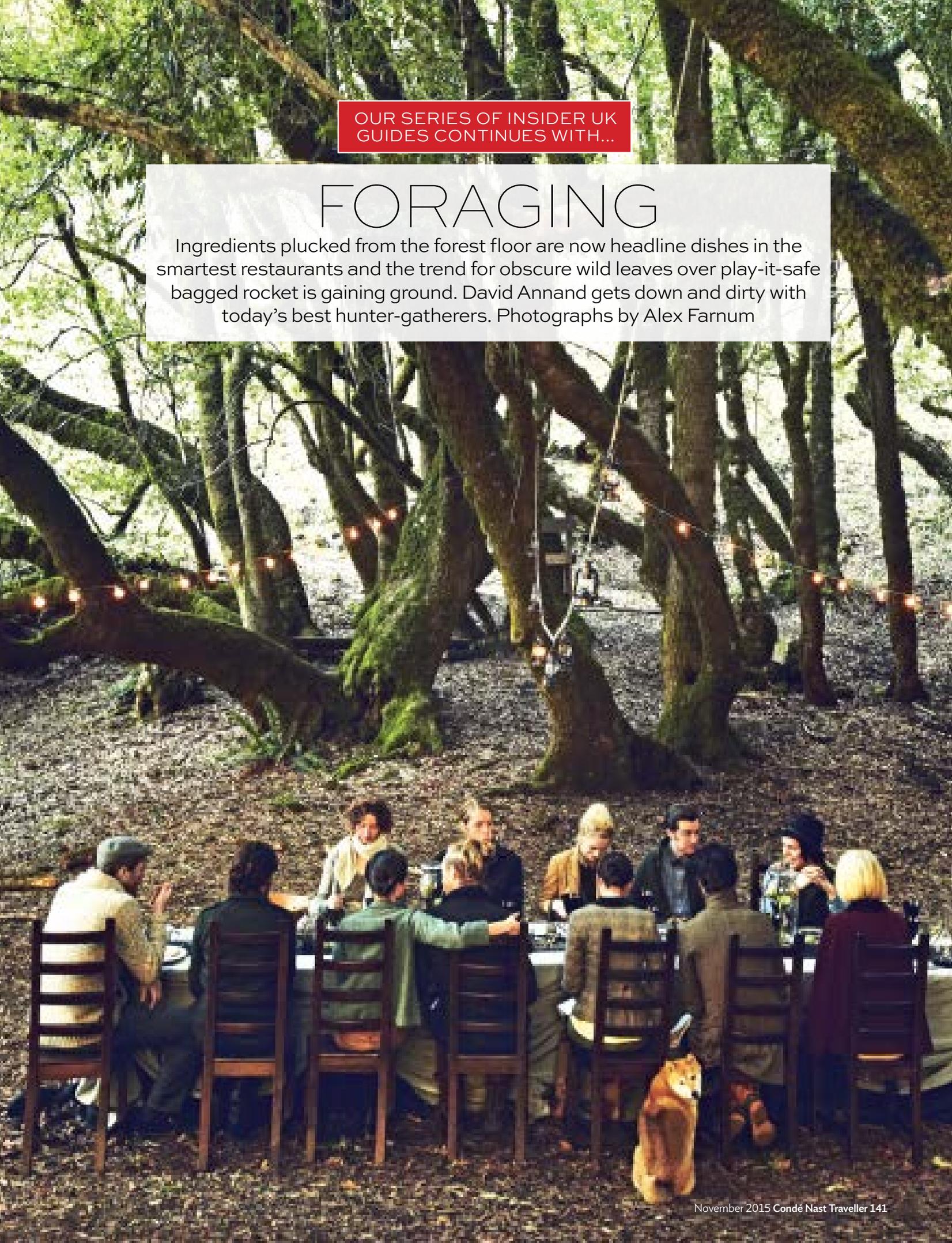


IN BRITAIN



A group of about ten people are seated around a long table in a forest. The table is covered with a white tablecloth and set with plates and glasses. The people are dressed in outdoor, casual attire. The forest floor is covered in fallen leaves and twigs. Large, moss-covered tree trunks are visible in the background. A string of warm-toned lights is strung across the scene, adding a cozy atmosphere. A dog is sitting on the ground in the foreground, near the table.

