

33 OVEN-FREE RECIPES

AUGUST 2004

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UNDER 30 MINUTES**

Gourmet

THE MAGAZINE OF GOOD LIVING



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Running wild: Above the fjords, in the mountain forests of southern Norway, abundant berry patches and mushroom circles lure summer foragers.

When I was little, I believed Norway was edible. We lived in Chicago, where anything that grew might be polluted. But in my mother's homeland, where we summered, I ground clover between my teeth, and sucked wild chamomile, and bit the resin from pine needles. When we took walks between my grandparents' house and the community's thousand-year-old church, I plucked stalks of barley from the fields and chewed the raw grains. To buy produce—with a garden and a forest to provide for us—would have been as odd as buying water.

MY GRANDFATHER CAST FISHNETS on his strawberries to keep away crows, and underneath them I gorged myself. Norwegian strawberries mature slowly, simmering in sunlight around the clock from May through July, until they taste halfway to jam. With thin skins and a pulp unlike that of commercial varieties, they are at once weightless and juicy. The only thing better is wild strawberries, which dangle among triplets of leaves and have a flowery, intoxicating perfume. My grandmother's whole-grain bread was creamy, with a crackerlike crust. Lightly buttered and paved with mashed strawberries, it is the best food I've eaten in my life. I ate of it until my entire body ached.

I took for granted the heaps of crabs my mother's uncle pulled from his traps, the homemade *saft* (plum or currant syrup blended with water), the caramelized cheese from goats that romped freely in the mountains, and the unpasteurized honey from my great-aunt Sigrid's bees. I considered these trade-offs for the potato chips, corn on the cob, and Kentucky Fried Chicken that Norway didn't have.

Then, in my twenties, I met my husband, Markham, and became a food fanatic with him. We subscribed to food magazines, spent hours preparing recipes, and grew discerning. The more we learned, the more I began to realize not only how delicious but how world-class, gourmet, and extraordinary the wild foods of Norway are. I read about chefs parceling out wild strawberries and chanterelles and glacial char as though they were precious. Once we realized the relative scarcity of our foraged summer staples, our gathering of these wild foods became more ardent and uncompromising. We now want raw milk for our café au laits, and we buy it at a farm near my mother's house. We want the farm's pale yellow butter, weeping in its parchment wrap and resembling fresh cheese. We want the amber, sun-warmed plums that ooze syrup and plop onto the grass in my mother's yard.

Hunting for food takes time. On a typical August day, our family traipses into the forest with birch baskets, sharp knives, buckets, and berry pickers. My mother leads, wearing a Mr. Bubble T-shirt, a pair of stirrup pants, and running shoes so frayed they are like Velcro for twigs and moss. She drops to one knee, claws grass and leaves aside, and severs something quickly with her reindeer-horn knife. It is a chanterelle a luscious shade of apricot. The cap looks like a tutu on a single ballerina leg, and our two-year-old, Vivian, shouts "*Kantarell!*" We scramble for the rest of the circles, concentric as splash rings and ranging in size from a fist to the forest's full circumference. In the Middle Ages, people believed that chanterelle circles were evidence of witches, but even our six-year-old, Blue,

Norwegian Wood

In an **edible landscape** like Norway's, what's for dinner may be what you just reached out and picked

BY MARGIT BISZTRAY

THE SKY, A TIE-DYE of pastels, glows although it's after 10 P.M. My mother, my husband and I, and our two children, sit around the table at my mother's country house in southern Norway, 30 miles inland from Kristiansand. Beyond the lace curtains and eight-pane windows, birch leaves flip gently in the wind, and swallows chase insects around the gooseberry bushes. Down the hill, the river turns from copper to pewter, and the mountain ridges on its far side appear blotted. Earlier today, we hiked in those mountains, picking the blueberries that now stain our dessert plates. Except for seasonings, flour, and an ice cream cake, everything we've just eaten is wild or farm-fresh. At this table, sights and tastes are one.



Salad in blossom: Nasturtium petals, the color of the ever-present Scandinavian sun, top off a mix of tender greens and roasted potatoes and beets.

knows they grow in gravelly soil, on old roads, and under heather bushes. A good patch might yield a dozen mushrooms, which we dust clean with a pastry brush and place in our basket.

We then climb up to the timberline for blueberries. Picking them reminds me of hunting for Easter eggs. My children sit on lichen-covered rocks and eat until they look like two blue-violet trolls. On the hike back down, we snip sorrel from a creek bed and snack on wild raspberries.

