

An Octopus's Garden

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Publish Date: July 13, 2006

Diane Bernard is smitten with her garden. Leading me around it, she identifies the plants that make a panorama of burgundies, purples, and greens, and marvels at how quickly they're all growing. She pulls a weed here and there, and offers me tasty edibles to sample. Like many gardeners, she's proud to show off nature's bounty. The difference is that her garden is the ocean, and her vegetables are seaweeds.

Known locally as "the seaweed lady", Bernard has invited me along as her guest on a marine tour, just off the beach from Sooke Harbour House. She heads Outer Coast Seaweeds, a company that doesn't actually grow seaweed, but harvests it on the southwest coast of Vancouver Island. She sells it fresh to restaurants for culinary purposes, and incorporated into a line of thalassotherapy seaweed products for spas. (Thalasso comes from the ancient Greek word for sea.) Bernard also gives tours to educate everyone from schoolchildren to chefs to tourists about the diversity of B.C. seaweeds and their health and healing properties. In doing so, she's changing the way people think about seaweed.

Bernard tells me that seaweed gets a bad rap because people think its colour and texture are strange, or that it smells. But she emphasizes that seaweed on the beach is nothing like the plant that grows just under the water's surface. "What you're seeing is essentially a compost pile," she tells me. "People will look at this stuff and go, 'Ew, what are you doing?'" But like any garden, seaweed has a period of reproduction. The dead plant washes up onshore. The real richness lies underwater.

Clad in gumboots, we slish into the ocean shin-deep, using walking sticks to navigate the rocks. "You're looking at the most fabulous and the wildest garden ever," Bernard says, gesturing out to sea. "It has over 700 species [of seaweed] here on the B.C. coastline....The area that I'm allowed to harvest in has about 250. That's huge diversity. That's actually as diverse as any temperate rain forest."

Bernard harvests some 70 kilometres along these shores from the end of April until September. "Seaweeds are quite poetic," she adds. "They really tie in to cycles of the whole universe." On December 21, the longest night of the year, seaweeds in the Northern Hemisphere start to grow. After the spring equinox, they start their reproductive cycle.

From the water, Bernard plucks a long, hollow, whiplike brown stalk attached to a floating bulb. "This is the fastest-growing plant on the planet," she tells me of the *nerocystis*, otherwise known as bull kelp. "On December 21, it will be a millimetre.

And in August, when I harvest it, it'll be, oh, 30 metres." She laughs and adds, "It makes corn look pretty slow."

Bernard explains that seaweeds lack a root system, so they don't take in nutrients from the sand. Instead, their broad leaves suck up the water's goodness. Clean ocean, clean seaweed.

It's no secret that seaweed is good for you. According to Bernard, seaweeds are high in vitamins A, B, and C, folic acid, and niacin. They also supply 60 trace elements and 12 minerals, such as potassium, calcium, and magnesium. For all that, they have almost no calories.

The Japanese have been eating seaweeds for thousands of years, not only in sushi but also as the kombu base of miso soup, wakame salads, and crispy nori snacks. According to a study in the February 2, 2005 Journal of Nutrition, the high seaweed intake of Japanese women may contribute to their significantly lower risk of breast cancer than that of American women. The study found that a diet containing kelp lowered the levels of estrogen in rats. Researchers postulate that if it did the same in humans, it might reduce levels of estrogen, which fuels certain cancers.

Seaweed dining by stealth

Still skeptical about seaweed? Taste some en route to Sooke at Spinnakers Gastro Brewpub and GuestHouses (308 Catherine Street, Victoria) " " although you won't see it featured on the menu. "We hide it," says publican Paul Hadfield with a laugh, explaining that people don't think they like it. So Spinnakers' chefs incorporate Diane Bernard's seaweed in sneaky ways " " as garnishes, in chowders or salads, or wrapped around baked seafood. Hadfield thinks seaweed dishes will catch on, but slowly. "Three to four years ago, people wouldn't eat duck. We had to find interesting ways to teach people it's an interesting thing to eat." Judging by the delicious dishes Spinnakers makes from other local ingredients, seaweed's star will rise. For restaurant reservations, or to book one of the charming guesthouses, visit spinnakers.com/ or call 1-877-838-2739.

