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Discovering the treasures beyond Victoria

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Photo by Deborah Stone

Diane Bernard, the Seaweed Lady, holding up one of the 250 varieties of seaweed found on the West Coast of Canada.

“Pteradorphria is long, lean, tenacious and suffers a bad hair day,” says Diane Bernard. “It’s like me.”

Bernard, who is commonly referred to as the Seaweed Lady, is in the process of describing one of the 250 varieties of seaweed that exist on the West Coast of Canada. I am standing on Whiffen Spit in Sooke, British Columbia, listening to Bernard extol the attributes of what she readily labels the elixir of the sea.

To hear her wax poetic about what most folks view as slimy, green gunk is initially amusing

and highly entertaining. I briefly entertain the notion that this woman is an eccentric kook with a bizarre obsession. Bernard, sensing a challenge, is not put off by my humorous eyebrow-raising reactions and apparent doubts. Like the Pteradorphria she so vividly describes, she moves forward, undaunted and determined to change perceptions, dispel stereotypes and transform disbelievers into strong advocates of this often misunderstood plant from the sea.

It doesn’t take long before my amusement and skepticism turn into amazement and respect, as Bernard awes me with her extensive knowledge and opens my eyes to the wonders of seaweed.

A self-taught expert on all things seaweed, Bernard makes her living as a “wild crafter.” She is an official licensed harvester, who hand gathers seaweed in her wild ocean garden in Sooke and uses it to create natural beauty remedies.

“The seaweed is the treasure and I’m the treasure hunter,” comments Bernard. Seven years ago, she started Outer Coast Seaweeds with the intention of changing the prevailing image of seaweed. She began operating her own seaweed tours by offering a sensory immersion experience of the “garden,” and educating enthusiasts around the world.

Her tours take interested and curious participants through tidal pools, where they learn to distinguish some of the different multi-colored and textured species of seaweed, while discovering its useful qualities, from the edible properties of crisp sea lettuce



(surprisingly tasty!)
to the
proper
way to
wear a
nourishing
Alaria
skin
wrap.

Photo by Deborah Stone
Sooke Harbour House, with its edible gardens in full bloom

According to Bernard, of the 250 varieties on the West Coast of Canada, only one, *Desmarestia*, is inedible. Her favorite of the plants is *Iridaea Cordata*, known locally as the rainbow seaweed. She describes it as an elegant gem, gleaming with iridescent colors, and loaded with vitamins A, E and C.

“Seaweed is one of the healthiest plants on the planet,” explains Bernard. “Though they’re referred to as weeds, they’re actually sea vegetables that are rich in vitamins, minerals and other compounds that benefit our physical health inside and out. Throughout history and in cultures around the world, seaweeds have been used as food, medicine and in cosmetic and body treatments.”

Photo by Deborah Stone
The Aerie Resort, a luxurious mountain top retreat where R&R is the top priority.

Bernard’s love affair with seaweed can be traced back to her family’s roots, which hail from the Gaspé Peninsula, where seaweed was swept up on the coast to be gathered and stuffed in mattresses, added to soups and stews and used to wrap the local catch in. She adds, “I’ve been exposed to seaweeds all my life. My parents used them as an edible food source, as well as for healing. Early on, I became aware of their high vitamin and mineral content and the calming and soothing effects they have on the skin.”

After founding Outer Coast Seaweeds, Bernard continued her research and experimentation with the plants, eventually developing a line of skincare products which are now produced and sold under the name of her company, Seaflora Wild Organic Seaweed Skincare. The products, which use the entire seaweed plant, rather than an extract, include body wraps, face masks and serums, and serve to detoxify, heal, hydrate and rejuvenate, while promoting healthy skin cell regeneration.

A number of spa professionals from local establishments are now using Bernard’s knowledge and products in their treatments.

For example, at The Aerie Resort, a luxurious mountain retreat about a half hour from downtown Victoria, you can have the Journey to the Horizon, a pampering head-to-toe experience that involves an exfoliation, heated wrap, mini facial and massage, all using

Seaflora organic products. You'll quickly become putty in the capable hands of one of the Aerie Wellness Centre's therapists and when she's done performing her magic, you'll leave feeling utterly relaxed, with silky soft and glowing skin.

Just don't give yourself a fright by looking in the mirror during the middle of the process. I mistakenly did and saw what I can only describe as a creature from the deep or a lab experiment gone terribly awry!

After this indulgent treatment, you'll probably just want to continue practicing the art of R&R by returning to your opulent accommodations for a nap or to simply gaze at the panoramic vista from your spacious balcony.

The Aerie's intimate guestrooms and suites feature old world style furnishings, fireplaces, Jacuzzis, original art and jaw-dropping views of the Saanich Inlet, Olympic Mountains and Gulf Islands. For the most discerning guests, there's Villa Cielo, with its ultra-luxurious suites and personalized butler service.

And at 300 feet above the rest of the resort, you'll be able to step out onto your private terrace and look down upon eagles and most of the rest of the world. When hunger calls, you can leisurely head down the hill to the property's award-winning dining room for a sumptuous meal.

Executive Chef Castro Boateng embraces the philosophy of slow food and makes use of seasonal, regional and organic fare to create his feted rotating tasting menu.

Inventive dishes like a grains and sprout salad with Miso dressing or pan seared sablefish with chickpea sauce, seaweed, cucumber and citrus salad show off Boateng's talents and transform a fine meal experience into a culinary adventure.

