

# CordonVert Goes Wild!

By Christine Tilbury



Manager of the Cordon Vert School, Christine Tilbury, has been out and about, scouring hedgerows, scrublands, rocky outcrops and coastal areas to collect the abundant wild foods. Armed with a good reference book, Christine found wild garlic, sweet cicely, nettles, dandelion flowers and leaves, watercress, rosehips, samphire plus a host of wild herbs such as thyme, marjoram, chervil, fennel and water mint. When it comes to cooking your finds, it's simply a case of substituting them for similar ingredients in your favourite recipes, or adding them to recipes to give a new twist. If you feel inspired to seek out free wild foods, make sure you only pick what you can identify without a shred of doubt (see wild food notes) and equally important, don't over-pick, to make sure you have a good continuous supply and re-growth the following year. Remember too that in National Parks all picking of wild plants is prohibited. Here are some of Christine's favourites as well as some adaptations from the Cordon Vert School's extensive recipe library.



## ■ SWEET CICELY AND THYME CRUSTED LABNAH

This recipe is a particular Lebanese favourite of Christine's and is so versatile it can be flavoured with anything – try pomegranates, walnuts, sweet roasted red peppers, olives herbs and spices. It can also be served as either a dip, a topping for canapés or as sandwich fillings.

Labnah is a thick 'strained' yogurt which is so easy to make at home from plain yoghurt. But beware – ready-made labnah sold in Middle Eastern delis may contain

gelatine. This version uses milder wild thyme, so you will need to use the large amount suggested, and sweet cicely for its wonderful aniseed flavour.

- 500g pot Natural Bio-yogurt**
- 1 tbsp sweet cicely seeds or wild fennel seeds, crushed**
- 1 tbsp toasted sesame seeds**
- 4 tbsp wild fresh thyme, very finely chopped**
- 2 tsp lemon zest, finely grated, or 1 tsp sumac**
- 4 tbsp extra virgin olive oil**

To make the labnah, put the yogurt to drain in a sieve lined with muslin or a J-cloth, set over a bowl. Cover with cling film and place in fridge overnight. This will produce about 250g of labnah.

Combine the sweet cicely seeds, toasted sesame seeds, thyme and lemon zest in a bowl.

Carefully turn out the labnah onto a plate, to keep the rounded shape made by the sieve, discarding the drained liquid. Drizzle over the olive oil, and sprinkle the sweet cicely mixture over the dome-shaped labneh. You can mix the mixture together if preferred. Serve with the Wild Herb Focaccia Bread or pitta breads, crudites and wild garlic dolmades.

## ■ WILD GARLIC DOLMADES

*Makes 30 small dolmades*

This is an adaptation of Chico Francesco's recipe from our two-day workshop 'End of the Silk Road'.

- 100g bulgur wheat**
- 100ml boiling hot water**
- 60 large wild garlic leaves**
- 2ltrs boiling hot water for blanching**
- 5ml olive oil**
- 1/2 small onion, peeled and finely chopped**
- 75g grated halloumi cheese**
- 4 sun-dried tomatoes, finely chopped**
- 1 tsp cumin seeds lightly roasted**
- 1tsp finely chopped mint**
- 1tsp sumac**
- 1tsp coarse black pepper**
- Extra olive oil for drizzling**

Place the bulgur wheat into a ceramic bowl and pour over 200ml of boiling water. Cover and set aside for 30 minutes.

Blanch the wild garlic leaves in 2 ltrs of boiling water for 1 minute to soften the central stem.

Heat the olive oil and lightly sauté the onions until lightly brown. Remove from heat and add all the remaining ingredients together with the bulgur wheat, and mix well.

Depending on their size, take two or three wild garlic leaves and, with the shiny side down, lay one leaf next to the other overlapping them slightly. Straighten off the stalk ends.

Take 2 teaspoons of the mixture and place in the centre of the leaves at the stalk end. Fold over once and then tuck the sides of the leaves towards the centre as tightly as possible. Continue to roll, ensuring that the package is as tight as possible with no

breakages in the leaf parcel. Secure with a cocktail stick and pack into a steamer. Continue until all the leaves are used.

Steam for 20-25 minutes. Place on serving dish and drizzle with olive oil. Serve with Sweet Cicely Labnah.



## ■ DANDELION PETAL RISOTTO CAKES

This is a recipe for early spring next year when fresh sweet dandelion flowers are in abundance – don't be tempted to use older summer dandelion flowers as they can be very bitter.

*Serves 8*

- 200g dandelion petals**
- 3 tbsp olive oil**
- 1 small onion, peeled and finely chopped**
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed**
- 170g Arborio rice**
- 125ml dry white wine**
- 1/2 tsp salt**
- 500ml light vegetable stock – kept at a slow simmer**
- 100g Vegetalia (vegetarian parmesan substitute)**
- to taste: freshly ground black pepper**

To prepare the dandelion petals, wash the flowers under running water and shake dry. Cut off the stalk at the base of the flowers, removing and discarding all the green bits. Separate out the petals. Heat 1 tablespoon olive oil over medium heat in a large skillet. Add the onions and sauté until softened. Add garlic and rice and stir for 2 minutes. Add wine and salt and cook stirring until wine is nearly evaporated. Add half of the vegetable stock and stir frequently until stock has been absorbed. Continue this process until all the stock has been

absorbed and the rice is soft. Add the Vegetalia, dandelion petals and seasoning. Transfer to a bowl and allow to chill for half an hour.

