

Paul Kirtley's Blog

Wilderness Bushcraft • Survival Skills • Outdoor Life

This the Paul Kirtley Podcast, Episode #15. The Paul Kirtley Podcast, Wilderness Bushcraft, Survival Skills and Outdoor Life.

Paul: Welcome, welcome to Episode #15 of the Paul Kirtley Podcast. My guest today is forager John Rensten. John lives and works in London and having opened a successful London gastro pub with a friend back in 2004. John combined his love of wild food with this business, progressively adding wild foods to the menu. Since then John has concentrated even more on wild foods, in particular focusing on showing other Londoners what can be foraged right under their noses or as John would have it, hiding in plain sight.

John's Forage London website has many articles and recipes, as well as some videos about foraging in the city. John runs foraging walks in London, as well as fungi forays in Hampshire. I caught up with John in London to talk about foraging in the city and learning tree and plant identification in urban spaces, somewhere that many people might at first think is quite an unlikely venue to be learning about trees and plants or indeed foraging.

So I'm going to start with John. John Rensten, in the park in London in Victoria Park. It's a nice, sunny spring day and it's been remarkably warm so far today and I think we're going to get cold sitting here.

John: Probably.

Paul: The wind is a little cold. So yeah, you know this park probably better than me. John, you do some foraging walks, so you have done some foraging walks here.

John: Yeah, I've run quite a few different events here for the last three years.

Paul: That's probably surprising to some people that you could run a foraging walk in a London park. What sort of things are you finding here? Are they exotic things that are being planted or are they just your common old garden stuff that you're going to find all over the UK or both?

John: Well, I like to divide the things that are foraged for into two or three groups, especially in an urban environment. You've got wild plants that don't care that we're in a city. They don't care about the amount of concrete that is around, and they're robust, militant, hardy plants and they're going to grow anywhere. They don't need looking after. They don't need heading or pruning or watering or anything, and they're just going to thrive. And there's hundreds of species of those, really, really do well in the city because it's a microclimate because it's a little bit warmer than the rest of the country. So not only are their growing seasons often advanced of the rest of the country they're often a lot longer.

And then there's the other group, the main group which I call the unintentionally edible plants. So that's like here we're looking at an avenue of trees. We've got some cherry trees. We've got some common lime trees. Things that have been introduced by either Victorian Park planners or latter day park planners that happened to have interesting edible along with this oasis. Then third group would be feral plants we'd be looking at. Is that a Wild Rocket or is that a garden escapee? It's not particularly relevant in foraging terms, just so long as you can be happy with your identification. It's Rocket. It's tasty and it's edible. You don't really need to start getting involved in what species it is and whether it's a wild plant or whether it's escaped from somebody's garden.

So if you take those three groups then a park like this, I would assume 200-250 different edible or medicinal species that we could come across. If you really wanted to drill down into it and try and catalog it all, then yeah, an awful lot in most London parks, to be honest. I was really surprised when I started turning my green vision, as it were, on the city. Because I'd done a lot of foraging for mushrooms in the New Forest, and I'd done coastal foraging. I'm a frustrated city dweller trying to escape the city all the time, and I thought I'd start looking at the parks, as a possible way to start running some urban foraging events.

And really when I actually went over to my local park, Glassell Park...it's near Newton...the first time to look at it in that way I was just stunned, really by how much stuff I'd not seen because I'd not been looking. I'd not been looking in the right way. So yeah, in answer to your question, I would say we would find a hell of a lot of stuff.

Paul: And so the people that come on your walks are they surprised? Clearly they're interested in foraging to start off with. Are they surprised at the diversity of species that you can show them?

John: Yeah, I think generally people are quite shocked. I'm not looking to plug my book, but if I were ever to write another one, it would be called Hiding in Plain Sight because I think that sums up what's going on with edible, forageable species of plants in London. We're very busy aren't we, in London? We're doing London things. We're on the way to different places. We're constantly in a rush, and if you just slow down for a second, and just look at street trees, just look at the trees that are growing on your street. If you live in London you'll be shocked. I leave my house and I have got Cherry Plum trees. I've got Hawthorne trees. I've got pear trees. I've got Cockspur trees. I can plot my walk with all these trees and they've all got edible fruit.

It's not necessarily that you'd want to be eating from a busy London street, but just to demonstrate that they grow very well here. In a park in London, such a lot of variety. So yeah, people are generally really very surprised. Like I ran a walk in January and it was bitterly cold, and I think we came up with about 25-30 different varieties of wild salads and different edible greens, and things like that, and that's January. That's like the least favorable time of year that you'd expect, really.

Paul: Indeed.

John: So yeah, there's always absolutely tons to look at. I consider London to be, in terms of learning about foraging, most definitely the best place in the country which sounds like a bit of a bizarre claim. But because there's such a diversity of species and because of that microclimate, and because there's such a lot crammed in, it's boundless really. I've learned far more about nature, about botany, about all of the topics that dovetail into foraging from the one square mile of Glassell Park than I have from the rest of the country put together.

Paul: It's interesting. When I was first becoming involved in bushcraft as a student, really I was doing some courses. I was already quite an avid outdoorsperson and I was living in North London, up near Bounds Green, and I was also a frustrated...I'd grew up in the country so I never lived in a town, until I went to university and then I moved down to London, and I used to go to the park at Alexandra Palace. I grew up in the country and I knew the trees there were. I lived in North Wales for a bit and I lived in the North of England, so I knew a lot of the trees that just occur in the countryside. But then when I started going to the park and tried to identify what was in the park, I learnt so much more. Because you not only get trees from all over the country in one place, but you get introduced to things that were a bit weird, and it was just really, really good to expand the knowledge and you can do so in a concentrated way. You don't have to go very far and you've got another species to look at, and another species to look at, and another species.

