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Feed the Foundation of Your Health

Tide turns for the harvest of the sea

Seaweed is not just for sushi – top chefs are adding it to everything from pasta to sea salads, says **Sudi Piggott**

Contrary to popular belief, there is nothing exclusively Japanese about eating seaweed. Historically, seaweed has always been a part, albeit a minor one, of our diets – think Welsh laverbread or Irish carrageen pudding.

Now all manner of seaweeds and sea vegetables are making a comeback, in response not only to renewed interest in traditional wild foods and flavours, but also our increased receptiveness to seaweed's nutritional benefits.

With Japanese food being fashionable among celebrities and foodies, and nori-wrapped nigiri sushi available in supermarkets, it is no longer seen as a shockingly risqué ingredient.

As Aylie Cooke, a buyer at the hip organic store Fresh & Wild, where sales of dried sea weed and seaweed food capsules are increasing steadily, admits: "Initially, people are wary of seaweed. For most, their first contact is through sushi, hardly something most of us are going to knock up after a hard day at the office. The challenge is overcoming consumers' apprehension - about how to use seaweed at home."

One of the first chefs to use seaweed beyond the confines of oriental cuisine in the UK was Raymond Blanc of Le Manoir Aux Quat' Saisons, who rhapsodises about the flavour and texture "I love its cleanness and freshness and wonderful melting chew. If you close your eyes, you can practically feel the wind and smell the sea. It carries a sense of the sea to the table, the ultimate natural flavour-enhancer."

The French are so enamoured of seaweed that they have cultivated Japanese varieties such as wakame on lakes in the South of France as well as along the North Atlantic coast.

Breton-born Pascal Proyart, of the fish restaurant One-O-One in Knightsbridge, was brought up on a culture of seaweed eating (*pain aux algues* made with dulse boiled with kelp is a Breton speciality) and uses it extensively in his cooking:

"The incredible sea fresh flavour is a bit like oyster and probably more acceptable to the tentatively adventurous diner."

**'I LOVE SEAWEED'S
CLEANNESS AND
FRESHNESS - ITS
WONDERFUL
MELTING CHEW'**

Proyart uses sea lettuce as well as salicornia or marsh samphire (which resembles wild asparagus and is found along the East Anglian coast) in an inventive variation of tartare sauce. He's also a

fan of *haricot de mer*, a long brown seaweed that looks rather like a French bean.



SEA FOOD PLATTER

- Dulse is the best introduction for seaweed novices. Dried dulse has a delicate taste and needs a little soaking before use; it is good when chopped finely and sprinkled over salads or soups. Dulse butter is good accompaniment to fish.
- Nori is tissue-thin Japanese laver, perfect for wrapping fish or as a garnish.
- Wakame is green, frilly, fronded seaweed popular in Japan. It is often used shredded in salads, soups or in stir fries.
- Kombu is a tender, mild Japanese kelp that needs soaking to soften before use in stocks, soups and sauces.
- Sea lettuce is a delicate, mild-flavoured, glittering green seaweed, mostly harvested in Brittany. Wash well and use in salads or as a wrapping for fish

DARREL GULIN

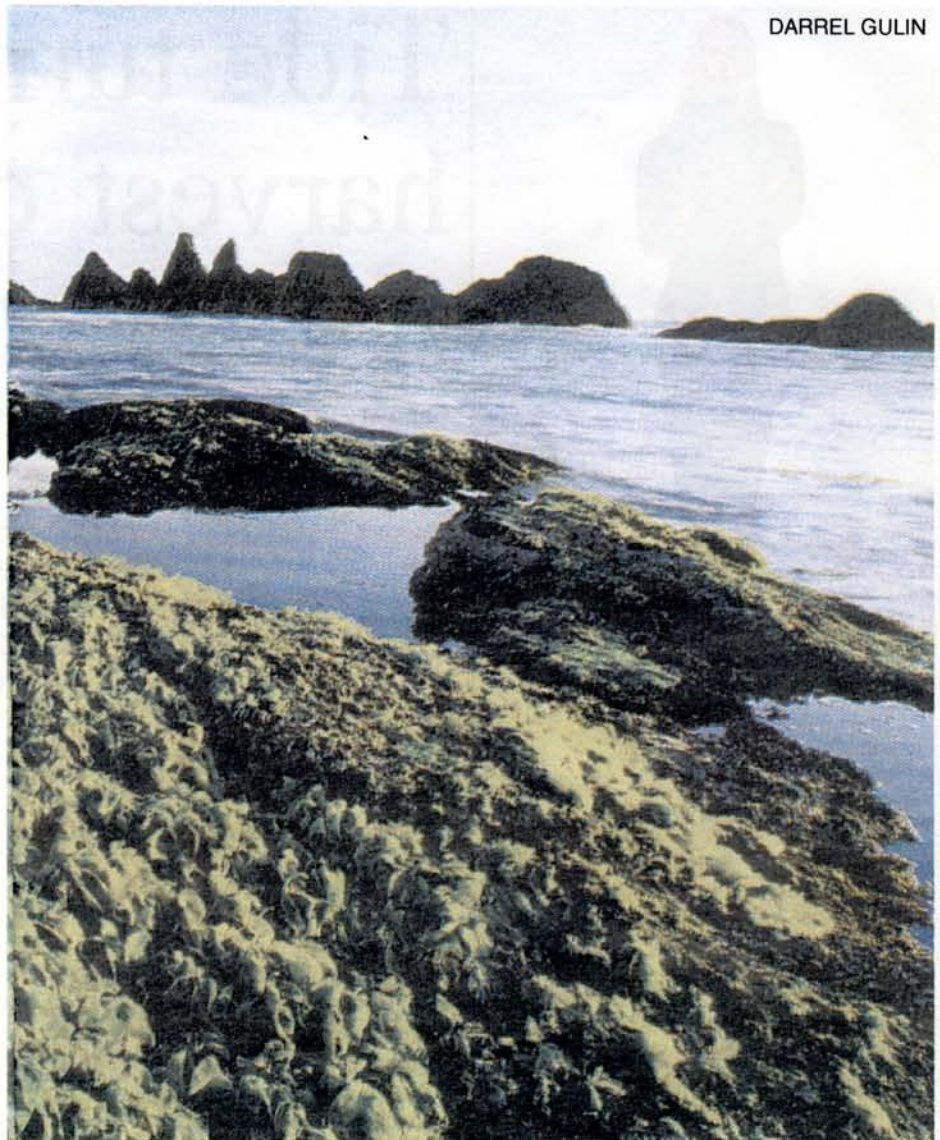
Simon Rogan, of L'Enclume in Cartmel, Cumbria, a chef to watch, serves an iodine-rich seaweed bread – a well-matched salty-sweet accompaniment to dishes such as oyster in artichoke aspic with beetroot jelly and a shot glass of creamy Reblochon cheese. Even The Ritz, that bastion of tradition, is to introduce seaweed to its menu. The new Breton chef Dominique Blais promises seaweed pasta and seaweed vinaigrette and, inspired by a recent visit to the South of France, is experimenting with light, crispy wisps of seaweed tempura as a novel garnish to fish dishes.

