

Brandywine Table

Foraged Goods

A RETURN TO THE TIME-HONORED PASTIME OF SEEKING AND GATHERING EDIBLE INGREDIENTS FROM THE WILDERNESS

Alyssa Thayer

FORAGING FOR FOOD, ONCE A NECESSITY FOR survival, is now making a resurgence as a hobby. Home enthusiasts and professional chefs alike scramble each season to claim their share of these forest-found treasures. From homely dandelion greens to sought-after morels, foraged goods have become highly coveted ingredients.

“People are getting tired of packaged things. They are looking for a life that touches the soil in a different way,” says **Tim Mountz**, owner of **Happy Cat Farm** in Kennett Square. He attributes the recent rise in seed and seedling sales to people turning towards more natural, work-with-your-hands pastimes. He sees foraging as a natural extension of gardening. He laughs and says, “You’re outside pulling weeds and wonder, could I eat this?” And often, the answer is yes!

Tim found his love of all things outdoors and edible early in life. His four local grandparents, whom he describes as “people of the land,” were constantly taking advantage of the abundance all around them—elderberries, wild raspberries, wineberries, wild mint and watercress.



Tim and some friends at their secret pawpaw harvesting spot

Tim says one of his favorite parts of foraging is that short, exciting window for finding each unique flavor. “I’m one of those people who loves foods that are hard to get,” he admits. If he had to pick just two foraged favorites, he says he’d pick spring ramps and fall pawpaws. Ramps because they come up for such a short time, and pawpaws because of their abundant harvest and diversity of uses.

One of the tenets of Happy Cat Farm is education, and as



Tim Mountz, owner of Happy Cat Farm, with his wife, Amy, and daughter, Signy, at Longwood Gardens (where Amy works).

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one of Tim’s mentors once said, “Pass along a piece of our passion.” By teaching people around him to respect, celebrate and forage the land, he is honoring and sharing his *raison d’être*.

The idea of teaching came as Tim prepared for the birth of his child. He knew he needed to reduce the number of plant shows and amount of travel he was doing. But Tim also knew it would leave a void, since interacting with the public and talking about what he loves was so fulfilling for him. Around this time, someone asked if he’d lead a foraging course, and just like that ‘Foraging School’ was created.

After seeing the success of their first “school,” Tim started expanding offerings, which eventually turned into Tomato, Pizza, Bread, Polenta, Taco and Hot Sauce Schools. The pandemic has forced a mix of in-person and virtual classes, but all of them come with ingredients and seeds to allow you to “play and create,” Tim says proudly.

Foraging, in particular, can be a little intimidating. Not knowing where to start and the fear of harvesting something poisonous often

stop people before they even start. But Tim suggests starting small—get a plant ID book and enlist a knowledgeable friend or guide, and slowly but surely your confidence and repertoire will grow. Below are some tips, guidelines and recipes to get you going on your gathering journey.



Tim's daughter, Signy, with a pawpaw

Ramp Oil

Ramps are vibrant green and magnificently bold in their flavor, but the window for finding them and enjoying them is quite short. Should you be lucky enough to get your hands on some, the recipe below will help you to extend the enjoyment.



Tim's Pressed Ramp Oil:

1 bunch of ramp leaves (about 10)
1–2 C. high quality olive oil*

***Note:** Tim says it’s really up to you how much oil you use. He likes to keep his ramp oil dark green and get as much of that great ramp flavor as possible.

Once the tops are washed, put the ramps into a pot to blanch quickly in boiling water. Then move into an ice bath. This breaks up the leaves and extracts more of the juices. Let them sit for about 15 minutes.

Next, use a piece of fine cheesecloth or an old dishtowel to squeeze the ramps and let the juice drip into a bowl. Squeeze like your life depends on it!

Blend this beautiful green liquid into good quality olive oil. I blend it slowly to get the color and flavor I’m looking for.

And that’s it! Told you it’s easy.

Store in the fridge for up to a month.

This green liquid-gold can and should be used on anything savory. My favorite is what we call the “cheesy boy.” It’s a non-sauced pizza with about seven or eight different cheeses on it, plus a little garlic, black sesame seeds and a drizzle of ramp oil. It’s phenomenal!

****Note:** Another method for creating ramp oil is to use a high-powered blender to pulverize the ramp tops into the oil and then strain them with fine cheesecloth. This method can be used with spring onions as well.

Vernal Green Soup

This fresh yet creamy soup can be served warm or at room temperature. It’s perfect for early spring when we still need warming foods but have begun yearning for more freshness. It can be adapted to use whatever foraged or market-bought greens you have on hand.



Ground Rules

Here are a few simple foraging guidelines to help ensure it’s a safe, satisfying and sustainable practice.

1. Lots to Learn: Each plant, fungi or fruit has its own unique characteristics—where to find it, what to look for, look-alike species and safe handling methods. It’s better to start with a few well-researched items than to cast a wide, less certain net. Tim suggests reading up in books or local forums, signing up for classes and finding a mentor or more experienced foraging partner.

