



Feb/Mar 03

**Paddle Meals
Feasting Fields
Deb Leach with Diane Bernard**

Stormed in for ten days on the remote Brooks Peninsula with rations running low and a family with ravenous teenagers-do you call in a float plane or try to live off the sea? If you are Diane Bernard you know that you can feast on seaweeds mixed with carbs to fill hungry bellies.

"West coasters are missing out," says Diane who has been eating (and wearing) seaweed for a long time. In fact, she's become a small-scale kelp farmer. Her fields yield fresh seaweeds for gourmet restaurants and tapas bars. But adventurous paddlers can have the same flavours for free.

Her husband, a kayaker, reckons paddling is a wonderful way to look at the ocean garden, especially the rugged outer coast of Vancouver Island.

Diane hooks chefs and other adventurers on fresh seaweed by taking them on tours to nibble a diversity of ocean delicacies. "Fresh, it tastes like a vegetable without the fishy smell of dried seaweed." She raves about its nutritional value and loves to talk about traditional uses and future possibilities.

To harvest from the long fronds, take a sharp knife and cut what you need off the top (about ½ cup per person). Leave at least 8" of the seaweed attached to the bottom, so it can re-grow.

"Fresh seaweed-the simpler the better. It is a natural with fish- to wrap, steam or stuff." Here are a few of Diane's favourites:

Alaria (Winged Kelp): a ribbon-like, shiny, olive-brown blade with a flat mid-rib, Alaria has a rhubarb-like smell when fresh. The mid-rib is delicious to crunch raw (like celery) or slice thinly to toss into a salad or spaghetti sauce. Thinly slice the frond across the grain and steam or parboil for 1 to 2 minutes. Mix with oil and vinegar and cool in a bag, bowl or pan for a salad. Alaria cooks quickly to a bright green and can be mixed into pasta or rice. Serve it as an edible bed for a fish dish. Wrap Alaria around oysters to steam and give them a sweet pea-zucchini hit!

Egregia (Feather Boa): brown kelp fringed with rich, chocolate brown blades and olive-shaped floats. After harvesting, run your knife or scissors up the midrib and discard it. Each piece of the frond is neatly uniform in shape and turns vibrant green when cooked. Add Egregia to a stir-fry at the very last. Diane loves to chop Egregia and stir-fry it quickly with butter, pepper and garlic for spreading on a chunk of bread as a snack.

Ulva (Sea Lettuce): light green and tissue-thin, Ulva is tasty in stir-fries, soups and stews-added near the end of cooking. Try a new wrap for a snack or side dish-spread Ulva with light cream cheese and roll it around cooked rice with chopped nuts. If you

are a baker, throw chopped Ulva into your bread mixture with nuts. Ulva dries well on rocks to flake into savoury scones.

Fucus (Rockweed): A coffee person who only takes tea on hikes, Diane puts Fucus into the pot with herbal teabags and sliced ginger for a more full-bodied drink. The algin from the rockweed can be used to thicken broths or as a marine aloe vera to soothe cuts and scrapes.

As for wearing seaweed, think spa products. On tours, Diane gets everyone to rub Fucus on their hands or wrap laminaria around their arms. They are surprised how wonderful their skin feels. A soothing idea to try after a day of paddling.

After our interview, Diane left the coffee shop in her boots to see if a winter storm had tossed some kelp onto the shore for her to serve for a 'Slow Food' event at Sooke Harbour House.

Who knows where the Seaweed Lady will surface next -authoring a cook book or demonstrating the perfect BC wines to serve with her fresh seaweed. That's dynamic Diane of the OCEAN: Outer Coast, Exotic And Natural.

Wildcrafting Seaweed Tours run in Sooke from April through September. Visit www.outercoastseaweeds.com

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