



WHAT'S IN SEASON
CULTIVATING A
FRONDNESS FOR
FIDDLEHEADS
IN NIAGARA

BY CARMEN EVEREST WAHL

Photos by Gail Gordon Oliver

Thirty years ago, a young man named Nick Secord exchanged one favour for another and, in so doing, changed not only the course of his life, but that of gourmands across the country. Desperate to procure some coveted fishing rights on a local New Brunswick river, Nick agreed to source out a supply of fiddleheads for a friend who owned the local Dominion store. Word soon spread that Nick had fiddleheads and, before long, other stores were jostling for a share of the spring harvest.

Although it began slowly, there was soon a demand for Nick's fiddleheads from as far away as Quebec. He eventually moved to Ontario and in 2003, along with his partner Nina Dilorenzo, bought a farm with forty acres of bush outside of Port Colborne, situated at the southern end of the Welland Canal near Niagara Falls. Nick also owns or leases another thousand acres of land in Quebec, Maine, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia through his company, NorCliff Farms. This west-to-east continuum allows NorCliff to extend the harvest of fiddleheads as spring moves across the land and the ferns emerge from their winter hiatus. While mainly consumed in the Maritime provinces, demand for fiddleheads has grown dramatically, due in no small part to the emergence of NorCliff Farms, the largest distributor of fiddleheads in North America.

Ostrich ferns (*Matteuccia Struthiopteris*) are the fern of choice when it comes to eating fiddleheads (other varieties can be toxic). They begin to emerge between late April and early

May and have only about two weeks before the tightly curled fronds spring open to reveal the feathery leaves that define woodland ferns. By summer, they will be four feet tall, even in the places where they were harvested, since the proper technique is to remove only two or three fiddleheads from each plant. Ostrich ferns are a native plant that have been eaten for centuries by indigenous peoples in this country and later by the early settlers. When the United Empire Loyalists moved from the United States to New Brunswick in 1783, they were badly prepared for the reality of winter in the Maritimes. The Malecite Indians of the St. John River Valley introduced these early settlers to the first fresh green vegetable of the season that not only relieved post-winter hunger pains but also provided a desperately needed shot of vitamins and minerals to restore their health and vigour. In fact the Malecites did quite well and soon developed a thriving seasonal business selling fiddleheads, or *mahsos* (a word that also symbolized good magic), to the newcomers to their land.

Nick's fiddleheads seem to be bringing him some considerable *mahsos*, as well. During the first two years on the farm, Nick and his crews planted 250,000 fern rootstocks harvested from his other lands. This year, another 250,000 plants will be introduced to the forest and swamplands that comprise the fiddlehead operation in Port Colborne. This represents what is likely the only recent attempt in North America to cultivate and control fiddlehead production. Initially, Nick cleared out some underlying bush in his forest, but the ferns are essentially being allowed to grow unimpeded in a natural, wild setting underneath the tall tree canopy. Some thinning of plants is sometimes necessary, but otherwise they grow naturally without any spraying or weeding. In high enough concentrations, fiddleheads face no competition from other plants and will usually crowd out any other ferns that attempt to gain a foothold in the forest. For a brief two-week period, approximately five hundred people will spread out across NorCliff lands to harvest the ferns when they reach five centimetres in height. A further thirty to forty people will be employed in the packing plant. It is a brief but intense harvest season for this wild springtime delicacy.

For many, fiddleheads are more than just an edible wild plant; they are the epitome of local, sustainable, organic food. More people are beginning to believe that food and health are connected, and that if you eat well, your body is in a better position to protect and defend itself against disease. Increased cynicism surrounding the commercial food system is also pushing people towards an appreciation of foods that grow in the wild with little or no human intervention. Fiddleheads top the list of wild foods for a variety of reasons.

