

## Wild Saga: In Search of a Foraging Ethics

By Jonah Raskin

Euell Gibbons called it “stalking” in his irascible guidebook, *Stalking the Wild Asparagus* (1962). These days he’d probably say, “foraging,” though the same activity is also known as gathering, collecting, and hunting - especially for wild mushrooms - one of the most prized of foraged foods. No forager today is as well known as Gibbons who appeared in TV commercials for Post Grape-Nuts, but foraging is far more popular now than it was in his heyday. With wild mushrooms fetching \$60 a pound - and California foragers making as much as \$100,000 a year - foraging has become a lucrative enterprise that’s largely out-of control. Money isn’t the only motivator. There’s a burgeoning mushroom cult that has a long history, lore, and an outlaw mystique. Then, too, there’s renewed passion for cooking with plants, nuts, flowers, and fruits gathered in fields and woods. “Foraging is more interesting than shopping in a supermarket,” John McReynolds, a long time forager and chef, says. Ancient foods, like acorns, have made modest comebacks in kitchens all over the Bay Area.

By instinct, the forager is often furtive, feral, and a step ahead of the law. California penal code sections 384a and 622 make it “a crime to harm or remove trees or plants on land not your own, which is punishable by a fine of up to \$1,000 and imprisonment in jail up to six months.” Few foragers are caught; fewer are actually fined or jailed, though there’s an epidemic of foraging on private property, and also in state and federal parks where it’s forbidden to forage. As one long time forager told me, “It’s impossible to police the wilderness.”

With booming outlawry and widespread ignorance about ecology, it’s no wonder that long-time State of California Park rangers such as Breck Parkman feel it’s time to enforce foraging rules before it’s too late. “I’ve seen foragers strip all the seaweed from rocks on the Sonoma coast,” he told me. “I’ve seen an increase in poaching and a rise in clandestine foraging on public land to make a few quick bucks. In our state parks, foragers make paths where they shouldn’t. There’s soil erosion and removal of foods essential for the survival of native animals. The ground itself has been trampled underfoot.”

Today, even Euell Gibbons might have second thoughts about his open invitation to one and all to have “wild parties” and eat “wild food”, or his belief that everything wild would be abundant. Fifty years on, plants that he gathered are in short supply. It’s not as easy to find sassafras, wild asparagus, wild calamus, wild chicory, wild crayfish, and wild knotweed, though on large estates in Northern California, foragers say that

In the 1970s I lived comfortably by gleaning apples and grapes, foraging in fields, fishing for blue gills, catfish, and bass and by swapping fruits and vegetables for venison. Hundreds of years had gone by, but like the first settlers on the North American continent, I believed that natural resources were infinite. I was naive. So was Euell Gibbons. The original colonists were naïve, too. In 1634, Andrew White, a Jesuit priest in Maryland, wrote rapturously that, “we cannot set down a foot, but tread on strawberries, raspberries, mulberries, acorns, walnuts, and sassafras.” A short time later, the ground was bare. The pioneer mentality doomed American forests, America flora, and fauna. It might doom what little is left.

Better perhaps than any other forager I’ve met in the Bay Area over the past 40 years, Mike T. knows that foraging won’t last long given contemporary practices, though exactly how long isn’t clear. A master forager, he’s taught a couple of generations the lore he’s acquired over a lifetime. “Novices have a hard time telling the differences between poisonous and not poisonous mushrooms,” he says. “That failure could be a matter of life or dearth, severe liver damage or good health.” He’s loath to take novices out in the wild for fear they’ll die from eating the wrong kinds of mushrooms

As a teenager, Mike T. picked wild strawberries and Marion berries that his mother used for pies and jams. Then, he went on to bigger and better fruits. In the Philippines, he foraged for guava, mangoes, and sugarcane; in the Australian outback for edible cactus flowers; in the Bay Area for all the bounty of the land. 2011 was his best year ever for mushrooms because of the steady winter rains, the relatively warm weather, and because after decades he knows precisely where and when to go for oyster mushrooms and chanterelles. He knows how not to get caught by park rangers though once a ranger stopped him and confiscated his mushrooms.