John: Exactly. An area like Springfield Park's got amazing different tree planting in it. There's a chap called Russell Miller who's an arboriculturalist, who's written a really good, little pamphlet cum book, of about 80 different species of the trees in Springfield Park. So you can walk around and you can identify them really easily and most of those have got edible or medicinal uses to them. In an area like Tower Hamlets, Tower Hamlet Cemetery Park, which is a nature reserve, it's the most diverse square mile of the country I've ever come across. It's got hundreds and hundreds of different species of wild plants and trees growing there, really amazing.

So yeah, it's a really concentrated learning experience in London. Maybe not...how could I put it? If I'm in the countryside and I'm spending time in the countryside, I'm in a permanent state of foraging and my fridge fills up with food. It's not that I go looking for it. I'm constantly coming across things that I would pick reasonable quantities of. But when I'm in the city I tend to do a lot more nibbling, maybe informed grazing, rather than turning anything into staple food source.

Paul: And that's presumably because there isn't so much of it. While you've got a lot of examples of different things, there aren't necessarily...you mentioned cherry trees and lime trees. There are some here, but if everybody started picking the leaves off them, they'd be denuded, wouldn't they?

John: Yeah, I think with the lime trees, I think if you, and me, and all our friends decided that we wanted nothing more than to eat all leaves of all the Common Lime trees that we could come across, I don't think there's anything that we could possibly do to them. Because they're such vast trees, and we'd never really get up into the canopy. I see from time to time people damaging Cherry trees, but I never even really pick cherries in London. I leave them for the birds. I think the crop there is the cherry blossom, really which is infinitely better and more reliable. It's a really nice, wild crop. You can do lots of things with it. You can make syrups and sauces. You can just eat the blossoms. But yeah, I tend to move around a lot.

I tend not to use one spot as a place to forage all the time. So I would where I tippy up here by this river up there. I might pick a few plants, but if I found a nice, big patch of wild spinach or one of those varieties, I wouldn't be picking from it every day. I wouldn't turn everything into my staple. It's important for people to do a bit of research about the history of the area that they're foraging in. I think a lot of the London parks are great because they're historically documented greenspaces, since before the Industrial Revolution. But also conversely there's areas like, say Hackney Marshes, that I know people go

foraging on which is only a thin layer of topsoil, and then it's lots of bomb rubble underneath. So I think people need to do careful research into where they're going to go foraging.

Paul: True and there's a lot of brown field sites that get taken over by greenery quite quickly. So yeah, and places that were bombed. Down not far from here at Shortage Park, that was terraced houses and a lot of it was bombed in the war and then it got turned over to being a park. Not far from here at Stronach [SP] Park, that was terraced houses, and a lot of it was bombed in the war, and then it got turned over to being a park. So yeah, you think that there have always been greenspace...

John: Well, there's another one of the parks down in the East End that used to be the site of a bomb factory.

Paul: Right.

John: And I've got no idea what goes into making bombs, but I'm sure it's not good. I'm sure it's not what you want leaching into the root systems of plants that you're going to nibble on.

Paul: Right. I see people foraging along canals in particular in London and they're often slightly older, middle-aged Eastern European women, and Chinese, I see a lot. I don't see so many...I don't know how to say this without sounding a bit stereotypical, but your typical 30-old-year Londoner who's got a job who's come from outside London, it seems to be people from further afield that are more naturally foraging for stuff in London.

John: Well, I think culturally we're a bit of a terrified nation, aren't we? We're fungi-phobic.

Paul: Absolutely, yeah.

John: Most of the Eastern European and European countries have grown up with a foraging culture. They've grown up with a foraging culture. We've got a bit of a knowledge gap here, really. I often suggest to people if they want to learn about foraging, go and ask your Nan. Go and ask somebody who was alive in the UK during the Second World War, where they would have been going out and doing a lot of foraging, maybe using Rose Hips as a good source of Vitamin C. There's a plethora of different things that they would have been foraging for. But we've got to this point where we're quite disconnected from our food and from its sources, and I think for a lot of people the idea of actually foraging for your food is a really alien concept. Which is something quite

strange considering this is the way that mankind has always existed until relatively recently.

Paul: Yeah, within a blink of an eye in terms of the history of the species.

John: The Polish people, the Czech people, Latvian people, they've still got that culture of foraging and they've come to live in the UK, and they brought it with them. I meet people in the woods in Hampshire from time to time, and rather than it being these mythical gangs of Eastern European...

Paul: Yeah, I've never seen one of them.

John: No, nor have I and I spend a lot of time in the woods in the autumn, and I've never ever seen these reported mythical gangs of commercial foragers, rapping the woods of its fungi. What I do come across is the occasional family group. I met two lovely Latvian families who were out foraging together for mushrooms, and we chatted, and they showed me a couple of species that they said were edible, and I said were poisonous. I think it's different degrees of received wisdom, really isn't it? I grew up in a middle class city and I've never had to forage for mushrooms, because if I didn't I wouldn't eat. I'm sure if I'd grown up in a very forested community and I'd been very poor there'd be a lot more things that would be considered to be edible.