OUR SERIES OF INSIDER UK
GUIDES CONTINUES WITH...

FORAGING

Ingredients plucked from the forest floor are now headline dishes in the smartest restaurants and the trend for obscure wild leaves over play-it-safe bagged rocket is gaining ground. David Annand gets down and dirty with today's best hunter-gatherers. Photographs by Alex Farnum



A woodland forager. Previous pages, from left: a selection of wild mushrooms; a feast in the forest

No one's going to pretend fashion wasn't a factor. If foraging hadn't become inextricably intertwined with photoshoot-friendly Scandinavians, it would probably still occupy its old place in the public imagination alongside coracle making. But such was the recent explosion of Noma-driven Nordophilia that members of society found themselves on their knees hunting for things they'd never heard of: vetch, sorrel, yarrows. They realised this kind of free food isn't just thrifty, it's revelatory: vegetables that don't taste like they have freighted through three international airports. And as Gravetye Manor's chef George Blogg so neatly put it, foraged food binds us to a time and place. It is 'ultra-regional and ultra-seasonal'.

Suddenly, the rock pool is a medicine cabinet; the hedgerow a larder; the beach an all-you-can-eat buffet. Particularly in the case of mushrooms, however, the delicacy can look uncannily like the deadly to the untrained eye, so always go with an expert. The days out below represent Britain's best.

FOREST FLAVOUR

I had, rather naïvely as it turns out, always assumed the English countryside to be a place free from the kind of malevolent flora and fauna that one readily associates with the Borneo jungle or the wilds of the Amazon. But after 15 minutes in the **New Forest** with Lime Wood's forager-in-chief Garry Eveleigh, I'm starting to wonder if the home counties should come with a public health warning.

It's no surprise that there are some malign mushrooms out there, but I had no idea our hedgerows were home to poisonous dog's mercury and hemlock, the slayer of Socrates. To top it off, it appears that buttercups are poisonous too. It's like finding out that Winnie-the-Pooh was secretly a member of Millwall Bushwackers.

Mercifully, I have Garry to guide me through this treacherous terrain. He tells me that when the weather is right the forest is as good as anywhere in Europe for mushroom foraging. Unfortunately, such abundance is not in evidence the day we're there. The months leading up to my

trip have been too dry and we find only a single solitary stinkhorn, which Garry claims is edible if you catch it at the right time. For all I know it may taste of Athena's own ambrosia, but it looks like a phallus emerging from a sulphurous egg and smells like an abattoir on a hot day, and I would sooner eat my own foot.

My guide's affection for the woods is irresistibly infectious. The conversation ranges from 5,000-year-old Otzi the Iceman's use of polypores as an antiseptic to what to do if you encounter a fallow deer off its head on fly agaric (answer: whatever you want, it's too stoned to move).

Back at Lime Wood we sit on the sun-soaked terrace eating a salad culled 30 minutes earlier from the hotel's meadow, which includes lady's smock, sorrel and ox-eye daisy. Head chef Luke Holder softens the sharp green flavours of the leaves with ewe's cheese and honey, and I lean back in my seat knowing that I have braved the badlands of Hampshire and these spoils are rightly mine. www.limewoodhotel.co.uk; from £140 per person, including a three-course foraged meal

STREET LIFE

Urban foraging may sound like something best left to vulpine scavengers lurking at the back of a KFC, but **London's** stock of free food is considerably more enticing than a half-eaten Zinger Burger. Jason Irving of Forage Wild Food is an expert in herbal medicines and forageable foods who, along with John Rensten of Forage London, leads guided walks around the capital's green spaces, from gritty Tower Hamlets to leafy Kew. They're after the usual suspects of nettle, burdock, elder and Alexanders, but a little earlier in the year than their country cousins thanks to London's warmer microclimate.

