



Seaweed tours

Sue Hoffart

Plucking lettuce has never been this captivating.

It's 7.30am on a cool Canadian morning and Diane Bernard has me wading through tidal pools, munching sea lettuce and other seaweeds while fantastic purple starfish languish at our gumboot clad feet. An otter streaks through the early morning mist as she extols the virtues of the oceanic weeds she harvests from this small stretch of Vancouver Island coastline.

I'm on a culinary seaweed tour, sloshing alongside a wildly enthusiastic, enterprising environmentalist who is making a living from sea plants. Aside from harvesting, marketing and selling fresh seaweed to chefs at high-end resorts, she has produced a seaweed skincare range, is working on a seaweed-based massage oil and sells fresh seaweed wraps to local spa treatment facilities. The tours are a relatively new addition to her repertoire, whereby resort guests spend a couple of hours with her before returning to their accommodation to dine on a multi-course seaweed-based dinner.

"Most countries in the world have embraced seaweeds as a food source," she says, tutting over Westerners' limited understanding of the product. She considers it a grave waste that we tend to toss seaweed on our gardens or dry it and sprinkle it over food.

Her own father and uncles, from the Eastern Canadian seaboard, always carried seaweed on them - she remembers them chewing it in place of tobacco.

Brandishing a length of bull kelp, Diane explains that this plant contains the entire alphabet of B vitamins, akin to a piece of liver. This particular seaweed can grow to 35 metres and First Nations people used it to make rope, while its gourd-like stem was ideal for storing fish oils.

As we chew and crunch our way through pieces of kelp, rockweed, sea lettuce and the odd seaweed pod (which, despite my expectations, isn't full of sea water), the fascinating facts pour forth. In Japan, for instance, they're using seaweed to make prophylactic diaphragms. Scientists say sugar kelp is okay for diabetics and medical researchers claim seaweed is beneficial in reducing inflammation and blood pressure, helps burns and eliminates toxins.

On the culinary front, Diane swears sea cabbage is lovely shredded and baked and that egregia (feather boa) makes great pesto. And, if you snip the ends from an elongated sea grape, you have a perfect cannelloni-type receptacle for seafood stuffings.

"You can use sea lettuce in emulsions, as a wrap. It's very dramatic and keeps its colour. You can heat it up and blend it with sauces so you've got this gorgeous green."

As we walk, Diane gathers seaweed for The Aerie, a resort that uses her products in both its kitchen and spa centre. Perched in the Malahat coastal mountains north of Victoria, the Relais and Chateau property



faces the ocean and looks directly onto the magnificent Finlayson Arm and across to Washington State's Olympic mountains.

The Aerie's executive chef Christophe Letard is a convert of freshly harvested culinary seaweed. Back home in France, he recalls seeing some "pretty terrible" recipes for seaweed. Modern methods of dealing with the sea plants are far better, he says. Christophe's favourite pairings include kelp with tempura or as a wrap for fish and oysters served with a cucumber and sea lettuce salsa.

"It is different from any other ingredient in the kitchen. It's really, really unique. I think this is the food of this century because it's so healthy, it's so complete...and it's fairly easy to get."

For information on tours, accommodation and seaweed products, visit www.sea-flora.com or www.aerie.bc.ca.

Courtesy of Cuisine Travel International