Asked repeatedly by leading chefs to become a professional forager, he has always declined. It’s the beauty of the outdoors, and the thrill of finding rare mushrooms that he craves, not cash. In fall and winter, he spends whole days in Bay Area fields and forests, and in the Sierras after the first snows. He tells no one where he goes and

he doesn't advertise his forays, either. I have known him for 30 years; he spoke to me only on condition of confidentiality.

"My spots are secret," he tells me on a cool afternoon under the shade of a pine tree. "People will grab your spot if you tell them where you go. They want the sensation of discovering wild mushrooms. For many foragers it's like finding gold."

Mike T. is an honest outlaw with a code of morality about mushroom hunting and he brings a sense of environmental ethics into Bay Area wilds. "It's a very fragile environment out there," he says. "I leave as small a footprint as possible. I pick up heaps of garbage – it's sad the junk hikers and foragers leave in forests. I don't disturb the grass, the twigs, or leaves on the ground. When I depart, I want the area to look exactly as it looked before I arrived."

The first foragers and fishermen that Mike T. met were the first ethicists he encountered. They were dirt poor; they lived in a shantytown in houses made of cardboard and tin and they had to forage, fish, and purloin vegetables and fruits, too, from farmers to stay alive. Reliant on the woods, on lakes, and streams for their food, they took only what they needed. Ever since then, Mike T. has lived by their rules even when he sees others "raping the land," as he puts it.

"Recently, it has gotten more cutthroat," he says. "Last winter in Point Reyes, I ran into four foragers who were after Matsutakes, which have an amazing aroma and are incredibly flavorful. They picked about 100 pounds, which could have brought them as much as \$6,000. Not bad for an afternoon's work, especially when they had almost no expenses. I did not report them to the police, but if I see them or anyone like them again I probably will. Something has to be done."

The new foraging fad has given birth to foraging classes and foraging teachers such as Kevin Feinstein one of the most visible members of ForageSF, the leading local organization for foragers. Feinstein struck me as a kind of pilgrim at play in the fields of the lord. He loves life in the open air, hiking, and the thrill of feral foraging. His job is to promote foraging and he understands that foraging can endanger the environment.

"All these plants are incredibly fragile, and if everyone in the Bay Area foraged and ate wild foods they would be gone in ten seconds," he told a group of wanna-be foragers – most of them baby boomers - whom he guided to the very edge of Jack London State Historical Park in Glen Ellen, and perhaps beyond. Where private property ended and the state park began wasn't clear. There were no

fences and no signs. Half-a-dozen couples followed Feinstein as he walked and talked about miner's lettuce, witches butter, blue dicks, Madrone, Manzanita, bay laurel, and true and false turkey tails. No doubt about it, Feinstein knows the wilds in summer, winter, fall and spring and in urban as well as rural places.

At Golden Gate Park on a breezy afternoon he led a hardy, energetic group that included two young women who took an Edible Botany class at Stanford, heard lectures on topics such as "forage and storage," and gathered edibles right on campus. On that same outing a recent immigrant from Poland told stories about hunting for mushrooms in the woods of Warsaw, and ignored Feinstein who said to everyone, "This is not a foray. We're not here to take stuff home. It's illegal to forage in Golden Gate and if someone asks us we're not foraging."

The woman picked and ate nearly everything Feinstein identified, and exclaimed, "Yummy," though there wasn't much to forage: thistles, mallow, a stand of nettles, and chickweed. As Feinstein pointed out, you wouldn't want to eat many of the weeds and grasses in the park because the ground is covered with dog feces, cigarette butts, plastic bags, and old, tattered newspapers. If nothing else, the walk in the park illustrated how trashed and tainted it is including the patches of nasturtiums that grow abundantly in the cool climate of Golden Gate and that add zest and color to salads.

