

Wild about greens

Forage your way out of the hungry gap Italian style with *Andrea Mynard*

In the depths of winter when we've had our fill of root veg and sprouts, we often dream of the April/May days when the veg patch will spring into productive life and offer our kitchens a bit more variety. It often isn't like that - there may be exciting shoots appearing and a few meals of baby veg but it certainly isn't a time of plenty.

Yet young wild leaves are tender in spring and it's possible to forage your way out of the hungry gap with wild green stir fries, nettle soups and Spring salads. A tea made with young nettles, sweetened with honey and with a squeeze of lemon is packed full of vitamins and minerals and will give you a revitalizing boost. Just the thing before the hard graft that's needed on the land to ensure a good harvest in a few months' time. If you planted chard and perennial spinach the previous year, you may have a head start on leafy greens in the veg garden and these are great mixed with ricotta for Italian style pies and tarts. But if there's not quite enough for the abundance needed in many recipes, we can take a tip from Italians and add foraged greens to our first meagre pickings.

In fact, Italy is a great place to turn to for inspiration as many Italians, particularly Ligurians, have a passion for food foraging verging on the obsessive, scouring forests and fields for edible goodies to supplement food grown on their ortos. Liguria is a rugged strip of land in northern Italy wedged between



■ Gennaro Contaldo shows Italian passion for wild food

mountains and sea, and partly because the terrain makes large-scale farming difficult, Ligurians are incredibly resourceful at making the most of the local vegetation. There are few flat plains for growing grain or rearing livestock and the fertile valley bottoms tend to be used for the cultivation of flowers that give the Riviera dei Fiori its name. So the Ligurians have become experts at growing delicious food in their ortos (small areas of land, often just outside their villages) and supplementing it with wild food.

This preoccupation is part of the "di magro" cooking tradition, a way of rustling up tasty, nutritious results from whatever modest offerings nature offers and it evolved during times of poverty. Of course, with a lot more sunny weather to help their ortos along than British smallholders are used to, nature's offerings are hardly meagre. After sampling a Torta Verde, packed full of nutritious wild greens or thinly sliced raw porcini served as an antipasto, it's obviously a good thing that the foraging tradition has persisted in more prosperous times.

Spring is a good time in Italy for gathering "preboggion", a mixture of wild herbs including borage, nettle, chervil, chicory which are used as a filling for Pansotti con Preboggion, literally meaning "big belly" pasta, and in stuffings for vegetables. With the addition of ricotta cheese to the herbs, ravioli

di magro is also delicious. Erbette, wild greens, are also used in Torta Pasqualina, a Ligurian Easter pie including egg and in Torta Verde, a savoury pie with a pastry type crust made of olive oil and filled with a mixture of chard, wild greens, feta or ricotta cheese, onion and egg. You can vary the filling with the seasons, adding courgettes in the summer and squash in the Autumn and in equally resourceful Ligurian style, if there's any leftover filling, it can be mixed with an egg or two and fried in an oiled pan to make fritters.

Similar wild herbs and greens can be found in the English countryside, and many of our own unique leafy greens work well in Italian recipes. Young nettle leaves, sticky cleavers, ground elder, garlic mustard and delicious wild garlic or rampions (with their appetising smell) can all play their part in delicious meals. Or you may just want to nibble a few tender young hawthorn leaves as a snack while walking the dog.

Gennaro Contaldo, the Italian chef who inspired Jamie Oliver when they worked together at Carluccios, is inspirational about the joys of gathering wild food. He grew up on the Amalfi coast where an Italian passion for foraging was ingrained in him, but came to England in the 1960s and spent his first years working in local village restaurants and studying our wild food. His passion for foraging is contagious - hearing Gennaro wax lyrical about wild food and how to cook it makes you want to head off with a basket under your arm immediately.

Some foraging rules

- Understand your poisonous plants. Some plants look edible, but are deadly.
- Some herbs and wild plants are fine to eat except if you're pregnant or breast-feeding. Do check and use a good reference book.
- Never strip a plant of leaves, take small quantities so that its appearance and health are not spoilt. Harvest respectfully and sustainably, remembering that seeds and flowers are a plant's future.
- Consider pollutions (at roadsides), herbicides, pollutions and dog pee. Stick to commons, woods, hedges along footpaths that are likely to be pollution free.
- Don't forage in Scientific Interest and National Nature Reserves without the express permission of Natural England.