Up in **York**, Robin Harford of Eat Weeds hops between the headstones in the city's cemetery to uncover an incredible number of edible species. www.foragewildfood.com; www.foragelondon.co.uk; both from £30 per person. www.eatweeds.co.uk; from £50 per person

FIND IT, COOK IT

Down in deepest **Cornwall**, Caroline Davey runs a wild cookery school called Fat Hen. It's a cuddly name, redolent of runny yolks and stodgy English food. It's also misleading as her dishes are clean and modern, and her beautifully converted barn kitchen is as chic as they come. ➤



Clockwise from this picture: a bell tent in the woods; just-picked herbs and mushrooms; porchetta made with wild ingredients; an oyster mushroom



► I ventured to the edge of the known world on one of her Forage, Cook and Feast days. The morning starts with Caroline whipping up a panna cotta using carrageenan, a seaweed that is an excellent vegetarian alternative to gelatin, before making our way to Sennen Cove. After a pitstop for elderflower Champagne and crispy seaweed, we go down to the rocks and scramble around the slippery pools before heading back to the barn for a three-course lunch. Rabbit summer rolls are packed tight with nasturtiums from a nearby car park and the hake is delicately poached in kelp stock. To the surprise of no one, the panna cotta wobbles perfectly. www.fathen.org; from £95 per person, including a three-course foraged meal

ON THE COASTAL SHELF

The waters off Britain are stocked with some of the best shellfish in the world and our shores packed with oft-overlooked vegetables such as sea beet and purslane.

With outposts in **Cumbria's** Flookburgh and **North Yorkshire's** Staithes, Taste the Wild is perfectly placed to seek out the best on both coasts. Its two-day courses cover everything from scouring the salt marsh to catching flat fish. Down south the coastline is equally abundant, not least in the garden of England, **Kent**, where Fergus the Forager, TV's *The Roadkill Chef*, takes groups hunting at Herne Bay, not far from pretty Whitstable. www.tastethewild.co.uk; from £85 per person. www.fergustheforager.co.uk; from £185 per person, including two foraged meals

BEACHCOMBERS

I'm standing on **Dorset's** Old Harry Rocks, named, some say, after Harry Paye, the 15th-century buccaneer who apparently stashed his loot in the nearby coves. I like to think there's something raffishly piratical about the way I'm wearing my wetsuit, but it doesn't matter because I'm not after doubloons or muskets, I'm seeking a ►



HOW TO SNIFF OUT TRUFFLES

When it comes to foraging, the bounty on offer tends to be either pricey porcini or not-very-dear dandelion. King of these extremes are truffles, which can fetch about £7,000 a kilogram. Our man-in-the-know is James Feaver of The English Truffle Company, who runs hunting courses in Wiltshire and Dorset.

1. KEEP IN THE BLACK

'The summer and autumn truffles found in this country are black, identical to those found over a wide part of Europe and prized for their culinary value. Ours are close cousins to the black Périgord – the most famous and valuable kind along with the Italian white – similar looking, but don't smell as strong.'

2. STAY SOUTH

'Truffles require lime-rich and well-drained soil. Those growing wild will generally be where the underlying geology is chalk or limestone, such as the beech woodlands of southern England. Summer truffles start to ripen around May and continue fruiting until September; the autumn variety appears from September to January.'

3. GO TO THE DOGS

'Female pigs are well known for hunting the stuff. When ripe, truffles produce a chemical almost identical to a pheromone found in male pig's saliva. But there are a number of reasons for not using sows, not least the risk of persuading a pig to give up a truffle. It may lose you your finger!' www.englishtruffles.co.uk