Paul: Well, I think that's true, isn't it historically if you look at peasant foods, and at what people forage? I mean comfrey was one of the ones that was on the list and that's not really something you want to be consuming a lot of these days in terms of what it does to your liver. People used to make teas out of ragwort, and that's not particularly good for you, either. So yeah, I think there are a lot of things that have been used that are not going to kill you straightaway. But if you consume them over time they're not going to do you any good. So it's possibly the same as some of the fungi.

John: There's definitely cultural differences, and there's one big group of mushrooms, most of which I don't forage for Russulas or a few of them. But I've met people and they say, "No, we pick all of them, including one that's called the Sickener" and they pick that, and they boil the hell out of them and they detoxify them, and eat them. What the nutritional value of these afterwards is, I don't know. But just different bits of received wisdom.

Yeah, most of the people who come on my walks are A: Female, and B: Thirty to forty and interested in what they can eat, and how it will benefit them in a nutritional way and some people are interested in the medicinal properties of things which I touch on. But I'm not a qualified herbalist, so I look more at the

ways that I've used herbal first aid, and I've used plants myself. But then I get a friend of mine whose a herbalist, and a researcher at Q who runs some walks for me, that have got a more herbalism/foraging bent to them.

But it'd be very easy to go off on a tangent, and talk about things like that when I don't have enough of a solid knowledge base. A topic like foraging, it dovetails into so many other topics, I can't see I'll ever become an expert at anything because it's which avenue do you wander down? Foraging could be taking your towards horticulture or permaculture, or you could be looking at cookery or you could be looking at very high-end cookery or you could be just looking at sustaining yourself or it could be herbal medicine. It goes off in such a lot of different directions, really.

Paul: You talk about high-end cookery. There has been a trend, hasn't there maybe in the last 10-15 years, maybe even just 10 years...

John: For sure.

Paul: ...of high-end restaurants in London? HIX being a prime example, but there are others as well pulling in foraged foods, and also I think that goes hand in hand with this concept of people wanting to know the origin of which herd, which field did your steak come from and those sorts of things? That provenance idea is quite important now as well, isn't it which feeds into all of that?

John: Well, I think with the catering colleges there's a provenance module now on their courses, which is really good because that dovetails into foraging, as well. It would be good with regards to chefs having an idea of not only where their foods going to be sourced from, but also getting involved in actually picking some of the plants, and identifying things themselves. To be honest, when you look at Noma where apparently the chefs are all, when they're not in the kitchen, they're all out foraging.

Paul: Are they?

John: Apparently so, but all the chefs that I've met and worked with, they do seven-hour shifts. They do sometimes two seven-hour shifts back-to-back and they do six or seven shifts a week, and the last thing that they're likely to be doing when they're not in the kitchen is going out foraging for ingredients. So I'm not saying they're not enthusiastic about the concepts of foraging, but I think there's a degree of mythology being woven around that.

Paul: Yeah, and for people that don't know Noma, can you explain?

John: Yeah, Noma is a restaurant, is it Copenhagen?

Paul: Copenhagen, yeah.

John: Yeah, it's at the forefront of high-end gastronomy with locally sourced, traditional, and foraged ingredients, and it's a restaurant, I think it's a trade magazine, I think it's just called Restaurant Magazine. It basically has a survey each year and Noma won its Best Restaurant on the entire planet, for four or five years running. Yeah, it's extremely well thought of.

Paul: It's on the Docks in Copenhagen. I've actually been a long time ago.

John: Have you? Lucky you.

Paul: Previous of working life, before I jumped career completely and I was on business in Copenhagen and somebody took us there, and I wasn't aware of...I think it was not long after it being going really. It was at least ten years ago, but yeah, the food was excellent and we had this seven-course, taste the menu with reindeer fillets, and all sorts of fungi, and stuff. When you've got a little bit of reindeer fillet, it was served on this wooden board with a little, traditional Scandinavian saw-me knife for you to cut it with. All very, very well done, very good wine, yeah, but it's down in the Docks. It's on Canary Wharf is where it is. So I can't imagine there's a huge amount of foraging in the immediate vicinity of the restaurant.

John: No, you would have thought not, and you can't get a table there now probably anyway can you?

Paul: Probably not, no.

John: I like what they're doing because rather than using wild foods in a very complex way they're creating high-end gastronomy, but they're using the ingredients in a way that they should do, which is they're not really interfering with them, and they're allowing them to be what they are, which is strong-tasting and interesting ingredients to cook with. I see sometimes people jumping on the wild food bandwagon as it were, because I suppose think of hunting and gathering, and collecting your own food as trendy. It's a bit nonsensical, but it's definitely a bit of a fad at the moment within the restaurants. But sometimes the way that they're choosing to use the ingredients isn't particularly inspiring.

Paul: Well, they're trying to just...do you mean they're trying to shoehorn into traditional recipes that would use something else or they're just putting it on the menu because they feel like they should?

John: Yeah, absolutely definitely putting it on the menu because they feel like they should, but not really having an understanding of how to necessarily cook with them. You've got to know how to cook with an ingredient, haven't you?

Paul: Yes.