To make the cakes, shape the chilled risotto into 8 small cakes, about 3cm in diameter. Heat 2 tablespoons oil over a high heat in a heavy skillet and when oil is hot, carefully place the cakes into skillet. Turn the heat down and brown the cakes on one side, turning over to brown the other side. Serve as a starter with salad and a tomato sauce.



## ■ WILD HERB FOCACCIA BREAD

- 1 tbs (1 sachet) Easy-Blend yeast**
- 675g strong white flour**
- 1 1/2 tsp rock salt**
- 2 tbs wild thyme, finely chopped**
- 2 tbs wild marjoram, finely chopped**
- 450ml hand-hot water**
- 3 tbs extra virgin olive oil, plus extra for greasing**
- 2 tsp sumac**
- Extra extra virgin olive oil to drizzle**

In a large bowl, mix the yeast, flour, salt, herbs and 1 tsp sumac. Stir in the oil and hand-hot water and bring the mixture to form a ball of dough. Turn the dough out onto a floured surface and wash out the bowl. Knead the dough for 10 minutes.

Place the dough back into the clean lightly oiled bowl, cover with cling film and leave to rise in a warm place until doubled in size. Preheat oven to 230°C/450°F/gas 8 and lightly grease two 37.5 x 27.5 cm baking sheets with a little oil.

Divide the dough in two and roll out to a thickness of 3cm. Leave to rise for 30-45 minutes. Drizzle over olive oil and sprinkle with remaining sumac. Bake for 10 minutes, or until cooked through.



**SWEET CICELY** Quite common on waysides and stream banks in the north of England and Scotland. Grows 4-5 feet (120 to 150cm) tall, with elegant, feathery, aniseed-scented foliage. Flowers in May to July with large umbels of white flowers, setting long seeds which are ripe when shiny black. Every part of this plant can be eaten; the thick root boiled like parsnip, the stems boiled or roasted as for celery. The leaves have distinctly sugary overtones to their mild aniseed flavour and are ideal for flavouring stewed fruits such as rhubarb, gooseberries and plums in place of sugar. In France, the young leaf sprays are dipped in batter and fried as an hors d'oeuvres. And the seeds are excellent for imparting an aniseed flavour to salads and cooked vegetable dishes. In early spring, when the leaves are emerging, the smell of aniseed will greet you before you reach the plant, making it very easy to identify.



**WILD ROSEHIPS** The wild rose, or 'dog rose', is a common shrub throughout the British Isles. It can be found in woods, hedges and scrub land. Flowering

from June to July the tiny fruits appear from late August to November. The fruits should not be picked until they have been softened by the first frost, but do not leave them past October. The seeds are covered with tiny hairs (children split open the rosehips and put them straight down other children's backs – or grind them up into itching powder!) and care should be taken to strain the cooked hips through fine muslin, as rosehip hairs are dangerous to consume. Rosehips are reputed to contain four times as much vitamin C as blackcurrant juice and twenty times as much as oranges!

**WILD GARLIC, OR RAMSONS** A native bulb, common through the British Isles in damp woods and lanes. The fresh young leaves can be used in salads, added to soups and stews as a flavouring, used instead of cabbage in 'bubble and squeak' or, as in our recipe, in place of vine leaves in dolmades. Very easy to identify, just follow your nose to locate them and if you are still unsure, pick and tear one of the leaves – ahhh – garlic!

**DANDELION LEAVES AND FLOWERS** A perennial herb, abundant through the British Isles. Can be found in pastures, meadows, lawns and waysides. The dandelion flowers profusely in April but the

leaves can be found at any time of the year. The young leaves can be eaten as a salad, but avoid the full grown leaves as they are too bitter and unpalatable. Serve as a vegetable, cooked as spinach or in a soup. The root of an established dandelion is roasted and used to make coffee which can be bought in health food shops. The flowers are edible too and can be bought in French markets under the name pissenlit.

**WILD CHERVIL** ('Cow Parsley') Widespread and abundant on footpaths, roadsides, banks etc. Umbels of tiny white flowers April to June. The plant is 2 – 4 feet (60 – 120cm) high, with hollow green, furrowed stems, hairy near the bottom of the plant but smooth above. The leaves are grass-green, slightly downy and much divided, looking very like wedge-shaped ferns. No plant shapes our roadside landscape more than wild chervil - a little coarser than the garden variety, but sharing the same fresh, spicy flavour. *Caution: There are a number of related species which resemble wild chervil, which can cause serious poisoning, the most dangerous of all are fool's parsley and hemlock, so beware.*

**MARSH SAMPHIRE** (Poor Man's Asparagus or Glasswort) Found locally on the south-east and west coasts of England, also in coastal areas of Wales, the west coasts of Scotland and the coasts of Ireland. Available during July and August at low tide, but it is often picked and sold in local markets. Roast as you would asparagus, in a little olive oil with a sprinkling of salt. Helpful hint: eat marsh samphire with your fingers, using your teeth to pull the flesh off the long, thin 'thread-like' core.

