

## Preface

IT WAS QUIET BACK IN THE WOODS, although we could hear the whine of the occasional car passing out on the road. Many of the trees had lost their foliage in preparation for a winter's sleep, but the mix of conifers and deciduous trees muffled all of the noises of modern life except the crunching of our feet as we shuffled through the dead leaves on the forest floor.

Ordinarily, I am a stick-to-the-path kind of person. I enjoy walks through the woods, but I prefer to stay out of the underbrush and stick to the obviously well-traveled walkways. Today was no leisurely stroll. We were on a mission.

Eric was looking up into the skeletal branches, paying particular attention to the white-barked birch trees that stood out brightly in the dark forest. We were in search of the elusive chaga (*Inonotus obliquus*), often referred to as a “mushroom” and certainly one of the many tree spore parasites, but very uncharacteristic in its growth habits as compared to other true mushrooms. Chaga is renowned for its healing properties. We wanted some.

I did not really know what to look for. Every dark spot on the white-barked birch looked like chaga ... and nothing did. I shuffled

through the dead leaves, trying to keep up, but mostly not being successful. In an effort to keep my footing, I looked down at the forest floor. A thick growth of a dark green-leafed plant caught my attention. It was everywhere, and so dark green that it contrasted sharply with brown decay. I'd never noticed anything like it before, and I had no idea what it was.

"What do you think that is?" I called to Eric, who was walking around a large birch a few yards from where I was standing in a patch of the green stuff.

"I don't know," he replied.

"Some sort of winter green, for sure," I said to him.

Eric and I have been studying plant identification for years, mostly as hobbyists, and we have close to a dozen books on various wild edible and medicinal plants. We had a long list of ones that we could identify as being safe to eat, but a considerably shorter list of those that we could identify and knew how to prepare as food. For years, we dabbled here and there at finding things to eat out in the forest or other wild places we occasion, but we had yet to make foraging a regular part of what we do.

There are some wild foods that we enjoy every year. Maple sap is one of the foraged foods that we have enjoyed for several years. Although some people may argue that sugaring is not wild harvesting (and certainly not in the Sam Thayer sautéed-spring-greens-with-wild-leeks kind of way), the fact is that we do not have a cultivated maple forest.

We have also harvested other wild foods. One summer a friend dragged us off to a clear-cut area where we picked blueberries as big as chickpeas. Later that year, we hit the mother lode of wild blackberries (*Rubus fruticosus*) just off a favorite walking path and filled several buckets. Occasionally, we collected a meal's worth of stinging nettles or dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) greens. However, like most people, with the exception of our annual maple syrup harvest, wild edibles were not a regular part of our diet.

The reason is simple. Like most people, we did not know enough about cooking with wild plants. There are hundreds of cookbooks on the market that use, what we believe, are exotic ingredients, like eggplant, but try finding a non-foraging-specific cookbook that has recipes for common plantain (*Plantago major*), or nettles or acorns, and be prepared to be disappointed. Further, wild foraging books are so full of complicated descriptions of ways to prepare the food to make it safe that it is daunting, to say the least.

It has only been a few years since we transitioned from the typical American processed foods diet to a local foods diet. Initially, it was a struggle learning how to cook the foods from the local farmer's market (before we started growing them, in quantity, in our home garden). When one is accustomed to cooking packaged food where the most complicated instruction is "add water," and then one must learn to cook less familiar vegetables like rutabaga and Hubbard squash, there can be a pretty steep learning curve. Take that to the next level of needing to learn not just how to cook the very different foods, but first how to correctly identify them, and it is easy to understand why the average person usually does not bother, and why it took us so long to take that step from knowing about all of the wild foods to really getting to know them. At least at the farmer's market what we bought could be presumed safe to eat without complicated conjuring and magic spells, which always seemed to be part of the process with wild foods.

For a very long time, wild edibles remained a curiosity, but not a dietary staple.

Over the last few years, however, almost daily we would see a news story on the dangers of eating just about anything from the grocery store shelves. A recent article warned against eating corn-based products, as most of the corn served in this country is from genetically engineered (GE) seed, which recent studies suggest are linked to long-term health problems. A grocery shopping guide in PDF form accompanied the article. So, I opened the PDF file and was looking

through the products that were okay to eat and the companies who pledged to use no GE ingredients or genetically modified organisms (GMO).

Since we embarked on a local foods diet, what not to eat has been a frequent topic of conversation in our house. Between not allowing ourselves to eat foods that are not grown in our local area and trying to avoid those that might contain questionably safe ingredients, the list of what is off-limits seems to grow every day. We now purchase nothing containing high-fructose corn syrup, stay away from anything with a benzoate in it, avoid meat from a factory farm, never use foods preserved in BPA-lined cans (which is all of them) and eschew any fruits or vegetables not grown in Maine. I never thought enough about what effect these conversations might be having on my daughters until that day when I opened that PDF and was skimming through the list.

My daughters were in the room with me, and I looked over to see my nine-year-old crying. I asked her what was wrong, and she said, "I'm afraid I'm going to eat something that will hurt me."