All the kelp you can get

The phrase seaweed wrap conjures images of being wound with green kelp, like a sea monster. But in fact, the experience at the Grotto Spa at Tigh-Na-Mara (1155 Resort Drive, Parksville) is much more dignified. During my 90- minute treatment as a guest of the spa, I only encounter one palm-sized square of dried kelp, which I rehydrate to use as a chamois in the shower. The rest is blended into Outer Coast Seaweed's products, including Rockweed Exfoliant, which gently sloughs my barnacled frame, and Laminaria Body Lotion. I soak up the ocean's goodness through a wrap, facial, and massage, breathing in the fresh, briny scent. In the end, I'm as smooth as a seashell. The West Coast Seaweed Experience costs \$175; reserve at grottopsa.com/ or call 1-800-663-7373.

If you prefer to have your pampering at home, you can buy Diane Bernard's products at selected spas that use them or through outercoastseaweeds.com/. The Rockweed Exfoliant and Laminaria Lotion cost \$37 and \$32, respectively, for a 250-millilitre bottle. Or sample six products with the \$51 Seaweed Wrap Travel Companion Kit.

Health benefits aside, the Japanese know that seaweed tastes great. Bernard started out in 2001 selling to the Sooke Harbour House and chefs like Vancouver's Hidekazu Tojo, who uses the seaweed in soups and sauces. Now, she provides about 10 varieties of fresh seaweed to adventurous restaurants across Canada, including Spinnakers Gastro Brewpub and GuestHouses in Victoria. (See sidebar.)

Bernard snips off a piece of paper-thin, bright-green sea lettuce, which looks like leaf lettuce. She shakes off the salt water and asks me if I want to taste it. I boldly pop it in my mouth. It tastes clean, fresh, crunchy...yes, with a hint of sea salt.

We walk on, exploring the lush, swaying undersea garden, sampling fare directly from the ocean. The thick bull kelp packs a firm bite; the ruffled olive-green nori tastes sweet and meaty. I feel like I'm at the aquarium, except the touch pool is a tasting pool. I ask Bernard if I can harvest my own dinner from Vancouver's shores. "Seaweeds take in really, really good stuff, but they don't differentiate between the good and the bad," □ she warns. If gleaned from a polluted area, they could contain high levels of lead. (Her seaweed is tested for toxins.)

Bernard squeezes open a pod of seaweed that looks like aloe vera and rubs the clear, clean gel on my hand. "Seaweed is a real natural thing to try on your body," she explains. "Cultures have been doing it for centuries. The Japanese wash their hair in it; they put it on their skin. The First Nations would use it to soothe burns and that kind of thing. They're now finding seaweed is quite good for burn victims."

After her success with restaurants, Bernard moved on to spas when she discovered they were using white, perfumed powders imported from France that didn't look or feel like seaweed. So she developed a range of products with seaweed as the main ingredient that retained the fibre, colour, and moisture of the plant. She now sells body wraps, exfoliants, lotions, serums, and gels to spas in California and across Canada. These include Vancouver's Four Seasons hotel, Richmond's River Rock Casino Resort, the Delta Victoria Ocean Pointe Resort and Spa, and Parksville's Tigh-Na-Mara Seaside Spa Resort & Conference Center. (See sidebar.) "The philosophy that we take is that what's good for you internally is good for you externally," □ Bernard says.

Her enthusiasm for seaweed is infectious, and Bernard tells me that most tour participants return to the beach and look at seaweed in a whole new light. Some head straight to a local spa for a treatment or two, and others go to lunch at Sooke Harbour House, which puts on a special three-course seaweed menu. After all, one of the best things about having a garden is reaping the benefits.

Outer Coast Seaweed tours run until September 9 this year and cost \$35 per person or \$25 per person for groups of at least five. The tour with lunch at Sooke Harbour House runs \$85 per person for groups of at least 15. Prices for spa treatments vary. To book on-line, visit outercoastseaweeds.com/ or call 1-877-713-7464.

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