From start to finish, Feinstein said almost nothing about the ecology of the park or the ethics of foraging, except to insist that, "Foragers can help the environment" and that "foraging is about looking and talking about plants." He also said, "foraging is natural," and "our food system is unsustainable." By the end of the afternoon, foragers knew the difference between poison Hemlock and Queen Anne's Lace. They also knew that the tops of hills were safer for foraging than the more polluted flat lands.

Iso Rabins - Feinstein's boss and the founder of ForageSF - spends as much time in the "Wild Kitchen," as he calls it, as he does in the wilds themselves. Born in Santa Cruz in 1981, Rabins began his foraging forays in 2005; six years later, he still considers himself a neophyte when it comes to edible plants, fishing, and hunting. His "newest love," he explains, is diving off the California coast and foraging under the surface of the ocean for abalone and sea urchins, or uni, as the Japanese call it. He has a license; it's required.

"Everyone needs to try sea foraging," he explained to diners at a Wild Kitchen feast on San Francisco's Mission Street. "It's amazing the abundance of life under the surface." The Wild Kitchen website

reinforces his point about the abundance of edible foods from the wilds both on land and at sea. It lists kelp, walnuts, boar, snails, acorns, cod, and squid, along with gleaned fruit such as lemons and oranges. When Rabins and I spoke on the phone a week after the Wild Kitchen sit-down meal, he talked about scarcity rather than abundance. "Abalone has been over-harvested; it's an endangered species," he explained. "Moreover, gathering edible birds' eggs on the Farallon Islands nearly wiped out whole species." Indeed, the history of the Farallon Islands provides a sobering tale about the hazards of foraging. In the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, the seal population was decimated and it hasn't ever returned to pre-hunting levels though the islands and its species are now protected by law.

Twelve times a year, Rabins and a small paid staff prepare a veritable feast and serve it to 60 or 70 guests who pay about \$100 for a six-course gourmet meal made from foraged and or gleaned ingredients such as quail eggs, sea beans, smelts, and plums and non-foraged foods such as steak from Marin County cows. Rabins gathers many of the ingredients himself, though foragers also supply him with fruits and fish. One forager who provides him with smelts that he catches at night won't reveal his fishing spots on the California coast, though Rabins has asked him for the information.

The monthly "wild kitchen" dinners take place in candle-lit warehouses and lofts. Rabins runs his three-ring culinary circuses with real panache, whether he's in the kitchen monitoring the cooks, serving aesthetically pleasing plates of food, opening wine bottles without charging a corkage fee, or explaining to guests, most of whom are strangers to one another, what they're eating and why he's a convert to foraging. Rabins often outdoes himself; his feasts have become increasingly lavish and esoteric with dishes such as squid cooked in its own ink, braised octopus with Meyer Lemon-shiso salsa verde, and wild porcini escargot. Foraged ingredients plus kitchen savvy make for delicious and unusual food.

Even with 70 people paying \$100 for a meal, Wild Kitchen is not a big money maker, though it has a loyal following among Bay Area foodies such as Pete and Sam who live in San Francisco and forage occasionally. "We drive to Marin and steal plums," Sam said gleefully. "Our kids pick and eat sea beans right out of the water." Jessica, who lives in the city, forages in Golden Gate Park for calla lilies. "They're everywhere and they're free," she said.

Mona Sullivan works for Rabins at the Wild Kitchen dinners. She's a forager and a gleaner and aims to do both ethically. Growing up in Sacramento, she learned about foraging from her father who

gathered wild elder berries along the river and at home used them for jams and pies. Today, when Sullivan wants fruit for a Wild Kitchen desert, she posts requests on Facebook. Her basic rule, she says, is, “don't trespass on people's property.” She adds that, “We always ask the resident for permission first.”