Driving home, we stop at a farm advertising eggs, new potatoes, and pull-your-own beets. Marta, the farmwife, fills our empty carton with caramel-colored eggs wisped with chicken down. As Blue plants his feet and tugs a wad of beet greens, Marta nods. "Beets—much work," she says. Blue looks astonished as roots pop from the soil, and as potatoes emerge between the tines of his pitchfork.

Back at my mother's house, Blue and I snip baby greens and herbs into a salad bowl. The Bibb and red-leaf lettuces, the spinach and the arugula, are barely petals, and look too fragile to have butted forth and clasped the sun's fingertips. Tossed with nasturtium, lovage, dill, chervil, and tarragon, then slicked with a simple vinaigrette, the leaves spiral and

bounce as if still growing. Cubes of roasted beets add an edge of candy, mellowed with roasted small potatoes, whose skins are thin as membranes and whose flavor is as buttery as pine nuts. After the salad, we enjoy a soup of our wild sorrel (or wild nettles or garden lovage) puréed with cooked onions, homemade stock, and fresh cream. It is delicious, stinging with earth and sun and every layer between the two.

The farm eggs we purchased have made the pasta we eat next as bright as marigolds. On top, we spoon the mushrooms, sautéed with butter, fresh cream, and Cognac. Blue says the mushrooms smell of dirt, and they do—and of rain, moss, pinecones, tree bones, and minerals I can't even name.

We've had some luck catching small trout in the river, but mostly we rely on our relatives, who have more experience and better fishing gear. The pink flesh is light and pure, and the taste is as subtle and stunning as the taste of spring water compared to tap. My cousin often dives, off the coast, for scallops, padded with orange roe, sweet as the ocean is salty.

Various uncles and aunts of mine also hunt moose, which tastes like beef, only gamier. It carries none of the stigmas of beef, since the moose lead normal, moosey lives—munching wild foods—until my relatives encircle them. Arne Brimi, Norway's famous chef, prepares his game using ingredients the animal itself would eat. Following his lead, we pair moose sirloin with a sauce of lingonberries, sautéed mushrooms, crushed juniper, and spruce shoots. It tastes of Norway's body.

We've had some mishaps with our wild-food preparations, of course. The dandelion wine we brewed was good enough for cooking but not for imbibing. The syrup we boiled from cherries tasted like tree bark. But when we fly home to the States, our fingernails blueberry purple, our suitcases heavy with honey, raspberry jam, dried porcini, pesto, and black-currant *safi*, we bring with us not only the flavors of a Norwegian summer to carry us through a long American winter but the memory of what it means to have truly eaten.

For THE DETAILS, see page 127.

BABY GREENS WITH ROASTED BEETS AND POTATOES

SERVES 6 TO 8

Active time: 40 min Start to finish: 1 ¾ hr

For sources for the specialty produce in this recipe, see Shopping List, page 127.

For vinaigrette

- 1 ½ tablespoons tarragon white-wine vinegar
- ¼ teaspoon Dijon mustard
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- ¼ cup olive oil

For salad

- 2 medium beets (1 lb with greens; 14 oz without greens), stems trimmed to 2 inches

- 1 lb small new potatoes (about 1 inch in diameter) or fingerlings (1 to 1 ½ inches long), scrubbed well
- 1 teaspoon olive oil
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 5 oz microgreens such as baby Bibb, red-leaf, and oak-leaf lettuces and baby arugula, or mesclun (about 10 cups)
- 4 cups baby spinach (3 oz)
- ⅓ cup lovage leaves, coarsely chopped
- ⅓ cup fresh chervil and/or dill leaves
- ⅓ cup fresh tarragon leaves
- 20 unsprayed organic nasturtium blossoms

Make vinaigrette:

► Whisk together vinegar, mustard, salt, and pepper. Add oil in a slow stream, whisking until emulsified.

Roast beets and potatoes:

► Put oven racks in upper and lower thirds of oven and preheat oven to 425°F. ► Wrap beets individually in foil and roast on a baking sheet in upper third of oven until tender, 1 to 1 ¼ hours. Once beets have roasted for 30 minutes, toss potatoes with oil and salt in a small baking pan and roast in lower third of oven, shaking pan occasionally, until potatoes are tender, 25 to 30 minutes. Carefully unwrap beets and cool slightly, then slip off and discard skins.

Assemble salad:

► Cut beets into ⅓-inch dice and put in a large salad bowl. Cut potatoes into ⅓-inch-thick slices and add to beets along with all greens and herbs. Add vinaigrette and toss gently to coat. ► Sprinkle blossoms on top and serve immediately.