**SORREL** Smaller than the cultivated French sorrel, and generally available throughout the British Isles. Good for soups and sauces and salads. Also reputed to be used by Laplanders as a substitute for rennet in the cheese-making process!

**SALAD BURNET** Widespread and common, flowering from May-August. Leaves can be added to salads but use sparingly as they have a strong bitter flavour.

**WATERCRESS** This is a lowland plant found throughout Britain. Found in moving freshwater streams and ditches. Pick the older, sturdier plants which are tangier than the young leaves. To be on the safe side, always cook wild watercress – this kills the larvae of the liver fluke which is common in uncultivated watercress.

## WILD ROSEHIP SOUP

The Swedish are fond of picking rosehips in the autumn and use them to make nutritious vitamin-packed soups. Rosehips are also the base ingredient for a cocktail, 'Rosehip Shooter' – see recipe here.

**200g fresh rosehips**

**2½ ltr water**

**100g sugar**

**1 tsp arrowroot**

TO GARNISH:

**Toasted flaked almonds, dried edible rose petals, which can be found in sachets of Moroccan spice mix 'Ras el Hanout'**

Mash the rosehips, transfer to a saucepan and cover with water. Soak for 4 -6 hours. Using the same water, boil the rosehips for 30 minutes or until soft.

Remove the rosehips by straining through a very fine sieve lined with muslin. Retain the liquid and add extra water if necessary to bring up to 1 litre.

Bring the rosehip liquid to the boil and add the sugar, reduce heat to simmer.

Mix the arrowroot with 1 tbsp water. Gradually pour this into the gently simmering soup and stir continuously for 3 minutes – do not boil.

Garnish with edible dried rose petals and toasted flaked almonds.

## WILD ROSEHIP SHOOTER

This is a true 'fusion' recipe, using Swedish Rosehip Soup and Spanish Licor 43. This liqueur has evolved from a thousand-year-old secret formula and uses 43 basic herbal, spice and fruit ingredients – hence its name. It is a bright yellow colour with sweet citrus/vanilla flavours. The recipe for Rosehip Soup is included here, but it can be bought in Jewish delis. This is great as a warming Autumn drink, but rather extravagant as it uses nearly a whole bottle of Licor 43!

*Serves: 6 large glasses*

**1 ltr warm rosehip soup (see recipe)**

**60cl Licor 43**

**284ml double cream, optional**

Take 6 large wine glasses and divide the warmed rosehip soup between them. Pour 10cl of Licor 43 into each glass. Then, using the back of a teaspoon, just touching the shooter mixture, slowly pour the cream over the spoon so that it floats on the surface. Serve immediately.

Roaming the Greek countryside on hot summer days is not for the faint-hearted. I am enticed out under blazing skies to gather our 'food for free'. During late spring and summer in this area of Southern Greece, there is a wealth of wild plants waiting to be gathered and eaten.

First to appear is the creeping caper plant. Its spiny tendrils quickly cover the ground between the aged olive trees. I gather the buds of the plant while they are still small and pack them, layered with salt, into jars. After two months they are rinsed in water and stored in jars with either vinegar or olive oil. They are now ready to be sprinkled on pizzas, scattered in salads or added to pasta sauces.

The buds that escape being pickled blossom into bright white flowers, similar in shape to a passion flower. The flowers drop, and are followed by the fruit, which has a bright red centre and tiny black seeds. Nothing goes to waste and the fruit is sliced up and stored in vinegar. After a couple of months they are ready to eat and are delicious as an addition to any salad.

Following quickly on from caper buds is wild salsify. It springs up along the edge of olive groves where the tractor and rotavator have not reached. First we pick the buds and the shoots, while they are still young. Steamed for a few minutes and sprinkled with lemon juice, they make a delicious green side vegetable. As the mauve flowers come and go, the root is growing and can be harvested and cooked like carrots. Salsify can be grown easily in a UK garden.

As the ground cover turns golden, in the intense heat of midsummer, purslane explodes in green patches. It is difficult to grow lettuce or 'delicate' green-leaved salads in the summer, so purslane provides an essential component of summer salads. It grows prolifically, seemingly without water, during the hottest months. Rich in omega 3 acid, which allegedly lowers cholesterol in the body, it contributes an important element to our vegetarian diet. Golden Purslane (a larger leaved variety of our wild purslane) can be grown from seed in the UK.

As the summer progresses our free food moves from the ground to the trees. Untended almonds and figs can be found in abandoned villages or on remote hillside tracks. Sweet tiny black figs make excellent jam, while the larger green figs are great for drying in the sun for use later in the year.