John: In the things that I cook, I tend to try and keep them as simplistic as possible. When I'm running mushroom hunting courses down in Hampshire and people are saying, "Well, what's the best way to cook them?" I'm just like, "Fry them. It's the simplest route from picking it to getting it in your mouth without interfering with the flavor of something that tastes absolutely amazing." I tend to fry the hell out of my mushrooms, anyway. I cook them in the reverse way that chefs recommend. Chefs are always about, "Don't add salt too soon because you don't want to dry the mushroom out." But I do want to dry the mushroom out because I want to really...

Paul: Intense flavor.

John: ...yeah, a really intense flavor, yeah.

Paul: Yeah, that's good. So let's backtrack. How did you get into this food? You said you're in London. You're sort of a frustrated person who wanted to spend in greenspaces. Is that what was the primary motivation or was there something else that led you to be interested in foraging?

John: I started foraging because I met my girlfriend, now wife, and we were doing lots of London things and we were hanging out, and going to parties, and we decided we'd go to the countryside for a weekend together to see if we actually liked each other. We went to the New Forest where she grew up and I didn't think she was a country girl. She worked at a fashion company and we were walking along, and she started pointing out edible and poisonous mushrooms and I was really shocked. I thought that's really cool to be able to do that. So I suppose she got me into foraging. I got her into photography. My photography career is now on its knees and she's now a very successful photographic artist. My foraging's going pretty well, but that got me into it.

So for a years I just was mushroom hunting and looking a little bit at coastal foraging, and then I had a bit of an epiphany and realized I should start joining the dots, and looking at all the other things. And so then I started doing a lot

more plant foraging and looking at which trees I could look at, and then I started looking at urban foraging. So it's going in waves and I'm not quite sure what the next one will be. I'm starting to look more at different seaweed species now and I figure with 2000-miles of coastline in the UK, and 700 species of seaweed on our shores, there's an awful lot to explore. I'm sure there's some stuff there that's not been researched in culinary terms very much, certainly not in the UK.

I did also 2004, I opened a pub. I opened a kind of a gastro-pub with a friend of mine in Clerkenwell. And what we planned to do was open a little bar with table football and bottled beers, and we got a bit carried away and before I knew it we'd signed a 25-year lease on a 4-story Georgian townhouse...

Paul: Oh, my goodness.

John: ...and we were opening a gastro-pub. Which I knew not a thing about, and as it transpired, I hated it.

Paul: Right.

John: I hated having a pub.

Paul: What did you hate about it?

John: Like a normal, not particularly stressful Monday morning would be the head chef's disappeared. The second chef's gone a bender all weekend, and he's in a complete state. We've had two noise complaints at the weekend. None of the deliveries turned up and the basement's backed up with raw sewage. That would be like a normal Monday. So I used to say to my business partner things like, "I've got to go to Devon to pick wild garlic, so we can have wild garlic mash," and he would go, "Off you go then."

He's still got the pub, The Green in Clerkenwell, and a lovely lad he is, too. And yeah, he allowed me to basically just run away from the business under the vague pretense that we needed foraged ingredients. So I started sourcing some stuff for the pub as well, just bits and pieces, really. Like Sea beets and wild garlic and Sorrel and simple, but tasty ingredients. Yeah, so I've come into my foraging in various different waves, and I imagine that it will develop. There's always something new to learn. There's always more to discover.

Paul: Indeed, indeed. So you mentioned your book, and you said you didn't really want to plug it, but I think it's worth mentioning it. I've seen a couple of illustrations that you posted, some photos of on Facebook a while ago, and they

looked absolutely stunning, so quite traditional in a way. They're not photos, although they're really nice illustrations. Can you tell us about the concept to the book and what you're trying to achieve there?

John: Well, I got approached by a publishing agent who's an American lady who lives in London, and she's having a bit of a love affair with London. She's discovering the city and she read my blog, and she read me writing about the joys of foraging in London. Then she approached me and said did I want to write a book, and I said, "No, I don't" because I didn't want to write a book. Because it just represented lots of time in front of the computer which is the last thing that I wanted to do. I'd got my computer time down to about an hour a day and I didn't want to take it back up. So I said no and being a bit argumentative or contrary I said, "No, but if I did, it wouldn't be a foraging guide anyway" because there's a few excellent foraging guides out there. There's a lot of really lousy ones.

Paul: What would you recommend as good ones for people, to go off on a tangent?

John: It depends where you are and what you want to look at. Something that breaks things down into seasons is always handy. If people had never looked at the concept of wild food foraging, there's a little book that was the first foraging book I was ever given, and I don't know this guy. But there's a chap out there called Neil Fletcher and he definitely owes me a pint because I'm always recommending his book to people. It's called Easy Wild Food and what I like about it is, it breaks everything down into seasons. It doesn't try and do too much too soon. It's got a little bit of fungi, a little bit of looking at trees, a little bit of seaweeds, a little bit of wild herbaceous plants, and what's really nice about it is, it's got not just photos.

It's got illustrations and I think good illustrations are a lot more useful than a photograph. You look at a photograph, you tend to basically go that's it. That's a fact, and plants don't do that and they don't stay in one way. So they change an awful lot, so if you look at a good illustration, it gives you the key characteristics of what you're looking and it gives you a better ability to recognize it in different stages of its growth. So anyway, yeah, so Easy Wild Food by Neil Fletcher is a good, little book, but I'm not plugging my book, am I?

Paul: No, no, do plug your book, but I think it's useful for people that are new to the subject if we make recommendations or if you make recommendations.

John: Yeah, for sure.

