in the house.

Wild fennel, not Florence fennel which produces the white bulb, grows easily in the UK, you can see it on grass verges and in gardens where it seems people look at it rather than cook with it. Its liquorice sweetness makes a perfect match to any fish or shellfish. Or try it with other sweet flavours such as grated beetroot in a salad or to finely chop it over its cousin the fennel bulb. Here are some recipe ideas to make with wild fennel to inspire you.

**Salmon parcel with fennel**

Tuck a short frond of wild fennel underneath a piece of salmon, lay another over the top. It’s so pretty like this you will want to photograph it. Add a splash of wine (or leave out if you wish but I can’t think why) add a twist of black pepper and wrap in parchment paper. Cook in the oven at 180oC until done. Roughly 12-15 minutes for a salmon fillet or 8-10 for a seabass fillet, to give you a guide. Remove from the paper when done, pour over the sauce from the parcel and enjoy with new potatoes, dressed with parsley and butter and some fresh peas.

**Wild fennel, Florence fennel and cucumber salad**

Roughly chop a bulb of Florence fennel, half a cucumber, 2 spring onions, a handful of wild fennel and parsley and toss together. Add a good splash of good extra-virgin olive oil and a squeeze of orange juice. Grind a generous twist of black pepper and a give it a good pinch of salt. Toss together, taste and adjust the seasoning or add more herbs as necessary. Serve with grilled fish or meat or as part of a selection of salads.

**Shredded beetroot and wild fennel salad**

Coarsely grate a couple of medium size beetroot and 1 large carrot and put into a salad bowl with a large handful of roughly chopped wild fennel fronds. Add a dressing of good olive oil, a good squeeze of lemon juice, a splash of red wine vinegar, a teaspoon of caster sugar, salt and pepper. Scatter over toasted almonds and black onion seeds and toss the whole lot together. Add a few more fennel fronds to look good and serve.

**Sardines with Fennel and Citrus Fruits**

This recipe was developed in our school during ‘Slow Fish week’ a couple of years ago. It uses the classic *soffrito* – a vegetable base used in Italian cookery - but with a citrus twist to balance the oily fish. If you can’t find fresh baby fennel use a teaspoon of fennel seeds to get the aniseed flavour. Mackerel can also be cooked in this way.

Serves 4

Juice of 1/2 lemon

200ml fish stock

1kg sardines, cleaned and trimmed

3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

Handful of flat-leaf parsley, destemmed, leaves roughly chopped

For the soffrito

150ml extra virgin olive oil

11/2 red onions, weighing about 150g, very finely chopped

2 celery sticks, weighing about 150g, very finely chopped

1 medium carrot, weighing about 150g, very finely chopped

2 sprigs fresh rosemary

3 bay leaves

2 x 5cm lengths of orange peel

4 baby fennel stalks, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, whole, crushed with the flat of a knife

1 teaspoon salt

Freshly ground black pepper

Preheat the oven to 180°C/350°F/gas mark 4.

First make the soffrito. Heat the olive oil in a frying pan and add the onion, celery and carrot. Season with salt and pepper. Add the rosemary, bay leaves, orange peel, baby fennel and garlic and cook over a low heat, stirring regularly, for 15 minutes to allow the onion to become sweet. Remove and discard the rosemary and bay leaves.

Add the lemon juice to the soffrito and cook through for a few minutes. Then add the stock and simmer gently for about 10 minutes until reduced. Season to taste and add more lemon juice if you feel it needs more bite. If the soffrito starts to look dry add a little more stock or water.

Meanwhile put the sardines on a baking tray. Season with salt and pepper, drizzle with olive oil and bake in the oven for 10 minutes.

Remove the tray from the oven and pour over the sauce from the pan. Allow to cool slightly then roll the sardines up around the sauce. Lay into a warmed ovenproof dish and return to the oven for a further10minutes or until the sardines are cooked through. Serve with extra lemon, roast potatoes and sautéed spinach.

**Elderflowers**

**Elderflower Cordial**

**Elderflower vinegar**

**Try pickled elderberries**

Copy recipe from GAP.

The making of the Chef’s table concept at La Cucina Caldesi

Occasionally people hire our room for a special dinner and not for a cookery course. This has always worked well as we are used to running tailormade events. Our chef Stefano Borella discusses the menu with the customer and all is well. Now having written the books about the Amalfi coast and more recently Venice, Recipes

Collecting our props for the evening I felt like I have been revisiting my days as a theatre designer, the dress rehearsal in Monday evening when we are doing our first chef’s table for the staff and photographer. I can’t wait to see the result but also want to make sure every detail is taken care of.

Writing out the menus.

Laying the table and setting up the room.