And there I was, between that proverbial rock and hard place. I could ignore what I knew and feed my children those foods. I could stop talking to them about why I make the food choices I make, but then I might get caught in a "because I said so" argument when they want the food that I cannot, in good conscience, allow them to eat, and I have to give them a reason why that food is not okay. They are not stupid, and they deserve the truth, but it is tough when the truth is scary enough to bring them to tears.

At that point, I knew we needed to make the shift from literally handing our lives over to the industrial food complex and hoping they will not poison us, too quickly, to being empowered to find our own food — for my daughters' sake. We needed to give our children the tools they needed to find healthy foods.

We already grow a lot of our food, and our daughters love our annual garden. For the last several years, they have asked for their own

garden beds, and our teen has started having a theme. One year, she grew a Zombie Garden, using plants that are used to fight the invading zombies in the video game *Plants vs. Zombies*. Her garden bed included sunflowers, peas, potatoes and pumpkins. Another year, we scoured the seed catalog for plants with animal names, like green panther cauliflower and deer tongue lettuce. Our daughters also love collecting eggs from the chickens and ducks in the backyard, raising chickens for the freezer every year and boiling sap for maple syrup.

It is not that our daughters do not know good food when they see it. They know what a real baby carrot is, how beets grow and what potato plants look like. They know apples grow on trees and raspberries do not. They know peas, pumpkins and cucumbers all grow on vines. They know they can eat some flowers and that once some plants start to flower, they can no longer be eaten.

They know about food, but like other kids their ages, they have also enjoyed the fact of our modern life — that some food does not look like other food, and it comes in a box. The “easy to get food,” the “always there when we are hungry food,” comes from the store. Unfortunately, more and more, the stuff that ends up being labeled food is not really safe to eat.

I could hear my daughter’s unspoken question in her tears: if you are telling me that I cannot eat the food from the grocery store, and I trust what you are saying, then, what can I eat?

I realized that we needed an easy-to-find alternative to what is offered at our supermarket.

We live in a cold climate with a short growing season and the belief that there is very little available to eat when the trees are bare. With that in mind, we are always on the lookout for wild things that could be eaten when nothing else is growing. In addition, as our comfort level with wild edibles has grown, so too has our interest in discovering what our native ancestors ate. We began to ask ourselves that question — what did people who lived in North America eat before there were grocery stores and food imports? Obviously, they

ate something, and unlike much of what we find in our modern grocery stores, most of what they ate did not have the potential to cause long-term systemic damage. As our interest in wild edibles and seasonal diets increased, we were encouraged to discover their secrets.

So, that day in the woods hunting for chaga, when I saw the greens poking through the leaf litter, I thought this plant must be a green that wildlife eats during the winter. It did not really occur to me that it might be something I could eat, but rather, it was a simple up-the-food-chain train of thought. The animals eat the green stuff, our ancestors ate the animals.

“You think?” he said, bending over to pick one of the leaves.

“Not ‘wintergreen,’” I corrected. “A winter ‘green.’ You know, something that stays green during winter.”

He snapped the leaf in half and smelled it.

“Are you sure?” he asked, holding the leaf to my nose.

The pungent sweet odor of wintergreen filled my olfactory senses, and I smiled. We had discovered wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*) — a plant that grows during the winter, in our cold climate, and is indeed edible (as a tea, and the berries can also be eaten and are delicious).

Encouraged by our discovery and the knowledge that we seemed to be developing a kind of intuitive sense about the plant life around us, we decided to make a plan to be more proactive about looking for wild foods. Like many best-laid-plans, our mundane, day-to-day suburban life interfered, and not a lot happened.

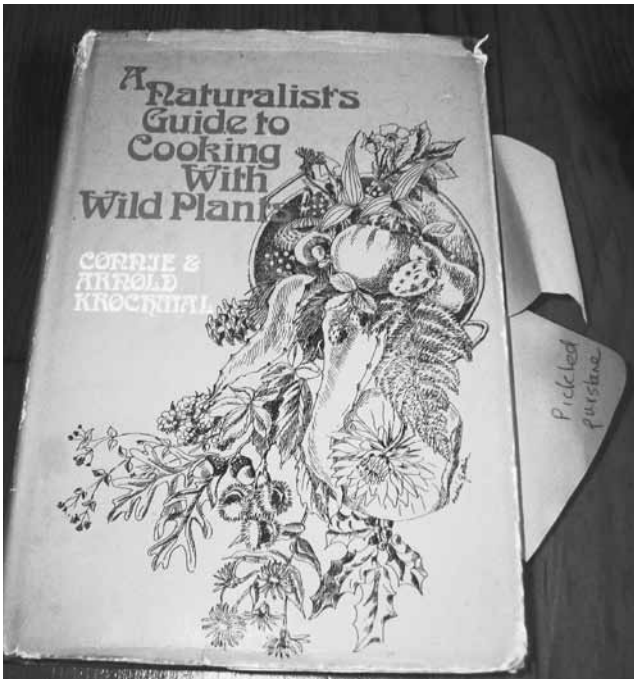
And then ...