Paul: Because I think one of the things and we can come onto this is people you said were kind of fungi-phobic as a nation, and that's certainly true. But I think also because we've lost that connection, maybe that our grandparents had with foraging, and certainly the Second World War generation, the pre-war generation, people are actually frightened that they've got their identification right and they're frightened of trying stuff, even. I know I've got students who I've shown them plants and they say, "Well, yeah, I've seen this before, but I've never had the courage to try it," and that's certainly the case. So I think there does need to be more education there for people to get over that phobia.

John: It's where you place your trust, isn't it? You get on an airplane and you're placing all sorts of different bits of trust in different bits of technology and people, and it seems to be quite a feasible thing to do, so long as you get reasonably food or you get a good film to watch. I think with the food that we eat, there's so many levels of trust that shouldn't necessarily be there. With wild food, generally speaking, if you can forage sensibly, if you can make sure you know the history of the area that you're foraging in, and you can be comfortable in your ID, you're going to be eating food that's healthy, food that's nutritionally rich, food that's not been subjected to packaging, and plastics. Food that's not been bred to travel well. Food that's not had all of its nutrients, and vitamins, and minerals replaced with carbs. There's a lot of reasons. I don't want to get on my soapbox, but there's a lot of reasons...

Paul: We will get the soapbox out in a minute.

John: ...to eat wild food, and it's understandable for people to be cautious. Because it's become an alien concept to put more trust in a supermarket than it is in your mate or your instructor or whoever it might be who says, "That is safe to eat."

Paul: Or yourself. It's odd, isn't it, that people will put more trust in a supermarket than they'll put in themselves for recognizing something. It needs to have a label on it...

John: Yeah, completely.

Paul: ...before you trust what it is.

John: I said though, I don't eat wild mushrooms, if they're on a menu in a restaurant.

Paul: Actually I'm the same.

John: Because I want to know what...they're either A: Not really wild mushrooms. They have just been described as that or if they are wild mushrooms, I want to know what wild mushrooms they are because you can't do mushroom ID once the bloody things have cooked. So I've been asked to do that before. I've been there. I've been asked to identify things that have been cooked.

Paul: Anyway so I took you off on a tangent there, your book. So you were approached by this...

John: Oh, yeah. So I was approached by this agent. She said would I write a book and I said, "No, don't want to, but if I did it would be not a foraging guide. It would be a diary about it." Because the year's irrelevant in foraging terms. It's cyclical. The whole thing is going round constantly. As one thing's going out, another thing's coming in. So there's never an end to it. So what I wrote was a diary of 12 months, but it could start at any point. It wouldn't matter really where you began with it and I wrote 60 short essays with 60 recipes, so pretty much 5 for each month of the year. Because my previous job was as a photographer, it seemed sensible that we'd use my photos to go in the book.

But then we had to discussion about whether it would be nicer to use illustration or not, and I thought it's be brilliant for me, especially having created lots of photographic commissions to be on the other end of it, to be actually overseeing somebody else's work. So I got to work with an illustrator and discuss with her what we wanted in the pictures and then my friend Jason, who's the far bigger botanical nerd than I am, was able to oversee the botany of it, to make sure everything was completely accurate. So yeah, we've ended up with a book, The Edible City which is coming out in September.

Paul: And the publisher is?

John: MacMillan.

Paul: MacMillan, okay.

John: It should be a nice book. That was my main thing about when Summer, the agent, she got a chapter from me and an introduction. She took it around, and she got four different offers, which was really good.

Paul: That's really good.

John: Yeah, and I didn't have to do any of that kind of work, which was very nice. But the main thing was to make sure that we created a nice book because I didn't particularly mind whether I produced a book or not. But I was concerned that if I did produce a book that it was going to be a nice thing. So it's going to be a proper book with a hardcover and 64-page illustrations. I'm hoping it's going to be a thing of beauty, really.

Paul: Yeah. Well, judging by the snippets of illustrations that I've seen so far that you've posted, it does bode well. It looks very pretty. They're very nice illustrations. Was the illustrator a botanical illustrator?

John: No, she's a commercial illustrator with a bit of an interest in the topic, and I think it's been quite a steep learning curve for her. Because if she's illustrating a book about fairy tales there's nobody picking her up going...

Paul: There's artistic license allowed there.

John: ..."Actually that buckle on that shoe wouldn't have been like that." So with this she's had to be very specific. We've tried to keep the drawings, the illustrations traditional and contemporary at the same time. I don't want them to look like faded Victorian watercolors, but to the same extent, I want them to look like botanical illustrations. But I don't want them to be too overly detailed, but yeah, they're really nice. I'm hoping it's going to be a really usable book, but like most things, it needs backing up with other books. If you're going to do plant ID you should really use two or three books, and you should use one of them that is specifically about identifying plants. Not just one like mine which is an essay about me wandering around Victoria Park, with my son in the freezing cold, and managing to pick some garlic mustard, and then a little recipe, and a bit of plant ID. It really needs to be backed up by some other ones, as well.

Paul: No, and I'd completely agree, and you do see that. Miles Irving's foraging book, for example, people have often said to me, "It's no good because you can't identify the plants." I said, "Well, it's not meant to do that. That's not the point of the book."

John: I think Miles' book actually is good for plant ID. But you already have to have a certain knowledge base....

Paul: Yes, that's true. I'd agree with that, yeah.

John: ...which would, if you didn't have that knowledge base, that would come from supplementing it with other books?

Paul: I agree.

