



TRENDSPOTTING

Found Foods

Chefs and home cooks alike are renewing their passion for humanity's oldest culinary pursuit.

By Maddy Sweitzer-Lammé

DANNY CHILDS is offering pawpaws to a surprised couple in a park on an early afternoon in suburban New Jersey. “They’re like a mix between a banana and a mango,” he explains. “You just rip the skin open and eat the flesh.” He demonstrates how by slurping the tender insides and handing each person one of the peanut-shaped fruits from his basket. They take them, dubious at first, their hesitancy quickly melting away as they take a taste, emboldened by his enthusiasm.

Childs is used to this particular type of skepticism. At the restaurant where he works, he coaxes uncertain guests to open their minds and palates as they sample drinks largely made from unexpected ingredients that go beyond the whiskey sours and tequila sodas that dominate nearby menus. The 60 or so pounds of pawpaws that he’s gathered today will be processed and turned into a vinegar-based shrub, forming the base ingredient for his signature Pawpaw Pisco Sour. He’ll serve it all year at The Farm and Fisherman Tavern, an unassuming restaurant in suburban New Jersey, where Childs runs one of the most distinctive, creative bar programs in the region, inspired by foraged ingredients. (He’s also at work on a book, *Slow Drinks*, that will be published in fall 2023.)

Childs, whose interest in foraging began while he was studying ethnobotany in college, is part of a recent return to the practice. Today’s foraging movement is one driven in part by high-end restaurants like Noma and Eleven Madison Park, where diners pay hundreds of dollars to sample rare ingredients plucked from the local landscape, and increasingly—especially since the pandemic—by home cooks who are getting in on the action and driving a surge of interest in foraging through social media.

There’s no better example of the home cook-turned-forager than Alexis Nikole Nelson, a TikTok star with more than 3 million followers. Her platform (@blackforager on Instagram) quickly grew into a community of people



Foraged wild ingredients are smoked to build flavor for Danny Childs’ winter amaro. *BELOW:* Columbus, Ohio forager Alexis Nikole Nelson has become a sensation on social media.



PHOTOGRAPHY:

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Twila Cassadore, a member of the San Carlos Apache Tribe. Cassadore documents and preserves foraging traditions within Indigenous communities in the American Southwest.

obsessed with her high-energy, contagiously excited explorations of the food growing all around her in suburban Columbus, Ohio. On her profile, you'll find videos of her gathering and cracking hazelnuts to make knock-off Nutella, marinating hen-of-the-woods mushrooms to create mushroom "bacon," and turning wild onions into a free-range onion dip.

"When I started posting about foraging at the beginning of the pandemic, people just started pouring into my account," she says. "I was surprised because in the past, this was a hobby that was better at pushing people away than bringing them closer—being the kid eating food off the ground didn't exactly make me cool. But here we are."

Nelson first learned about foraging from her parents, who she says were the true revolutionaries as people of color out in nature in the 1960s. They instilled

in her a love of plants and cooking, which made her interest in foraging a natural next step. Nelson says it makes sense that the pandemic created such a fervor around foraging.

"I think it gave everyone a sense of 'I need to be able to take care of myself,'" she says. "And at the same time, everyone realized they needed to get a hobby that was outside."

But this impulse to get outside wasn't just a response to the pandemic—it's evolutionary.

"As humans, we're inherently biophilic, so we feel better when we're in nature," explains Gina Rae La Cerva, author of *Feasting Wild: In Search of the Last Untamed Food*. "For most of human history, foraging was one of the main ways humans accessed food. We've evolved to want to do it."

In her book, La Cerva explores the renewed interest that many Western

cultures have seen in foraging over the past two decades or so, offering a deeply researched and surprising exploration of the role of wild food throughout history and across the world. La Cerva also points to the monoculture system of agriculture that has largely taken over as an explanation for our renewed interest in foraging.

"When we go to the grocery store, we think we see a lot of variety because there are so many different options on the shelves," she explains. "But we rely primarily on 30 plant species, and 60% of our diets are made up of rice, wheat, potatoes, and corn. Compare this to the fact that throughout history, humans have used 30,000 different plants for food or medicine."

Among those trying to document and reintegrate foraging traditions is Twila Cassadore, a foraging educator and member of the San Carlos Apache Tribe who focuses on foraging in native communities. Through her work with the Traditional Western Apache Diet Project, Cassadore has interviewed over a hundred tribal elders, recording their knowledge of edible plants and animals across the Southwest so that it can be passed down.

"When I first started, I was like, 'Why are we not teaching this more to the community?'" Cassadore says. "In the mid-'70s and '80s, society labeled foraging as something that you only do when you're poor, so I think among the tribal community, there's a sense that we don't have to do it anymore. It's that Western colonized way of thinking that has transformed Indigenous ways of life."

Cassadore approaches foraging with just as much focus on stewardship as on consumption and encourages all foragers to think about it as a way to build a relationship with a place. "I don't think it's a trend," she says. "I think it's a dormant instinct that is waking up, and that's beautiful to see."

FIND YOUR FORAGER

EXPERTS SHARE THEIR FAVORITE FORAGING RESOURCES

READ

Alexis Nikole Nelson (@black forager on Instagram) recommends *The Forager's Harvest: A Guide to Identifying, Harvesting, and Preparing Edible Wild Plants* by Samuel Thayer as a great primer on foraging in the U.S. La Cerva's book, *Feasting Wild: In Search of the Last*

Untamed Food, is not a foraging guide but explores the practice throughout history. Read it for a roving international adventure that goes from Noma's kitchen in Copenhagen to the Congo.

JOIN

Local foraging-focused Facebook groups are an excellent way to

get dialed into what's growing in your area in real time, says Nelson. Cassadore, who collaborates with the *I-Collective*, a community of Indigenous chefs, activists, and knowledge keepers who are working to promote conversations about Indigenous food sovereignty. Subscribe to *A Gathering Basket*, their digital

cookbook series, for a multimedia exploration of Indigenous foods, traditions, and narratives.

WATCH

Watch *Gather*, a documentary about native foodways that features Twila Cassadore and native communities working to reclaim food sovereignty.