As if Fate had heard our dilemma and decided to give us a break, my mother sent us a box of books. While our family members do not always understand or agree with how we have chosen to live (they think we are kind of fun and quirky, mostly), they try to indulge our interests. As it turns out, my aunt and her late husband were prolific writers during the 1970s, and many of their books were about wild and medicinal edibles.

In the box were several books written by my aunt and uncle, including one that would lead us on the adventure of our lives. In answer to our unspoken request to the Universe, we were gifted a copy of the 1974 edition of *A Naturalist's Guide to Cooking with Wild Plants* by Connie and Arnold Krochmal.<sup>1</sup>

When I first saw it in the box, I figured it was just another book about collecting wild edibles, the kind with extensive and complicated preparation instructions and cautions about eating wild foods. So, I put it in a pile of books to be perused at a later date and promptly forgot about it, as my life took its typical twists and turns.

I placed my Johnny Seed order. We started harvesting maple syrup. The chickens started laying again. In general, we prepared for spring on our nanofarm, with some intention of, probably, eventually, as time allowed, getting out into the woods and wild foraging for some delicacies, when we wanted a change of pace. As with other



years, the focus would be on what we could grow (i.e., control) right on our quarter acre.

As Willy Wonka proclaims, “The best prize is a surprise.”

A few weeks after the box arrived, I was prodded into taking a closer look at the books, and as I shuffled through the stack, the cookbook caught my eye. I started flipping through the pages. The foods are listed in alphabetical order, and so acorn was first. We had some experience with acorns, and while we had harvested and prepped acorns in one of our outdoor skills classes, we had not successfully turned them to flour on our own. Indeed, the whole process was very daunting, and since we were not really sure how to eat the acorn flour once we made it, we postponed practicing the skill.

I read through the processing instructions and scanned the acorn recipes. So simple. So straightforward. I was intrigued, and flipping the pages, I started to get a little excited. By the time I had reached the c's, I was giddy.

Of the first sixteen plants featured in the book, ten of them grew in my area, and not only that, but *I could identify them*. Ten plants I could identify. Edible ... and the best part about the cookbook — it has incredibly simple recipes using ingredients that are easily acquired and usually found in the average kitchen — salt, butter, flour, eggs, milk, sugar, oil, vinegar.

And better, most of those added ingredients are things we have made (vinegar and butter), we raise (eggs) and/or come from a local farmer (milk and lard, as a substitute for cooking oil) or are things we can produce from our foraging efforts (flour).

I have long maintained that there is no reason for the average person to be hungry. Plenty of food, free for the taking, grows unassisted and unhindered in the wild spaces where most of us fear to tread (except with our fully stocked and accessorized backpacks).

Many years ago, during a camping trip with some friends, I noticed an apple tree in the middle of the campground. We walked by it several times a day on our way to the bathroom. Although, at the



time, I did not know much about anything, especially wild foods, the apples were clearly apples, and given the number on the ground around the tree, and the fact that it was late September, those apples were ready to harvest. Given the fullness of the tree and the sheer number of drops, it was also pretty clear that no one was harvesting it. So, I did, gathering as many as I could carry (while the rest of my group plodded back to our campsite).

For dinner that night, I cooked the apples with some of the oatmeal we had brought, a bit of sugar and butter and some water. It was delicious, and I quipped that we should go camping sometime and forage all of our food. My friend immediately nixed my idea as being ridiculous and undoable.

“No way! We would starve,” she declared.

Over the years, I have learned how wrong her belief is, in spite of the fact that it is the prevailing attitude. Armed with my aunt’s book and a growing knowledge of wild edibles, we embarked on the adventure of eating the wild food that shared our suburban environment.

This book is the story of our experiences through our seasons of eating free from nature’s bounty.

We divided the book into three sections:

### **Part I: What We Did**

This section describes what we did. We start by discussing the decision to make a very concerted effort, over a calendar year, of incorporating foraged foods into our diet and setting some goals for ourselves. Then we describe the kinds of plants that we actually foraged, how we ate them and how we preserved them (many of the foods we foraged did end up as stored foods, and learning to store food for the winter was a big part of the project).

### **Part II: Why We Decided to Start Foraging**

This section focuses on our growing concerns about the safety,

availability and cost of grocery store food, which played a pretty significant role in our desire to adopt foraging as a way of life rather than just a once-in-awhile hobby.

### **Part III: Life Lessons We Learned from Foraging**

Our foraging adventure was not just about going out and finding food. It was about a lot of things, including changing our very definition of food. Not only did we have to learn about specific plants, but we also had to learn how to use them to nourish our bodies and how to prepare them into foods that would be both aesthetically appealing and palatable.

Along the way, we learned some very important facts about the nature of food and of, well, *nature*. Our culture has allowed us to become completely complacent about our food. We make a grocery list and then pick up what we need. As we learned, nature does not work that way, and often what one hopes to find is not there, and if it was there last week, it may not be next week.

We learned five specific lessons and discuss each one as it applied to our foraging efforts.

We are not expert foragers by any stretch of the imagination, and this book is not a how-to guide for foraging. It is a story, peppered with a few interesting ways to cook some common *wild* foods, but mostly it is about taking control and regaining our freedom.