John: But for me, I look at the way that they've done the illustrations in Miles' book because I know the plants. I know the colors. I think they're actually really good.

Paul: No, I'd agree with you. I like the book a lot and the fact that it's almost monochrome, isn't it?

John: Yeah.

Paul: But I think some people have a problem with that, if they don't have a very good botanical knowledge in the first place. They'll look at that and go, "Well, I can't," again, it goes back to the confidence thing, "...I'm not confident to identify this."

John: Well, plant ID's simultaneously dead easy and extremely tricky. If you wanted to learn the plants to forage for all you really need to do is learn one plant a month for 12-months a year. So if you could learn to identify a dandelion, and you could learn to identify a stinging nettle, and you could learn to identify another ten plants, if you can identify a dandelion, you can create a coffee from its roots. You can create vinegars, and wines, and syrups, and sauces from its flowers. You can create salads and cooked greens from its leaves. So a lot of the plants that we might forage for might have three or four different edible crops spread across the year.

So if you've got 12 plants, 1 a month, and then you've got 4 different crops from each one, then you've got 48 different crops throughout the year. If you take that 48 different crops and think of 3 different ways to use them, you've got nearly 150 different recipes you could be creating throughout the year. Nobody's got the time to do that anyway, have they? It's like one brand new thing that you've never eaten before every other day of the entire year just based on 12 plants. So plant ID if you want to try and learn to identify hundreds of different plants is a complicated task. It's a slow task. It's one that's best learned, instead of a traditional academic way it's one that's best learnt by slowly revisiting the same plants and seeing them over and over again.

Paul: Going back to the same place and seeing them in different seasons.

John: Yeah, and seeing them in different stages, their development, and seeing them how they might behave in a way you didn't expect them to behave. I generally teach people to learn plants backwards. What I mean by that is often

the most appropriate time to identify something is the least appropriate time to eat it. So in the middle of the summer there'll be some mustard plant, for example, and it'll have all its flowers, all its leaves. It'll have its top leaves and its bottom leaves which are very different. It's got all its information on show. It's almost got a label on it which tells you what it is. But the time of year you want to use it is probably four months before that when it's just got some small, but very tasty leaves. So you learn it when it's got all of its key ID features on show so as you can return to it when you want to use it. That's a good way to learn to identify a lot of things.

Paul: It's just the same with deciduous trees. A lot of people say to me, well, they have difficulty with identifying tree species in the winter and my first point to them is, "Well, learn them in the summer when they've got all those ID features there. Follow them into the autumn when the buds will be there, and then even after the leaves have gone, then you'll be familiar and particularly if you're going back to the same spot whether it's a park or just out in the woods near where you live. Wherever you live, you can go and see the same trees every week for months, and months, and months and become very familiar with the different stages, and then you will easily recognize them in the winter."

John: Then also I think when you're trying to learn these things you've got to open your vision up a little bit, really. The thing that might be the most obvious feature for a tree that's got no information on it whatsoever, if you look at the ground, there might be loads of leaves that were there before. It might be, "What is this?" Well, it's beech mast lying all over the ground, so therefore it's a beech tree. I teach kids to go looking in a park and they look in a pond and they say to me, "Is that seaweed?" and I say, "Are we looking at the sea?" They go, "No." "Well, in that case it's pond weed." Water mints, does it look like mint? Does it smell like mint? Is it growing in or out of the water? It's probably water mint. So there's definitely more to identifying things than the plants themselves. There's the habitat and I quite like the idea of doing a scratch and sniff foraging guide, although I seem to remember from scratch and sniff books in the '70s...

Paul: They all smell the same.

John: ...they often smell of petrol or lemonade.

Paul: Or bubblegum.

John: Oh, yeah. So if scratch and sniff technology's moved on, we could do a scratch and sniff foraging guide because smells are fantastic things for foraging, and you can't get smells from books. There's one of the books I've got and it describes one of the mushrooms as smelling like furniture. I mean what a

useless piece of information. What kind of furniture? What age furniture?
Who's been sitting on it?

Paul: Antique, moldy.

John: Exactly.

Paul: Like chipboard, yeah.

John: There's a mushroom called an Oakbug Milkcap because apparently it smells of bugs. Bugs isn't even a word that I choose to use, but apparently that's the way you identify it. So with smells, I take people out and I show them how to tell the difference between Hemlock, very poisonous, and Cow Parsley, very edible. The way I do that is I get them to hardwire the smell of Cow Parsley and the range of responses I get people say it smells of lemons. People it smells of pears. People say it smells of creosote. My mum thinks it smells like washing powder. Somebody told me it smells of hippies, which I think they meant patchouli.

Paul: Yeah, okay.

John: But whatever it smells of it does not smell like hemlock. Hemlock does not have a come-hither smell to it.

Paul: No, it's an unpleasant smell, yeah.

John: Once you can hardwire the smell of Cow Parsley into your brain, it doesn't matter what you then call it. You could then call it Smell 38 or Smell 7B. But smells are very evocative. As long as you can return to that, then you've got a brilliant piece of ID information, and you can always tell the difference between a hemlock based on the smell. But obviously you can't get those from books. Scratch and sniff foraging guide, yeah. Definitely the way forwards.

Paul: I haven't seen the book itself, but I saw that somebody had done a scratch and sniff guide to whiskeys, I think.

John: Really?

Paul: Yeah.

John: I wonder if it works.