When it comes to the ethics of foraging, or gathering as she usually calls it, Sasha Duerr is ahead of the pack. A teacher, author, clothing designer, and ecologist who grew up in Maine and in Hawaii, and who now lives in northern California, she has thought long and hard about environmental awareness, accountability, and stewardship. She's learned a great deal about nature from Native Americans who've taught her that there's absolutely no place for greed when it comes to foraging. For Duerr, respect for nature comes first. In the Bay Area, she forages for food for her family – she has a husband and two small children. She also gathers plants such as Japanese maple leaves, fennel, sour grass, fig leaves, and black walnuts that she uses to make natural dyes that turn textiles, fabrics, paper, and more into “living colors.” Her dyes and mordants – the elements that bind color to fiber – are biodegradable and non-toxic, unlike most that are artificial. What one puts *on* one's body is as important to her as what one put *in* it and she aims to bring fashion into alignment with sound foraging practices in accord with the cycles of nature and the seasons.

Duerr has taught at the California College of the Arts and the Edible School Yard in Berkeley – where kids learn to grow organic food and make healthy meals. She's the author of *The Handbook of Natural Dyes* (2010) that offers practical information for foragers and a foraging philosophy, too. Hunters, gatherers, hikers, and backpackers ought to know the landscape inside and out, she believes. They ought to learn the cultural history of the bioregion. In *The Handbook of Natural Dyes*, she urges readers to conserve tap water, gather rainwater, and use the power of the sun for dyeing. To promote eco-literacy, she suggests “take a walk,” “notice what you see,” connect to the rhythms of nature, listen to Bay Area plants and learn the stories that almost all of them have to tell.

What she wants most of all is for foragers to “participate” in the processes of the natural world and not to “interfere” with them. It's the preservation not the consumption of the natural world that she advocates in a gentle, caring way. Duerr knows, too, how difficult it can be to follow rules. On the campus of the California College of the Arts, for example, foraging is not allowed; ripe olives fall from olive trees and simply rot on the pavement in the parking lot. She's also

troubled that Pomo basket weavers such as her friend, Julia Parker are forbidden to gather materials for their baskets in Yosemite, though Parker's ancestors gathered them for hundreds if not thousands of years.

In a few California state parks, Indians are allowed to gather sedge and bear grass that are used to make baskets. Mostly, foraging is illegal for them as it is for others. So, at Prairie Creek State Park, gathering endangered five-finger ferns that are essential for basket making is against the law. Yurok Indians who have applied for permits to forage there have been turned away empty handed, though they insist that pruning the shoots at the top of the plant is an effective way to manage the landscape and ensure that five-finger ferns will survive. According to Breck Parkman, the State of California is rewriting its foraging policy for Indians, though with the current crisis in the park system he doesn't expect it to be available to the public in the near future.

Glenn Walker, a mycologist who works at Gourmet Mushrooms, Inc. – a huge commercial operation – is surrounded by mushrooms all day long. There's no end to the assembly line at Gourmet, where 18,000 pounds of mushrooms are harvest 52 weeks of the year. Their abundance and availability, however, have not deterred Walker from gathering wild mushrooms, some of them within walking distance of the immense warehouse where he keeps a close eye on humidity, room temperature and amount of light and dark. A UC Santa Cruz graduate with a degree in biology, Walker has taught college botany and dedicates himself to the preservation of the earth in the big backyard of the Bay Area. For almost all of his adult life, he's gathered mushrooms, though long ago he decided not to become a "guerrilla forager." Walker knows more than anyone that I know about psychedelic mushrooms – he's also a Grateful Dead fan – and, indeed, about every kind of mushroom. "I'm still a student and a learner," he tells me. The lessons that he's learned about foraging are sobering and even grim, though he's still hopeful and still looks forward to mushroom season.

"On foraging expeditions, I ask people to please remember that they can go to the supermarket to shop, but that chip-monks, deer, newts and other creatures *have* to forage," he told me. "They can't go to Safeway. Unfortunately, that lesson doesn't really sink in. People don't seem to get, maybe because they're so out of touch with nature."

Walker gazed at a near-by stand of trees, where, he'd explained, wild mushrooms grew. We'd talked much of the morning.

Now, it was time to go back to work inside the plant, though he had a few thoughts he wanted to express before we parted. “There used to be thick forests all over this region,” he said. “Now, it feels like there are only relic patches of woods. The forests aren’t what they used to be and foraging isn’t what it once was, either. All in all, I’m really nervous about the future of the wild mushroom.”