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## A walk on the wild side

Foraging for food in the woodland and beaches of Dorset with a real-life TV Masterchef

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Theo Langton imparts local knowledge to the group. Photograph: Neil Turner for the Guardian

I'm not an outdoor girl. As far as foraging for food goes, I'm less the wilds of Dorset, more the aisles of Waitrose. So how do I find myself eating plants picked from a wet and windy beach on the south coast? I'd like to say, as a trainee chef, it's because I'm passionate about discovering new ingredients – but that would be a lie. No, I'm here because I'm addicted to TV cookery programmes, so when the opportunity to meet a real-life Masterchef arises, I jump at it. Even though it does involve being outside. In the rain.

I have signed up to take part in a foraging day run by 2009 Masterchef winner Mat Follas. For me, Mat was one of the programme's most memorable contestants, a New Zealand-born IT manager with a passion for wild and foraged ingredients. He now runs a successful restaurant, The Wild Garlic, in Beaminster, Dorset, and this summer launched a series of foraging days, giving diners the chance to join him for a morning's exploration of the local environs, followed by lunch at the restaurant.

The day starts at 9.30am, when the group meet Mat and guide Theo, a fascinating local character whose family are all ardent foragers and also live entirely without electricity. If anyone knows about living off the land, you trust he does. Despite the rain, everyone is eager to get going.

No sooner than we've set off, Theo stops us. He points to some leaves sprouting from a grate in the road. I'm no gardener but my first guess would be weeds. Apparently not. It's hairy bittercress, an edible leaf related to mustard, which works well in salads. Clocking the worried faces, Theo stresses he's not advocating truffling in the gutters, but merely pointing out that these ingredients are on our doorstep.

After examining some ground elder in an overgrown garden (again, good in salads) we continue into the countryside. Forestry work prevents us from exploring the best mushroom-picking areas, so we focus on the hedgerows. The double act between Mat and Theo works well, with Theo explaining the traditional uses of what we spot and Mat

focusing on how he uses the ingredients in the kitchen. We discuss an endless trail of plants – I doubt I'd have the confidence to identify them all again but many stick in my mind: the silver birch tree that yields sugar, the jack-by-the-hedge seeds that taste of wasabi and the hogweed seeds that burst with cardamom flavour, which Mat uses in his chocolate brownies.

Briefly we take shelter in a copse, apparently home to an abundance of wild garlic in early spring. Wild garlic typifies what Mat loves about foraging – an ingredient that can be used in numerous ways at every stage of its life cycle: the flower petals in salads, the older leaves wrapped round meat, the bulbs roasted. Here, he also explains the ethics of foraging, encouraging us to be mindful of where we are, who owns the land and the importance of not stripping an environment. Taking just 10% of a plant is almost too much, he warns: "If it's been taken unethically then the food just won't taste good."

After a tea-and-brownie stop back at the restaurant, we head out again by van to explore the shore. The pebble beach is a forager's paradise, littered with patches of bluey-green sea kale and bushes of rock samphire. As the wind picks up, some of us (me included) retreat to the van while others continue with Theo along the coast. We pick them up at the end of their trail and head back for lunch.

On the menu today: watercress soup with red cress and quail's egg served with foraged leaves; locally sourced crayfish salad with crayfish consommé; and tangy sorrel ice-cream with apple and lavender jelly, wild raspberries and borage flowers. These days we're so used to a standard roll call of flavours when we eat out, it's a genuine surprise and pleasure to taste something you have never tried before. My day with the Masterchef has more than lived up to expectations. May many more people take a foraged leaf out of Mat's book.

*For more information visit [thewildgarlic.co.uk](http://thewildgarlic.co.uk)*

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