Paul: I don't know. I think it was quite a broad book about different types of whiskey. John, it's a nice, sunny day, but the wind's quite cold.

John: I'm doing star jacks.

Paul: And now he's jumping around.

John: It is chilly, isn't it?

Paul: Yeah, yeah. But that's good outdoor discipline. He's cold and he's doing some exercise, rather than just sitting there getting colder and colder.

John: It's actually great to have a cup of tea.

Paul: Well, we can go and have a cup of tea or we can listen...there's a nice, little songbird singing there, as well. Is that a thrush? Yeah, we can go and have a cuppa, and I think the other thing that'd be nice to do is, if we could find a spot where we can set the microphone up and then we can see what we can spot from that place, as well.

John: Should we rummage around in the undergrowth?

Paul: Yeah, yeah. We'll do that.

John: Okay, good.

Paul: Come back. So this will all be seamlessly edited together in the podcast. But we'll go for a wander now and grab a cuppa and then find some interesting plants.

John: Cool, yeah.

Paul: Well, we found a little suntrap of an area. We had our cuppa tea. John's warmed up. We found a nice, little suntrap here and we've also found a spot where there's a few interesting plants to have a look at. So John is busy picking things from the...

John: Rummaging in the undergrowth.

Paul: Rummaging in the undergrowth which you have to be careful about in London parks.

John: Yeah, most definitely. Especially with a lot of the low growing herbaceous plants that you find. They've got really shallow root systems and they tend to thrive in areas where they might be the least appropriate to pick them, like chickweed. Chickweed's a lovely sort of blandish, but good salad plant. But it loves growing...

Paul: Growing next to trees.

John: Exactly, at the base of London trees where it's getting generous donations of nitrogen from dogs. Flowerbeds in London parks are often good because they stake them around the edge of them with those wooden stakes when they're changing over what's in the flowerbed. So at that time the soils all been turned over. All these opportunistic wild plants all just come in and self seed and have a party and just start thriving there. But the area, it's its own little dog-free zone. So that's the place that I'd be choosing to pick my chickweed.

Paul: Yes, and they're almost like little automatic fences in places, aren't there? They border off the flowerbed.

John: Yeah, it's like a lot of things where you've got to use some common sense and not forage from right by a road. You talk about people who are foraging by canals, as well. I think that a lot of our canals, obviously they've got an industrial history. So you need to do some research. The good thing with the internet, there's all this information's online.

Paul: Yes.

John: But we're in Victoria Park. You've only got to Google Victoria Park and it says, built in the 1850s at the request of Queen Victoria, to create a washing facility for the 400,000 working class people here. So those two big lakes down there, that's what they were. They were massive commoner bathing pools.

Paul: Bathing pools, yeah.

John: So and anywhere really most places are reasonably well documented. Certainly in the city it's easy to find out the history.

Paul: Yeah, indeed, indeed.

John: Should we have a look at a few...?

Paul: Yeah, what have we got here? I'll bring the microphone a bit closer and have a look at it.

John: Well, we've just got a little patch of greenery here. We're on the edge of a quite manicured bit of lawn. But next to it, going into the flowerbed is some lime trees, and some cherry over there, and some...what else have we got?

Paul: Norway maple?

John: Maple, you're good with your trees, aren't you?

Paul: I'm all right.

John: Some Elder over there, and some more cherry, a mishmash of different things. Then we've got a mid-layer which is where I get my most confused. Because when you start getting into the world of things that I think of generically as shrubs, especially in an urban environment, there's so much stuff that's been planted that doesn't necessarily have an edible use. It's got an ornamental use, and some of the things turn out to be edible, like this Barberry. It's Darwin's Barberry here we're looking at which has got delicious, little citrusy, edible flowers. Then lots of the things that turn out to not have edible uses or to be mildly toxic, but that's my most confusing area, I suppose.

Paul: Understood, yeah.

John: The trees it's a lot more specific, and then when you get down into the low-growing herbaceous plants we've got a few things here to look at. Should we just have a look at some of these and see what we've got?

Paul: Yes, I'm going to take a photo as well, just so that I can stick that in the blog. And so if you're listening to this on something like iTunes, just go over to the page on the blog and there'll be a photo of John's jacket with a few leaves and other things on it. But we're going to have a look through those now. We've got somebody doing some dog training nearby as well, so if you hear somebody whistling, it's not me or John.

John: Yeah, if somebody says rollover, it's not me. So what have got going on here? We've got some garlic mustard, otherwise as Jack by the Hedge. So I wouldn't really consider it a salad plant because it's for my palate it's too strong. It's real, proper wild plant flavor. It's got strong garlic taste to it and it's got quite a bitterness on the back. It's not actually...it's not an allium, so it's not in the garlic family. It's cabbage doing an impression of garlic.

Paul: It shares some chemicals with some of the garlic.

John: Exactly. So it's kind of right down the feistiest end of the cabbage family with other perennials, like horseradish, and it too would produce a feisty little root, although the root of garlic mustard is not any bigger than your little finger. So obviously it wouldn't be worth digging that up, certainly if you had horseradish available. But this is a good...do you want to try a bit?

Paul: There you go. I'm well familiar with it, but I'm happy to try some London...I quite like it, but it does often have a bit of a bitter aftertaste, doesn't it?

