

# MENU FOR A WILD WINTER DAY

BY KEVIN FEINSTEIN

## BREAKFAST

ACORN PANCAKES WITH QUINCE JAM  
YERBA BUENA/ROSEHIP TEA

## LUNCH

WILD GREEN SALAD WITH SOAKED WALNUT AND  
FERAL CITRUS DRESSING  
MANZANITA CIDER

## AFTERNOON SNACK

ENERGY BAR MADE WITH DRIED FIGS,  
DRIED PERSIMMONS, POWDERED NETTLES, AND  
POWDERED BAY NUTS

## DINNER

MISO/GINKGO NUT SOUP WITH FRESH NETTLES  
PICKLED PURSLANE  
WILD SOURDOUGH ACORN BREAD  
UNFILTERED PLUM WINE



*Bay nuts, acorns, and manzanita berries gathered in Oakland*

This is how I hope to eat at least one day this winter. Yes, it may look a little unusual, but eating wild and feral foods is my way of life. It has become an integral part of my path to achieving a more sustainable and balanced existence. It's a means for connecting to place in the most intimate way that I know and an opportunity to enjoy the choicest gourmet "local foods." Nothing provides a truer "taste of place," in my opinion, than food that grows as a natural, wild expression of the landscape. The abundance of this wild food makes me feel blessed to live in the East Bay.

## Fear of the Wild and the Feral

To many people the very idea of wild food conjures up times of famine or the need to survive while stranded in some remote wilderness. But wild and feral foods are everywhere around us, even in the urban East Bay. Wild foods come from both native and exotic species, and also from previously domesticated species that have returned to a wild state. The latter are often referred to as feral. Abandoned orchard trees are feral, for instance. Much of this food is very good to eat, but every day in urban, suburban, and even rural areas, wild and feral foods are run over by cars, pulverized by pedestrians and hikers, swept up and tossed in the garbage (or perhaps the green bins), or simply left to rot. It is true that if everyone in the East Bay suddenly started to eat the food currently growing here, it would hardly last a day. But the fact is, almost nobody is

harvesting this tremendous bounty.

We live in a time of widespread cultural disconnection from place and the natural world. Plants are scenery and food is something brought to us by some corporate entity, which we have been trained to believe is looking out for our well-being. Food that we can readily see growing around us is often seen as dangerous and unsafe, while we imagine that the products in the supermarket are produced with care in some pristine environment. The irony is that foods found in mainstream supermarkets can be toxic and dangerous in ways that we are only beginning to learn about (think: trans fats, GMOs, dioxin, BHA, BHT, rBGH, E. coli, lead, mercury, and prions for mad cow disease). Nutritional imbalances in these supermarket foods (which according to Michael Pollan are basically low-mineral corn in many forms) can also be dangerous to health. Freshness is also a critical factor to good nutrition (and taste). Wild foods gathered locally are much fresher than anything you might find at the supermarket.

Throughout nearly the entirety of human history, most people could identify the plants of their bioregion: They had a detailed understanding of everything in their environment, including what plants to eat and when, which were good for medicine, and which could kill you. Without this knowledge, identification of wild plant foods can be very intimidating. Foraging, then, is not advised unless you have mastered these identification skills. Please do not eat anything unless you are certain of its safety, and that

Photograph: Cheryl Koehler

means you must be absolutely positive that you have identified and prepared it properly, and that it is free of dangerous pollutants. If it is a food that is new to you, it is also wise to eat only a small amount so that you can watch for allergic or other reactions.

Our “fear of the feral” is a learned fear, since many feral foods are nearly identical to things offered in our supermarkets. The fear, when I see it, often takes me by surprise, as it did one time when I reached for a red feral plum from a neighborhood tree, and while putting it in my mouth, heard a gasp of shock from a companion. I thought, “it’s a plum, right? She buys them at the market and eats them.” We have become accustomed to a false sense of security, believing that if someone we do not know grows, picks, and processes the food, and then seals it in plastic, it will be safe.

Sometimes in my foraging adventures, I meet people from cultures where foraging is still practiced, and this is always a great inspiration and opportunity to learn. More often, I meet people who want to know about what I’m doing. Conversation ensues, information is exchanged, community bridges are built. When I knock on a door in my neighborhood to ask if the fruit falling in the yard is unwanted, more often than not, my neighbors are thrilled that someone wants it, exclaiming how thankful they are that it won’t be going to waste. Gathering these wild and feral foods makes me feel like I belong to this place.

