

Jane Mundy

Seaweed Goes Gourmet
at your local restaurant sometime soon...

The smell in the air reminded me of a damp Cowichan sweater as I pulled on my galoshes and headed down to the water's edge at Wiffen Spit, the inlet just behind the Sooke Harbour House in Sooke, B.C.. Bleary eyed, I looked at my watch—6.30am meant low tide. Cutting across the detritus of broken mussel shells, dried up seaweeds and assorted plastic bits of last night's high-tide line, I was thinking of my pioneer spirit like the brave bloke who got to eat the first oyster because I was about to eat raw seaweed, with a little prompting from Diane Bernard, a.k.a. the seaweed lady.

Now you're probably wondering why anyone in her right mind would do this voluntarily. I weighed the odds and decided that if someone is crazy enough to eat live sea urchin or the first oyster, chewing a piece of vegetation was no big deal. After all, it's a main staple of the Japanese diet, and most of us eat sushi. With today's quest for anything unusual and unique, it would seem like the trendy thing to try. Venturing farther out until I was in a pool so thick with seaweed it looked like a cauldron of leafy chowder, Bernard snagged a floppy purple leaf and chowed down. Even though she knows every seaweed in this area like a gardener knows chickory from chickweed, I gingerly took a nibble. And most surprisingly, it tasted good. Bernard is also quick to expound upon how nutritional they are: most seaweeds pack more Vitamin B than any other plant. They contain complete proteins and carry all the essential amino acids, along with a zillion minerals, trace minerals and other vitamins.

Taste is an elusive thing - it relies on memory. Trying to describe the taste of Sea Lettuce is about as futile as describing the taste of raw sea urchin. Nor does it do much good to equate the taste of any seaweed to something familiar, such as zucchini. Better to say it's like something from another planet or describe it like a cross-over of senses; how oysters taste like the smell of the sea, or how gin tastes like the smell of perfume. Anyway, judging from the few I did try while wading about in the primordial soup, each kind of seaweed had a taste as distinct as its shape, texture and colour – a most pleasant discovery, given my dubious attitude. And given the pristine waters in this area, the ebb and flow of the tides, the seaweed that grows here is pollution free. Don't forage for sea lettuce on Kits beach unless you plan on digging it into your veggie patch.

So I'm looking at this stuff that surrounds me (and there's plenty of it), and wondering why there isn't a market for it. The seaweed we trample on the beach is used as fertilizer, and the stuff growing in the outer coastal areas is harvested to a few restaurants, but that's as far as it gets. Sea Asparagus is the only fresh sea vegetable we can get in B.C. all year round, but it's expensive. Of course there is dried kelp powder, dehydrated dulse, and nori sheets available (to name a few); just about any Japanese grocery store stocks these items. But nothing fresh is available, at least not in BC. The only way to eat fresh seaweed—without sloshing around the west coast at high tide and dragging it home—is to visit a few upscale restaurants on Vancouver Island or downtown Vancouver.

A few innovative chefs have been experimenting with seaweed for the last year or so. And a few places have successfully incorporated seaweed into their menus. On the whole, feedback from customers has been positive. Chef Edward Tuson of the Sooke Harbour House says, “Some people have an aversion to it, but the adventuresome will try. Of course the Asian market loves it, particularly Japanese guests.” And finding fresh seaweed on the menu here in B.C. is just as surprising to Japanese visitors as a Westerner finding a cheese plate at a restaurant in rural Japan.

“We’re lucky here ‘cause we can force it on people”, Tuson laughs. “We always put it with the salmon, so about 40 people are eating it every night.” He has put it in ravioli and perogies. “You name it, I’ll put it in there”, he says. Tuson has been harvesting *Alaria*, *Porphyra* and Sea lettuce since the early 90s, using it in everything from salads to sauces. The first day Tuson picked seaweed, it was plated and in the dining room that very night. Now that’s a guy who doesn’t mess around. His favourite sea vegetable is Sea lettuce. When blended raw into chicken or vegetable stock it looks just like a sweet pea sauce. And just as delicious.

At the Aerie Resort, Chef Christophe Letard showcases seaweeds by using complimentary ingredients to enhance their natural flavours. “Unfortunately, I haven’t had much time to experiment but I have [steamed] poultry in a seaweed broth which is very interesting and surprising”, he says. Letard uses the stipe, or stalk, of *Alaria* as an appetizer and the fronds to wrap and bake sablefish.

At last year’s Feast of Fields, Tuson served a seaweed salad made with three varieties of seaweed on a dried *Porphyra* tuille. The public reaction was wild. According to Bernard “We sold out in three hours with 750 people trying our samples. People were lined up for more”, she proudly attests. This year’s Feast of Fields featured three venues serving seaweed: Wildfire Bakery baked Sea lettuce bread, the Marina Restaurant served *Porphyra* spring rolls, and Sooke Harbour House created a four-seaweed special that, judging from the crowd’s reactions, was the highlight of the festival.

AS I GET HERE I REALIZE YOUR PERSONAL FORAY IS OFF THE TOPIC.
CUT ENTIRE LEAD. STICK WITH THE PEOPLE WHO USE IT.

People who try seaweed seem to love it, but it’s unlikely that fresh seaweed will become a staple in our diets. Chances are that it won’t be coming to your neighbourhood supermarket anytime soon. The biggest obstacle is freshness. One reason is that we don’t have factories pumping nitrogen into salad greens like some US companies have, allowing the product to remain “fresh” for a few weeks. Another reason is the old ‘supply and demand maxim. If you compare it to other products, seaweed is more obscure to the mainstream than miso, for example. But if we ask for, and more Chefs listen to the consumer and accept it, seaweed may be on the menu at your favourite restaurant very soon...

Rockweed has delectable little pods that pop in your mouth like roasted pumpkin seeds (and they're apparently great in martinis, but it's too early in the morning to clarify). You can find it draped over rocks in the high-tide zone and consists of bushy pod-like clumps with yellowish tips.

Agregia, or "feather boa", looks like a huge centipede from afar. The little floats all along the stype have a mushroom-like taste. Shear off the feathers and eat the stype for an earthier taste. Nature has already julienned the feathers, ready to chuck into a stir-fry.

Sea cabbage, compact as Savoy under water, spreads its multitude of leaves in a huge circle on land. It produces lots of algin, thus producing a thick sauce when cooked and (I've been told) marries well with carrots. There is nothing I can vaguely think of to describe the taste, but this I know; you'll either love it or gag.

Ulva lactuca, or Sea lettuce, is the most recognizable and accessible of the seaweeds. It has a crisp, grassy taste, vaguely reminiscent of peas. It is the bright green, almost translucent stuff you see washed up on shore and just about everywhere in the high tide zone.

Alaria, sometimes referred to as "wakame", has an altogether different taste. It has a faint smell of rhubarb and tastes a bit like celery. The stype (stalk) of the frond is a favourite amongst chefs. If I was blindfolded and had to perform a taste test, I would never consider that it came from the sea.

Like any plant, seaweed is seasonal - from the end of April until September. Try harvesting some for yourself; gather seaweed like you would snip fresh herbs, never clearing out an area, and be sure to collect living plants that are attached to rocks or floating free. The stuff washed up on shore is like our backyard compost – in the process of decay. Also, play it safe and harvest away from residential areas and far from the high tide line. You can dry some varieties in the sun or in a warm oven, depending upon the type – thin leaves such as Sea lettuce are good for this method. Thick, leathery stems should be boiled first to soften them. To keep seaweed for a few days, rinse well and store as cool as possible without freezing, wrapped in damp towels.

Courtesy of Jane Mundy