2. Get Permission: Once you start recognizing various species, you’ll find you notice them almost everywhere. From a wooded area on the side of the road to a stump in a neighbor’s yard. It’s important to have permission to be on the land and to harvest there. Tim says, “If I’m driving down the road and see a big puff-ball (mushroom) in someone’s yard, I knock on the door and ask about it.”

3. Sacred Spots: Practiced foragers often have particular places to find certain items. “If I take you to my spot, that’s sacred turf,” Tim says. That’s more of a code of conduct than a hard and fast rule, but it’s observed widely among foraging friends.

4. Split the Goods: Again, less of a rule, more of a custom, but Tim believes the best way to divide up a collection is equally. “Everyone shares what we get. If we find one mushroom and we are with three people, everyone gets a share,” he says.

5. Storing and preserving: Once you’re well-versed in the identification and harvesting process, you’ll want to find ways to preserve your bounty. Tricks like sun-drying mushrooms or blending herbs/alliums in oil and freezing help extend the short seasons.

- 4 T. butter
- 1 medium onion, diced
- 1 T. olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tsp. tarragon
- 2 tsp. ground sage
- 5 baby potatoes, quartered
- 1 C. whole milk
- 2 C. chicken broth
- 5 loose cups spring greens and alliums, washed, dried and chopped. ***See note**
- Salt and pepper to taste

***Note:** This can be a combination of whatever is available and can include ramps, arugula, sorrel dandelion, watercress, spring onion, parsley or even spinach. Aim to have a balance of pungent and neutral greens. *For example*, 1–2 cups chopped bitter/pungent greens (ramps, arugula, dandelion, chives, garlic mustard) and 3–4 cups neutral greens (parsley, watercress, kale and spinach).

To begin, melt 3 tablespoons of butter in a heavy-bottomed pot over medium-high heat. Stir or swirl the pan. Just as the butter begins to brown, turn the heat down to medium.

Add onion, sauté until soft and translucent (about 4 minutes). Add olive oil, garlic, herbs and a hearty pinch of salt and pepper. Cook for an additional minute. Add potatoes and cook (still over medium heat) for an additional few minutes.

Meanwhile, in a small pot, bring milk and stock to a simmer. Pour simmering stock mixture into the pot with potatoes and aromatics and bring back to a simmer for 10–15 minutes, or until potatoes have softened.

Add greens and simmer for 1–2 extra minutes, until they have completely wilted and softened.

Using either an immersion blender or a stand-up blender, blend until smooth. Return to pot over low heat (using extreme caution when pouring your hot soup from pot to blender). Stir in the last tablespoon of butter and an additional pinch of salt and pepper to taste. Allow flavors to meld (2 minutes). Stir in vinegar and bring back up to a simmer for 1 minute before serving.

Serve topped with croutons or toasted nuts, and a little of that ramp oil.

Serves 4–6.

Pan-seared Maitake Mushrooms Over Polenta

This dish can be made with fresh or sun-dried hen of the woods (aka maitake mushrooms). Tim says he loves drying his foraged mushrooms because they keep for so long and rehydrate so well.

Tim says this recipe is only a suggestion. “People tend to have big opinions on how to cook polenta. I think that’s one of the reasons I love it. I love food that people are so passionate about that they will stop talking to you if you say you do it a different way,” he says.



Dried Mushrooms 101

Drying Mushrooms:

Start by slicing the mushrooms into thin slices (3/4”), then put the slices in the sun on a hot sunny day (once we have those again) and it will dry pretty quickly. Once they’re completely dehydrated, store them in a brown paper bag away from humidity and direct light. If handled correctly, they can last a year or two. Bonus: The sunlight increases the vitamin D in the mushroom, making it an even bigger superfood.

Spring Spotlight

While the farm fields still lay mostly barren, out in the woods, fresh, green shoots are bursting onto the scene for their April debut. Here are a few early arrivals on the foraging scene:

Ramps: (*Allium tricoccum*; aka wild leeks) are a good beginner plant. Tim says they’re great because there are no look-alikes that also smell like onion.

Harvest sustainably: Because ramps are becoming so popular to forage, their abundance is dwindling. Help patches continue to flourish by only harvesting leaves and allowing the bulb to continue to regrow.

Tasting notes: They have a delightfully bright and pungent flavor that works well in place of garlic, leeks or spring onions. They can be grilled, sautéed or blended into a sauce or pesto.

Morels: Tim says, “They’re brown in a season that is brown,” making them tricky to find. But they have an exceptional woody, nutty flavor, which makes them culinary gold.

Where and when to find: These special fungi arrive on the scene in early to mid-April and often grow in small clusters around particular trees, such as ash and elm.

Avoid fakes: It’s important to have these mushrooms properly identified as there is a similar “false morel” that can have very adverse effects if eaten.

Fiddleheads: These are the tightly wound ferns of early spring. These natural formations have long been a part of Native American art and medicine, but only recently become a more mainstream culinary delicacy.

Types: There are two types that are edible and others that can be quite toxic. The most commonly found and eaten variety is the ostrich. These still have trace amounts of toxins, so they must be cooked for at least 5 minutes before eating.