Rivaling The Aerie in terms of comfort, ambiance and culinary expertise is Sooke Harbour House. Closer to Bernard's stomping grounds and just an hour from Victoria, this well known hotel also offers a variety of spa treatments with Seaflora products.

Owners Sinclair and Frederique Philip were among the first proponents of Bernard's work, both in the skincare arena, as well as in the culinary milieu. Chefs at the property have been incorporating the use of seaweed in their cooking for a number of years. Guests at the Sooke come not only for the inn's scenic seaside locale, but for its charming decor and award-winning restaurant. They tour the organic edible gardens, peruse the eclectic art gallery on site, soak in their private whirlpools by the fireplace or under the stars and stroll along the beach, as they keep an eye out for frolicking otters, sunbathing seals and soaring eagles.

And when dinnertime comes, they embark on a unique gastronomical journey in the candlelit dining room. The restaurant, which is known for its creativity, innovation and quality, shares a focus with The Aerie on local, regional and organic cuisine.

The menu changes daily and features seasonal specialties that might include starters of sautéed spot shrimp, grilled quail or Salt Spring Island mussels, with the house salad, a

colorful display of wild and cultivated organic greens from the inn's gardens. Entrees could be grilled spiced pork tenderloin with a meat stock reduction and sour cherry or pan roasted Chinook salmon with horseradish, calendula petal and mint emulsions.

You'll definitely have difficulty deciding on dessert. Maybe you'll want the decadent chocolate soufflé with red wine poached pears or the Rhubarb Variations, mini bite-sized portions of melt-in-your-mouth rhubarb mousse with raspberry puree, rhubarb jelly, rhubarb mint sorbet, caramelized rhubarb strudel and rhubarb compote.

But then your eye goes to a trio of homemade sorbets, inspired from the garden's bounty and now you're in a real quandary. If you think those choices are tough, try selecting your wine (although there is a sommelier who will gladly provide assistance).

The Sooke is touted as having one of the best wine cellars in the world with 15,000 bottles and over 2,700 selections, nearly 700 from British Columbia alone. It has been the recipient of the prestigious Wine Spectator Grand Award for seven consecutive years since 2000.

Co-owner Sinclair Philip is also the Sooke's Wine Director and his remarkable collection is the culmination of careful purchasing from many of the finest wine producing regions around the globe.

Although he searches the world over for new additions to his wine library, he is quick to praise local and regional wines.

"Our Cowichan Valley produces some very good wines," says Philip. "They're becoming increasingly well known outside of the region."

The Cowichan Valley, 45 minutes north of Victoria, is considered by many to be Canada's Napa Valley. Growing conditions for grapes are primo, as the area receives an abundance of sunshine and the warmest temps in all of Canada.

The name "Cowichan" actually means "land warmed by the sun" in the First Nations Coast Salish language. As you travel through the valley, you'll pass by lush farmland, picturesque vineyards and verdant forests. It's an idyllic setting with a bountiful oasis of visual and culinary delights. In addition to award-winning wines, there are orchard ciders, locally produced cheeses, meats, fruits and veggies, all fresh from the farm and bursting with flavor.

Those in the know view the Cowichan as Vancouver Island's gastronomic destination, where visitors can have a truly satisfying wine, culinary and agri-tourism experience. They can eat and drink their way through the meandering back roads of the area, stopping to tour wineries, visit charming fishing villages and dine in cozy bistros with menus that pay homage to the local seasonal fare grown right in their own backyards.

Canada's premiere artisan cidery, Merridale, is located in the valley and definitely warrants a visit. It produces authentic, hand-crafted ciders made from home-grown apples.

After you take a self-guided tour of the place, make a beeline to the cidery's La Pommeraiie Bistro to sample flights of ciders with names like Scrumpy, Merri Berri, Cidre Normandie and Somerset. The place also serves up some delicious grub with apple-themed dishes like cream of apple and parsnip soup and three cheese strudel with apple and mango chutney. Cherry Point Vineyards and Venturi-Schulze Winery and Vinegery are two other destinations in the valley that also deserve mention.

Cherry Point is the only winery owned by Vancouver Island's Colichan Tribes and it is home of the famed Cowichan Blackberry Port.

At Venturi-Schulze (visitors by appointment only), you'll definitely hit the jackpot if you get a tour with owner Giordano Venturi. The Italian born and bred gentleman is a wonderful storyteller who will regale you with tales of his youth, the art of winemaking and the ancient method of producing the best Balsamic vinegar I have ever tasted.

Another popular point of interest in the valley is Cowichan Bay Seaside Village, a quaint cluster of shops, restaurants, historic buildings and houses on stilts that hugs the waterfront.

Here you can meander along the boardwalk, stopping in to grab a hearty loaf of cracked grain organic bread at True Grain Bread and Mill and some locally made artisan cheese next door at Hillary's Cheese and Deli to take over to the docks for an impromptu lunch.

If you want to dine more formally, check out historic Masthead Restaurant and feast on such delicacies as pan seared Queen Charlotte Island halibut with locally picked stinging nettle sauce or Cowichan Bay Farm duck.

Indulge yourself in a myriad of experiences, as you explore the treasures that lie beyond Victoria.

If you go:

- Outer Coast Seaweeds: www.outercoastseaweeds.com
- The Aerie Resort: www.aerie.bc.ca
- Sooke Harbour House: www.sookeharbourhouse.com
- Cowichan Valley tourist information: www.visit.cowichan.net