## **Tending the Wild**

While foraging might seem like a passive activity, in which food is simply “taken” from nature, what I’m talking about more closely resembles a large-scale landscape management system. Throughout history, traditional foraging cultures have been “tending the wild.” Kat Anderson, in her book that uses the phrase as its title, details how the Native Californians were tremendous managers of their “wild” ecologies. In some cases, as she points out, harvesting from the wild can help the ecosystem become more diverse and healthy, and the food more abundant the following season. A forager attunes to the landscape, learning the benefits of caring for the wild things that sustain him and other species. In this way, foraging and gardening start to look alike, and the relationship between forager and the environment becomes a reciprocal one.

Wild plants, especially trees, build soil. Agriculture on the other hand, depletes soil. In addition, wild plants require little or no work (inputs) to grow, and this makes them a potentially more sustainable source of food than farmed crops. In many instances, wild plants produce more food than an equivalent acre of farmed corn or wheat. Anyone who took a walk under the oak trees this fall may have noticed the prodigious crop of acorns that nature offered this year. Wild plant communities also provide more mystery, intrigue, and habitat for wildlife than do most large farms, a fact that is not lost on permaculture designers and biodynamic farmers, who seek to draw wildlife into a symbiotic relationship.

The wild foods that I look for to feed me are only those that

can withstand the pressures of foraging humans. An ethical forager, mind in tune with nature, learns how to take a sustainable harvest. I don't, for instance, take enough chinquapin nuts for a meal, nor do I go digging up rare brodiaea bulbs, as delicious as they might be. The good news, however, is that there are plenty of species that produce copious amounts of food. In the East Bay, these foods are abundant, but unfortunately not nearly as abundant as people. So the last thing we need is for people to go out and wildcraft as a big business enterprise. However, I do sometimes ponder the feasibility of a small cottage industry based on some of the most prolific foods.

My suggestion is to sample wild and feral foods as a way to become better acquainted with the natural world, your neighborhood, and perhaps your neighbors as well. Take only a fraction of the total, leaving enough for wildlife and other foragers. Pick things at the correct ripeness and don't waste them. Take note of the wild and feral foods that are neglected in your neighborhood by humans and the local wildlife, and consider organizing interested neighbors to manage these as local resources. These basic foraging techniques can apply to your garden or a small farm as well. The foraging mind is not that of a robotic crop producer; it is a human intelligence that predates agriculture. Because of the ancient origin of this way of thinking, it feels good to be a forager; it suits the mind as well as the body.

### **East Bay Wild Food Seasons**

In my version of an edible East Bay, winter is all about wild greens: miner's lettuce, nettles, dandelion, mallow, and various grasses for juice. It's also a time to enjoy foods that have been dried and preserved in other months, so keep your eyes open, and by next winter, you'll have plenty to eat.

As we move into spring, many plants, such as wild mustards, feral nasturtiums, fennel, and redbud, begin producing edible flowers. Then the season of fruit begins with loquats, which usually ripen in April and May. Very soon, we'll find feral cherries, and then we'll have plums of all sorts, wild, feral, and decidedly decorative. Plums are probably the most abundant food growing in our area, and as they ripen, it seems we should all be eating fresh plums until we're sick, and then drying, stewing, and brewing the rest into prunes, plum jam, and plum wine for our enjoyment throughout the year.

In summer we can find various feral stone fruits and many wild berries, such as blackberries, huckleberries, and *Elaeagnus* berries. In August we start getting grapes, apples, and pears. (Moraga has acres and acres of feral pears.) Before we know it, there are figs, pomegranates, jujubes, and quince. When fall approaches, many of the most exciting wild and feral edibles become available: acorns, bay nuts, walnuts, ginkgo nuts and then persimmons, followed by feijoas (pineapple guavas), olives, and prickly pear fruit. Citrus, I should mention is available throughout much of the year, and provides enough delight to keep a forager active even in the



coldest, darkest months.

There's no shortage of food out there, only limits to food paradigms.

*Kevin Feinstein is a freelance writer/filmmaker and rewilder\* whose main passion is wild food. He has taught wildcrafting courses at the Regenerative Design Institute in Bolinas, and works as an environmental educator at an East Bay elementary school. You can check out his blog at [feralkevin.com](http://feralkevin.com).*

\*Rewilding is the process of undoing domestication, and returning to an existence that is separate from civilization.

### WILD GREEN SAAG

*Saag is an Indian dish that uses greens and a combination of spices. My version is very California-ized.*

1 onion

1 "bunch" dandelion greens

½ "bunch" stinging nettles

1 "bunch" wild mustard greens

Ghee, butter, or olive oil (use a very generous amount, dish should be oily)

Curry powder

Salt to taste

Sauté onion in butter. Carefully add stinging nettles, dandelion greens, and wild mustard. Cook until soft, adding curry powder and salt to taste. Eat with bread (naan), or rice.