It's not only French chefs who are using seaweed and sea vegetables more adventurously. Antonio Carluccio is evangelical about wild ingredients such as tender sea kale shoots, which grow rampantly around British shores in spring. He recommends blanching the broccoli-like tops and eating them with melted butter and Parmesan, or with garlic and chilli oil. Importers of dried Japanese seaweed such as Clearspring are seeing sales flourish, reflecting the increasing integration of seaweed into different cuisines.

Clearspring's most popular variety is the delicately flavoured reddish-purple dulse. Dulse also grows wild in Ireland, where it is added to mashed potatoes to make dulse "champ". However, Peter Bradford, Clearspring's spokesman, has great hopes for a new mixed sea vegetable salad incorporating dulse, nori and sea lettuce, which, when soaked in cold water, becomes a fetching red, green and yellow colour with a clean taste of the sea. Tasting apart, it is good nutritional value, as Leslie Kenton states in her book on uncooked foods *The New Raw Energy*: "Seaweed is the most nutritious form of vegetation ... it contains almost the whole alphabet of nutrients."

Seaweed contains higher levels of iodine than fish. Iodine is needed for the thyroid gland to function properly; without it, the body's metabolism slows. It is one of the best completely natural sources available for a range of important minerals including iron (helpful in formation of red blood cells); zinc (a powerful antioxidant); potassium (useful in keeping blood pressure under control), and magnesium (essential for healthy muscle and nerve functioning). The only problem is the level of sodium, but rinsing fresh seaweed under running water for a couple of minutes gets rid of surplus salt.

Besides its mineral wealth, seaweed is an excellent source of protein,



particularly for vegetarians, and an effective detoxifier.

Seagreens, Britain's first organic seaweed producer, uses only wild Arctic wrack harvested from the coast of Norway, which is available in granules to sprinkle on food (the taste has been compared to a nutty salad ingredient such as avocado) and used in cooking, in broccoli soup, for example. Seagreens also sells seaweed "food capsules" to help "replace the nutrients missing from everyday food". The company is working with bakers to reduce the salt content of bread by using wrack as a salt replacement.

Oyamada Yasuta, a consultant chef at the newly opened Viktor, a modern Japanese/Latin American restaurant with branches in St Petersburg and New York, reports that in Japan and Russia seaweed is eaten by children as a healthy snack alternative to crisps. Not so fanciful – my eight-year-old vegetarian son was

instantly – converted to Clearspring's "slightly spicy and delicious" toasted nori snacks – nori sheets dipped in soya sauce, gently toasted until crisp and cut into bite-size strips.

LIVING COSTS

You can buy dried seaweed in health food shops or from specialist Japanese suppliers, or you can forage for your own along the British Shoreline. Hunt away from polluted areas and wash the seaweed well.

- Look near the high-tide areas for sea lettuce. It is found all year around but is most succulent in spring.
- Pick sea beet between May and December. It has green, fleshy laurel-shaped leaves. Cook as spinach.
- Dulse has dark red fronds and grows from spring to autumn on rocks on the middle shore between the tides.
- Samphire is best in July and August and is found on sandy mud in salt marshes on the southeast and west coast of Scotland and Ireland.
- Martin Catt runs foraging courses in South Devon. For details email martin.catt@btinternet.com

SEAWEED IS A SOURCE OF PROTEIN FOR VEGETARIANS AND A DETOXIFIER