

## The seaweed ladies of Sooke Tuesday, March 17, 2009

On the shores of the beach at Sooke Harbour House I meet Diane, an entrepreneurial seaweed lady who was formerly a community activist and politician. Astute, communicative and self-assured, she is a true lobbyist for her cause. Just as fast as I arrive, she fits me with a pair of gum-boots and a durable hand-painted walking stick and we take a walk on the beach facing Sooke Harbour House. This is her ocean classroom.

Diane Bernard of Seaflorella at Outer Coast Seaweeds has developed a line of skin-care products that she makes from seaweed collected around Sooke. Her line includes twenty-six products that she sells to upscale spas in Canada and around the world. She is the entrepreneurial magnet that brings together and likely holds together the seaweed ladies of Sooke. But the fruit of the ocean garden runs deep in her family history. It is deeply anchored on both of the Canadian coastlines.

"I am from the Îles de la Madeleine," says Diane, "I have been here on the British Columbia coastline for most of my adult life but I am actually a third-generation seaweed person. When locally they call me a seaweed lady, I sort of chuckle. But it's true. That's what I am."

### **Diane Bernard: A seaweed heritage**

Diane says this while scrambling on chunky rocks in front of monster bull kelp that looks like a massive wound up piece of spaghetti. Of course she was a seaweed lady, I thought, it even says as much on her business card. She is a seaweed lady as I am a cultural navigator. Unusual vocations like these must be named as we call a spade, a spade.

The Îles de la Madeleine are a series of small gulf islands in the province of Quebec, a series of interconnected islands inhabited by story-tellers, fishermen and seal hunters. In the Gulf of the St-Laurence, they are wind-swept and isolated for many months of the year, and inhabited by so-called 'Madelinotes', mostly descendents of French-speaking Acadians. But what the islands bring back for her are memories of the seaweed culture of another ocean.

Her grandparents' generation harvested seaweed to insulate homes, stuff mattresses and refrigerate fishing vessels. They used to keep lobsters cool as they were brought to market and she even remembers as a child when it was used as a poor-man's chewing tobacco.

"They weren't focused on the health benefits of seaweed at the time," says Diane, "When my aunts cooked up lobster or clam bakes they would dig a pit and add a layer seaweeds followed by



*Diane Bernard is the leading magnet, entrepreneur and 'spokesperson' for seaweed culture in Sooke*  
[Photo Andrew Princz, ontheglobe.com]

a layer of clams, after which they would water it and layer it again. They always drank the broth in the end."

"I have to tell you that as a child I found that totally disgusting. But now when I look back on those years; they worked with what they had," she reasons.

Diane bends down and picks up the long monster-sized seaweed from the beach, likely thrown ashore from a coastal storm. She lifts it in the air and appears statuesque, talking to me but looking out into the landscape.

"These are some of the healthiest plants on the planet. When you have clean oceans, you have clean seaweed. I am not hiding behind anything and our oceans are in a lot of trouble. But the ocean in this area is exceptionally clean."

Commercial seaweed, she explains, is used as fillers for paints, varnishes, car polishes, toothpaste and even ice cream. It is even used in chocolate milk, ice cream and even paints.

"Over the course of the past hundred years seaweeds around the world are being harvested brutally," says Diane, "What the world does in treating it as a commodity is that they strip it, freeze it, boil it and bleach it. They filter it, and filter it, and filter it until it is rendered down into a very fine white powder. After that whole process there would not be one decent vitamin left."

Intent on creating a new model, Diane does more than rendering seaweed into a simple white powder. She developed a business based on overseeing the development of a beauty product from the time it was harvested from the sea to the time that it put into the users hand. Her idea was to bring real seaweed back into the seaweed products, focusing on their nutrient values.

As we move along the pebbles of the waters edge, suddenly Diane motions me to stop. Suddenly we hear three crisp cries of birds in the distance.

"They're oyster catchers," she whispers. But in front of us there are also ducks, gulls and cormorants. We move on and sitting idly on top of a series of rocks in the distance are lazy looking seals casually watching us. We stop for a few minutes enjoying the rays of the mid-afternoon sun.

### **Bathing in seaweed culture**

On the move again I leave Sooke Harbour House for my third and final stop. I return to French Beach, not far from Muir Creek where I am promised another unique experience; the so-called French Beach Special. Christine was waiting for me for a thlassotherapy session. The word sounds rather complicated but in plain English it was basically a bath in seaweed followed by a scented aromatherapy massage, "especially suited to your individual requirements".

Christine Hopkins had been practicing aromatherapy for more than a dozen years when she began to introduce seaweed into her treatments. A meeting with Diane six years ago - who at the time was researching her own seaweed products - resulted in Christine testing the use of

seaweeds as a complement to her own aroma therapies. Today, she bathes in seaweed at least five times a week and believes in the healing power of a mixture of the use of seaweed and essential oils.

"About four years ago I was enjoying using the seaweed so much," she tells me, "I started soaking with them myself in baths. I was not intending to do this, but I was able to get off of thyroid medication that I was taking as the result of a combination of essential oils and seaweeds."

The health benefits of seaweed were not discovered yesterday. They are cited in ancient Chinese poems or even Egyptian papyrus. Christine hands me a book which describes the health benefits of various kinds of seaweed that includes its use in the treatment cancer, fibroids, cholesterol, cardiovascular ailments, diabetes, hepatitis, weight loss or burns. Sure it's not a panacea, I thought, but in a world of imperfect sciences age-old medicines certainly have a place.

Christine turns on the tap in a hot-tub that is speckled with various kinds of seaweed. She turns on some Irish-light spiritual music and leaves the room as I watch amazed as the small shrivelled up bits of seaweed expand into their original sizes. Floating in the water is what looks like an array of multi-coloured washcloths. One develops into a silk-like kerchief that gives off some kind of gelatine. Another is as rough as sandpaper, but all of them develop color and suddenly look as if they had been plucked from the sea by Amanda the day before.

I hop into the bath and begin to bathe in the seaweed that by now has expanded five to six times their shrivelled sizes, and turned into bright purples, greens and browns. You could really smell the sea, and I begin to play like a boy in his tub with the flimsy seaweed that were my magical discovery of the day.

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