Crostini with oyster, miyake and chanterelle mushrooms

► less rarefied kind of treasure: seaweed. I'm here with Dan Scott of Fore Adventure, the nearby Pig on the Beach's go-to man for saltwater foraging. Our baited lines hang off the back of our kayaks, hoping to catch mackerel or one of the stunning local sea bass. Bass are opportunists, says Dan, always on the lookout for something to eat. It's a way of being that resonates with him, he tells me as we jump from pool to pool collecting bladderwrack, gutweed and beautiful sea lettuce, bright green and translucent. Back on the beach we make an open fire and eat the chargrilled bass with pepper dulse and Jack-by-the-hedge. The smell of the wood is rich in the sea air. I sit there, my hair streaked with salt, the juices flowing down my chin, and I renounce all ready meals for good. www.foreadventure.co.uk; from £50 per person. Book through www.thepighotel.com

BOOZE CRUISE

A man who used to be a cage fighter and one of Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's River Cottage sparring partners stretches out a tattooed arm and plucks a small white flower from a tree, then tells me the secret of sealing hawthorn blossom in ice cubes. I'm in **Epping Forest** with Mark Lloyd, in the spirit of the hunter-gatherers who track the wild botanicals used in Caorunn, a small-batch gin distilled in the Highlands. Here, though, we're finding free stuff for embellishing cocktails: water mint and young nettles to pinch off and make cordial for a Gin Gimlet, sweet cicely for anise tinctures. There's talk of tapping and fermenting birch sap. I'm more likely to pick sloe in autumn, to steep in gin for a couple of months. I walk away, doubtful about sustaining a

three-course meal from the woodland, but confident about a three-cocktail lunch. www.realmarklloyd.co.uk; from £50 per person. www.caorunnin.com

MAGIC MUSHROOMS

Out in the **Forest of Dean**, Raoul van den Broucke ('the Carluccio of the Wye Valley') takes guests from the charming Tudor Farmhouse to search for wimberries and wild garlic along with the forest's fungi.

Down at **Dorset's** Summer Lodge Country House Hotel, the foraging day culminates in a three-course mushroom feast. It's led by John Wright, author of *Mushrooms: River Cottage Handbook No 1*. He also runs sessions in Devon at Hugh's HQ, the River Cottage in **Axminster**, where there are courses on everything from wild cookery to hedgerow hunting. www.tudorfarmhousehotel.co.uk; from £30 per person. www.summerlodgehotel.co.uk; from £375 per person, including accommodation and a three-course foraged meal. www.rivercottage.net; from £195 per person for a one-day course, including a foraged meal

SCOT-FREE

The busiest man with a basket is surely **Galloway Wild Foods'** Mark Williams, whose packed diary sees him foraging in Scotland and the Lake District all year round. An admirer of hard-to-find food, he enjoys the challenge of the lean winter months and is particularly keen on March with its low tides – perfect for picking razor clams. Look out for the gourmet days he runs in Galloway's Gatehouse of Fleet, where he takes advantage of south-west Scotland's mushroom-filled forests by the beach. www.gallowaywildfoods.com; from £30 per person

RUSTLE UP A FEAST

The pros share their favourite foraged recipes



Fergus Drennan,
Fergus the Forager

'My dream dish is an autumnal reality: venison slowly pot-roasted in blackberry wine with plenty of penny bun, parasol and horn mushrooms. In the final 30 minutes of cooking, I add bunches of elderberries, sprigs of tangy orange sea-buckthorn berries and whole crab apples, all of which end up rustically and artistically arranged on a serving plate.'



Caroline Davey, Fat Hen

'For me it's spider-crab tagliatelle with sea lettuce, rock samphire and wild fennel. The sweetness of the spider crab – freshly picked from the water three miles away in Sennen Cove and cooked within the hour – goes very well with these coastal vegetables.'



Raoul van den Broucke,
Tudor Farmhouse

'I love hop shoots. They are an Italian delicacy. You catch them early before they flower, when they look like very thin asparagus. You can't eat the ones cultivated by brewers because unless they're organic they'll be sprayed with pesticides. I look for wild ones in the hedges and take them to the kitchen, toss them in olive oil or butter, then fry them for a few minutes and sprinkle with rock salt. They're delicious served with a pint of beer.'