Tasting notes: They’re fresh tasting with a crisp texture. Because of their delicate flavor profile, they’re best paired with subtle, soft herbs (mint, dill) rather than pungent alliums or hard herbs (sage, rosemary).

Prepare by boiling briefly (2 min.) before sautéing. Wash just before cooking, since moisture will cause them to spoil.

Other General Resources:

- Pennsylvania Foragers Club
- Pennsylvania Mushroom Hunters
- Wild Foodies of Philly
- Chester County Mycology Facebook page

Rehydrating Mushrooms:

There are different ways to rehydrate. If you have time, soaking them for a long time in cool water (12–24 hours) keeps their flavor at its best. If pressed for time, simply pour 2 cups of boiling water over them and wait 20–30 minutes until soft.

No matter which method you use, make sure to rinse them well and dry before use.

- 1 C. water
- 2½ C. vegetable or mushroom broth
- 1 C. polenta
- 3 T. butter (1 for polenta, 2 for mushrooms)
- ⅓–½ C. Parmesan cheese

(depending on how cheesy you like it)

- 2 T. olive oil
- 2 oz. dried mushrooms, rehydrated, dried and chopped, or about 10 oz. of fresh mushrooms, chopped
- ½ large onion, finely chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 3–4 sprigs of fresh thyme, leaves removed from stems
- 1 tsp. ground sage
- 1 tsp. arrowroot
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Optional: Maldon sea salt to finish

***Polenta Note:** Depending on the size and type of polenta/corn grits you use, cooking times can range drastically (up to 45 minutes). This recipe used Bob’s Red Mill, which is quick cooking.

In a large pot, bring water and 2 cups of broth to a boil. Whisk in polenta and a pinch of salt and pepper and reduce heat to medium-low. Continue stirring every few minutes (to keep it from sticking to the bottom) until mixture thickens.

Once thick, turn the heat down to low, and place the lid on top, allowing the mixture to absorb any additional liquid (5 minutes).

***Note:** If it thickens too much or is sticking too much, add a bit of hot water to loosen it up (a few spoonfuls at a time).

Stir in 1 tablespoon of butter and Parmesan cheese before serving.

While polenta cooks, heat a cast iron skillet or heavy frypan over medium-high heat. Add olive oil and wait for it to get hot before adding mushrooms and a generous pinch of salt and pepper. Stir once to coat and then allow to cook undisturbed for 3–4 minutes before stirring and allowing to soften and brown on another side for an additional 3–4 minutes (6–8 minutes total). Add a tablespoon of oil if the pan seems dry.

****Note:** Mushrooms need ample space to brown and soften. If the pan seems crowded or they are overlapping, cook them in batches.

Once mushrooms have released their moisture and are browning, add remaining 2 tablespoons of butter, allowing it to melt and bubble. Turn heat down to medium and add garlic, onion and herbs. Sauté until fragrant and soft (3–4 minutes).

In a small bowl, whisk arrowroot into the remaining ½ cup of broth. Pour arrowroot slurry over top of the mushroom pan, stirring as it cooks to loosen any flavorful bits from the pan. Allow water to cook out for a minute or two more, and then it will begin to thicken. Depending on whether you used salted or unsalted butter, you may want to add one additional pinch of salt to taste.

Serve in a shallow bowl with a bed of warm polenta and the sautéed mushrooms spooned over top. Tim likes to top with Maldon sea salt and a drizzle of the ramp oil.

Serves 4.

Wilted Dandelion Salad

Turns out those pesky, ubiquitous weeds all over your yard are not only edible, they’re delicious. Dandelion greens have a fresh, slightly bitter

flavor that stands up well to the sweet and savory of this dressing. Enjoy salad as-is, or top with a grilled protein or sliced hard boiled egg.



- 3 slices of bacon
- 1 shallot, thinly sliced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 3 T. apple cider vinegar
- 1 T. Dijon mustard
- 1 T. olive oil
- 2 bunches of dandelion greens, chopped, washed thoroughly and dried
- ½ C. slivered almonds
- Salt and pepper to taste

In a large frypan, render bacon over medium heat. Cook 5 minutes or so on each side, making sure it’s browned and crisp but not charred. Transfer to a plate covered in a paper towel to absorb any extra grease.

Turn heat up to medium-high and add shallots. Sauté for 1–2 minutes until softened. Turn down heat to medium-low and add garlic and a pinch of salt and pepper. Sauté until fragrant and soft, being careful the garlic doesn’t burn (1–2 minutes).

Turn heat off and add olive oil, vinegar and mustard, and whisk. Stir to combine. Add chopped dandelion greens to a large bowl and start spooning warm dressing over top a bit at a time, tossing in between. By the end, greens should be well-coated and beginning to wilt.

Chop crispy bacon into small pieces and sprinkle ovetop with slivered almonds and one more pinch of salt (I like to use flaked salt to finish) and pepper (fresh ground if you have it).

Enjoy right away.

Serves 4–6. ♦

Alyssa Thayer found her love of food at an early age, frolicking around her mother’s organic farm and eating her weight in berries and snap peas each summer. She is a self-proclaimed urban farm girl, whose mission is to bring inspired ideas to life, passionate people together, and good food to every table.



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