



## Western Living

HOMES AND GARDENS // TRAVEL // FOOD AND RECIPES // THE WEST

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This woman pushes weed-into some of the finest restaurants in western Canada. Seaweed fanatic Diane Bernard is leading the charge with a new green cuisine.

### A SHORE THING By Jane Mundy

Decked out from head to toe in green rain gear, Diane Bernard strides across the detritus of the previous nights' high-tide line. Where others might slip and slide, she is sure-footed and swift, moving from one plant to the next, stick in one hand, bucket in the other, bending occasionally to snip and prune. Known as "The Seaweed Lady" to some of the country's most formidable chefs, Bernard has a license to harvest the wildest garden on the West coast: a 15 kilometre stretch of shoreline west of Sooke, near Jordan River, on the southern tip of Vancouver Island.

Bernard grew up 130 kilometres northeast of Prince Edward Island on the Magdalen Islands, where fishermen wrapped lobsters in seaweed before going to market and grandmothers stuffed bedding with seagrass. And everyone cooked with seaweed. "They threw it in with the clambake, the mussels, everything. Then we'd drink the broth afterwards," says Bernard proudly. And she should be proud: starting with ingredients that sound more like Fear Factor fodder than a meal, Bernard (who now lives in Sooke, B.C.) has created a niche market for gourmet seaweed cuisine.

It was dried seaweed found in a product Bernard picked up in a Nelson health food store that first got her wheels turning. The seaweed originated in Japan, had been flown to Michigan and then back to Vancouver before boarding a truck for Nelson—a lot of travel, thought Bernard for something that grows in our own backyard. She raced home to Sooke to discuss an idea that was forming in her head with friends Sinclair and Frederique Philip.

Bernard had met the Philips in 1979, shortly after they purchased Sooke Harbour House, and was immediately impressed with their high standards and passion for serving fresh seafood and local produce. But peddling seaweed didn't seem the most practical way to deal with the economic downturn that afflicted the Sooke area in the early 1980's. Instead Bernard got involved in local politics, with environmental issues her major platform and ultimately landed a job as regional director of the Sooke electoral area. But in the back of her mind was seaweed. "I was teasing the Philips that at some point we'd have to eat seaweed to survive. And then we thought, why not?" Sooke Harbour House was, by then, renowned for its use of regional ingredients, serving edible flowers from its own garden, cooking limpets and gooseneck barnacles from local waters, using ingredients throughout the menu that to the uninitiated seemed inedible.

The Philips told her to "put her money where her mouth is: get down to the seashore and bring back some seaweed," Bernard recalls.

Wondering which plants to collect, she found a book, *Sea Vegetables*, in a thrift shop, dusted it off and read it from cover to cover. The author, a social activist, discussed the many virtues of seaweed but wasn't overly concerned with flavour: she recommended seaweed fronds as healthy substitutes for lasagna sheets. For those who found the taste too strong, well, it was nothing that a little ketchup couldn't fix.

Bernard turned to Sooke Harbour House chef Edward Tuson, who was as keen on seaweed as the Philips. He'd already sniffed around the shore a little, had even pickled some bull kelp, but didn't have the time to collect and experiment with seaweeds. With Tuson as an advisor, Bernard was soon able to supply the Sooke Harbour House with eight edible plants.

Vancouver Island's 2001 Feast of Field's an annual harvest celebration, was the turning point. Not knowing how the public would react to eating raw seaweed, Bernard stood quietly in the corner of the Sooke Harbour House booth while Tuson served tri-seaweed salad on a dried porphyra (commonly known as nori) tuile. "The public reaction was wild- we sold out in three hours with 750 people trying our samples. They were lining up for more," says Bernard. Tuson now uses seaweed for sauces and salads, has served it in sorbet and has deep-fried it with maple syrup.

Chef Robert Clark of Vancouver's lauded C Restaurant is another fan. "We got a wonderful product from her last year-it's great to have fresh versus dried. And we like to support anyone trying to increase indigenous, local products that we can serve." All of which bodes well for Sooke, soon perhaps to be known as, drum roll please, the Seaweed Capital of North America.

Louis Druehl, a professor of biological science at Simon Fraser University specializing in kelp evolution recently met with Bernard so the two could learn from each other about the exceptional volume and diversity of seaweed around Whiffen Spit. "I couldn't believe there was someone out there with a Ph.D in seaweed," says Bernard. "I had to meet him."

Druehl, who lives further up Vancouver Island's West Coast in Bamfield, doesn't know exactly why there is so much seaweed in such a small area. "We think it's a combination of many things: cold water and a varied ocean bottom from sand to rock, shallow to deep," Bernard explains.

Experts do know that most seaweeds are complete proteins, carrying all the essential amino acids and packing more vitamin B than any other plant. Nutritional value alone is reason enough to eat seaweed as often as they do in Japan, where it makes up 10 percent of the diet. Many fresh, raw seaweeds have flavours as distinct as their various shapes, textures and colours, ranging from nutty to sweet. But be warned: the stuff we see on our beaches - the thick tangle of kelp washed ashore- is the ocean's compost and definitely inedible.

Just like any other garden, the ocean plot has a growing season and a fallow time. From April until the end of September, fresh, edible seaweed can be delivered to restaurants within 24 hours. In between says Bernard, who now runs a company called Outer Coast Seaweeds, "we can eat cabbages and turnips and look forward to spring."

And what does the future have in store for Outer Coast Seaweeds? The next step is to feed the masses. She's hired two seaweed gatherers and extra staff to help with packaging, and plans to have edible seaweed in delis by summer. No ketchup necessary.

**From May 16 to September 26, the Aerie Resort teams up with Bernard to offer a series of weekly, educational seaweed tours at Whiffen Spit. For more information about the seminars, call 800.518.1933 or visit [www.aerie.bc.ca](http://www.aerie.bc.ca)**

**For details on Outer Coast Seaweeds, visit [www.outercoastseaweeds.com](http://www.outercoastseaweeds.com) or call 250.642.5328**

**Courtesy of Jane Mundy**