■ Making the most of foraged greens in vegetable fritters



■ Torta Pasqualina with wild greens

According to Gennaro: "As the days become longer and warmer and wildlife is more visible, fields, meadows and gardens come alive again as the first green grasses, plants, flowers and herbs surface; a sure sign that Spring is here...edible herbs like stinging nettles, dandelion, sorrel, rocket, wild garlic and fennel are all around us even in cities.

I can't resist but collect these bounties of nature to make into delicious and nutritious dishes and all for free. A mix of nettles and sorrel makes a wonderful soup as well as fillings for ravioli; the slightly bitter-tasting dandelion can be added to the humble frittata (omelette) or more elaborate torte salate (savory pies); pungent wild rocket is added to salads or made into pesto sauce to dress pasta; the slightly lemony flavour of sorrel can be made into a simple but unique tasting risotto; wild garlic with its more delicate flavour can be added to salads and pasta sauces; wild fennel is a must with fish. The list is endless and each herb with its unique flavour will enhance and transform everyday dishes."

It's a good idea to take the time to think about gathering wild food though.

As Gennaro points out, "When collecting and handling nettles, make sure you wear protective gloves; once cooked, the sting disappears and you will be amazed at how gentle and versatile this nutritious wild green is."

Nettles are great to use instead of (or in addition to) chard in torta verde. Make sure you use the young tender ones or the tops of slightly bigger nettles later on in the season, as older nettles can be tough.

It's also obviously a good idea to avoid picking from areas that may have been sprayed with insecticide or weed killer, as it is when foraging for any greens. Caution is necessary when foraging generally, both in terms of understanding your poisonous plants as well as respecting the countryside.

But do some preparation and research beforehand – ideally go foraging with someone who knows the difference between poisonous and edible until you're entirely sure what's what and take a good reference book (such as Richard Mabey's Food for Free) with you – and hopefully you'll hunt, cook, savour, live. Buon appetite. ■



■ Pasta with greens

Recipes

Torta Verde

■ Pastry:

200g strong plain flour
3 tablespoons olive oil
Pinch salt
60 – 80 ml warm water

■ For the filling:

400g of greens (mixture of chard, spinach and wild greens such as nettles)
¼ cup of flour
100g ricotta cheese
1 large egg
½ teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
8 tablespoons grated parmesan (or similar hard English cheese)

To make pastry, sift flour into large mixing bowl and make a well in the centre. Add the oil and salt and mix well, adding warm water a little at a time to form a soft, not sticky, dough. Wrap in clingfilm and leave to rest in the fridge for 20 minutes, while you make the filling.

Wash the greens well and barely cook in the water left clinging to them until they wilt. Drain and squeeze out excess water. Chop fine (I find this easy to do with scissors), then add to ricotta. Mix with egg, nutmeg, season with salt and fold in half of the parmesan and the flour.

Roll the pastry out to fill a well-greased deep cake tin or pie dish, crimping around the edge. Spread in the filling, sprinkle with the remaining parmesan and drizzle with olive oil then bake for 40 mins in an oven preheated to 180 C.

Nettle Soup

Ingredients:

A carrier bag of nettles, sorrel and spinach if you have some, well washed.
1 potato, diced.
1 onion, chopped
Glug of olive oil
2 large cloves of garlic (or ransoms if you've found any), chopped fine
750 ml chicken or vegetable stock
2 – 3 tablespoons yoghurt or crème fraiche

Cook the onion in olive oil until softened, then add garlic and potato and cook for another 5 minutes. Add the stock and nettles/greens and simmer for 20 minutes, topping up with more water if necessary. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Blend until smooth and add a swirl of crème fraiche or yoghurt to each bowl of soup.

■ For further inspiration on cooking Italian-style with your foraged greens and general passion for food, see www.gennarocontaldo.com