Typical of other springtime greens, fiddleheads are rich in vitamins A and C (supplying 72 percent and 44 percent, respectively, of our daily requirements in one half-cup). High in niacin, manganese and copper, this healthy vegetable provides 2 grams of dietary fibre, 0 grams of fat and 5 grams of protein, but only 34 calories in that half-cup. Recent research has been focusing on the phenolic compounds found in fiddleheads, and suggests that the green frond compares favourably to blueberries when it comes to antioxidant levels. Research commissioned at NorCliff Farms from Dr. John DeLong and his team at the Atlantic Food and Horticulture Research Centre in Kentville, Nova Scotia, in-



Nick Secord at NorCliff Farm in Port Colborne

icates that the ratio of omega-6 fatty acids to omega-3 fatty acids is less than, or equal to, three. A ratio of four or less is considered highly beneficial, especially in North America where the typical ratio sits around sixteen. Furthermore, fiddleheads contain arachidonic and eicosapentaenoic acids, essential fatty acids not usually found in plants.

And to think that all this nutrition can be found growing nearby, in the wild, year after year! Preferring to sink their roots in damp soil, ostrich ferns in southern Ontario are most often found in deciduous forests and along streams. This is why Nick's large parcel of swampland near Port Colborne was such a perfect site for his fiddlehead operation. Nick recalls that when he purchased the land, he became something of a laughingstock, his new neighbours wondering whether he had any common sense; after all, what kind of farmer buys swampland? As it



PREPARING AND COOKING FIDDLEHEADS

Fiddleheads should be thoroughly washed in several changes of water, and all brown, papery or slimy bits should be removed. They can be eaten simply steamed (for about 15 to 20 minutes), boiled (for about 8 to 10 minutes) or sautéed, or used as you would asparagus or broccoli. Give David Cohlmeier's recipe for Asparagus Risotto (see page 27) a try using whole fiddleheads in place of the cut-up asparagus. And be sure to make the elegant recipe for whitefish with fiddleheads that appears on page 30.

turns out, the swamp water is being redirected through a series of manufactured levies to create the wet conditions so necessary for good fern growth, as well as to irrigate other areas of the woodlot where hundreds of thousands of new fiddleheads see the light of day every spring.

Last year, Nick purchased and retrofitted a former meatpacking plant in Quebec. All fiddleheads harvested for NorCliff will now be sent to this provincially and federally inspected-and-certified plant to be cleaned and packed for shipment to major retailers across the country. Fiddleheads arriving at the packing plant for processing are washed and held in water tanks kept at 2° C until they are either packed fresh into 12-ounce bags or frozen in 10-ounce blocks. Nick is proud of his company's ability to have fiddleheads picked and on their way to stores within twenty-four hours. Since fiddleheads like wet, cool conditions, the best way to store them fresh at home is in a container of water in the fridge. If the water is changed every few days, the fiddleheads will last a month. When ready to eat, just trim the ends and prepare in your favourite recipe.

After several cases of illness were reported following consumption of raw fiddleheads, Health Canada now recommends that they be boiled or steamed for ten to fifteen minutes before eating. It is not yet clear whether the fiddleheads themselves contain a toxin or whether runoff from surrounding farms loads the soil with harmful bacteria, leading to gastrointestinal distress. Nick is confident, however, that with the proper washing that takes place at his new packing plant, fiddleheads do not have to be overcooked to the detriment of nutrient content. In fact, like First Nations people before him, he often eats NorCliff products in their raw state.

Fresh, frozen, steamed or boiled, both Nick and Nina will eat fiddleheads any way they can get them. Best eaten when small and tightly curled, these spring greens resemble the flavours of asparagus, green beans and broccoli – all mixed together! In season, it's not unusual for the couple to feast on the fronds three times a day. Throughout the rest of the year, packages of frozen fiddleheads are made into everything from soups and quiches to fritters and stir fries. And for those times when pickles are just too passé and olives too mundane, NorCliff markets jars of marinated fiddleheads prepared with vinegar, sugar, salt and secret spices. At any time of year, fiddleheads can be enjoyed fresh from the forest or right out of the freezer or pantry for a taste of Canada's original wild food. □

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Carmen Everest Wahl resides in Waterloo and is a board member of Foodlink. Meeting local food heroes and promoting the sale of local food to consumers through the Buy Local! Buy Fresh! program are a source of continual pleasure for this urban dweller.