John: Yeah, and certainly as the year goes on the plant chemistry changes, and a lot of these plants that we forage for January/February/March, they're very mild. They're very sweet and they've got a good flavor. Then you get a lot more bitterness coming through, and also they become more fibrous. But that's talking about the cyclical nature of foraging, what will happen as well, is as a plant reaches a point where it wouldn't be usable to us. It would give us other crops. It'll give us flowers. It'll give us roots, so you can keep going with a lot of plants throughout the year.

Paul: The mustards are good for seeds, as well, of course, I'd say.

John: Exactly.

Paul: The brassicas as a whole, yeah.

John: Exactly and you can make a wildflower mustard, as well. If you don't have the seeds, you can smooch up loads and loads of crucifer flowers.

Paul: I've never done that.

John: So yeah, and that works really well, as well. Then if you put them with a little bit of vinegar and a little of honey they keep for absolutely ages.

Paul: That'll give them time to grow again.

John: So yeah, a plant like this, I would say I wouldn't use it as a salad plant. I'd probably use it in soups or stews or dry fry it so it goes crispy and use it as little sprinkles to go on other things. So I use it like the Japanese condiment Furikake which is seaweed and sesame and things like that. Yeah, it's got a good flavor to it, and that will be producing...it's starting to produce some flowers. London is crazy really. You start to think of things as, "Well, the flowers will be coming through in the summer" and they won't be coming through in the summer. They'll be coming through when they fancy coming through.

Paul: Well, it's interesting for me and the same for you because you spend time out of London, and I spend a lot of time down in Sussex, as well as up in the northeast of England. And just the difference between what's out down in Sussex which is only 50 miles away and further south than this, although albeit a slightly higher altitude, it's just weeks and weeks, and weeks behind what we're seeing today in London.

John: Well, wild garlic sometimes is the first week of February in London, and I've also had elderberry seasons where the elder flower I should say has gone over completely here. I've gotten in the car and driven to my mum's. It's only ten miles away and it's a sufficient drop in temperature just leaving the edge of the microclimate. I don't know. Maybe the temperature's a degree or two cooler and the elder flowers a bit behind there. So it kind of reminds of when I was a photographer, the idea that if you want to get the best shot you've got to move around a lot. You don't want to stay static.

Paul: Yeah, true.

John: The same thing with foraging. If you sit on your ass and expect all these things to come to you, they won't. You've got to move around. You've got to explore. So just in this little flowerbed here we've got some Dog's Mercury which is a toxic plant. Let's throw that one out. We've got some Choisya. That's a common bush. Do you know this plant?

Paul: I don't, actually.

John: Smell it. It's not an edible and I've got no idea why it's not. It's got an extraordinary smell to it.

Paul: It looks a bit like a Bay leaf, doesn't it?

John: Yeah, it looks and it smells a bit like a...

Paul: Very aromatic.

John: Yeah, I can't find information about it ever having or had any edible uses.

Paul: Somewhat kind of citrusy, but there's another different tone in there, as well.

John: Yeah, tastes bloody awful, unfortunately.

Paul: I won't try it then. I take your word on that one, Choisy.

John: I've got some young leaves here from some as yet, can't be specific, some type of land cress there. Try that. It should have a slightly mustardy flavor to it. When I first saw that I thought it was a member of the Daisy family called Nipplewort, and the reason is that the members of the Cabbage family and the Daisy family they both start their life in the same way by creating what botanists call a basal rosette. So the first thing they do when they grow is they form a circle of little, low leaves. So if you imagine like a dandelion forms a rosette of leaves and then it sticks a flower stem up out of the middle. So often when you find that you're looking at members of the Daisy family or looking at members of the Cabbage family.

When I do plant ID I'm always looking initially to decide what family I'm in. With a plant family like Rose, you've got 25,000 members worldwide. But say with a family like the Cabbage family you've got 100 members of that family. Roughly 100 members, wild in the UK and none of them are poisonous. So a few aren't going to taste great. A plateful of a few will probably give you a bit of a stomachache, but there's nothing in there that's going to really do you any harm.

Paul: Yeah, even if you had some escaped oilseed rape or something.

John: Exactly.

Paul: That would be fine as well, so yeah.

John: Same thing coming back to the idea of is it wild or is it feral? Not really important. With that, you'd probably be more concerned with whether it's in an area where it's got pesticides or fungicide or something on it, if anything. I've actually recently found a company that are going to do some soil tests for me in parks in London. I'd always thought it was far, far too expensive, and I found a company in Kent, who for about £50 per test are going to test for heavy metal, pesticide residue, and a couple of other tests.

So what I'm going to do just because I'm curious about it. Because I have with a lot of research and a lot of thought about it, I've always decided that a lot of the parks are fine to forage in because they don't have historical pollution. Because they've been documented greenspaces since before the Industrial Revolution and there's this kind of myth that city dirty, countryside clean. Victoria Park has not been systematically sprayed with pesticide. It's not go glyphosate all over it, etc. etc. So I'm going to do some. The plan was to pick two or three parks,

basically whatever I could afford, pick two or three parks, and do a soil test in an area like this right in the middle and do a soil test right on the edge.

Paul: Yes.

John: And then I'm going to publish that on the newly formed Association of Foragers website.

Paul: That's right, yeah.

John: As just general information for everybody. I thought it would be quite useful...

Paul: No, it would...

John: ...for people looking at foraging.

Paul: ...and it would be good to have that, but if there's any sort of baseline information about what would you typical field in Dorset or Sussex be.

John: Yeah, exactly.

Paul: That would be really useful to compare because it's a benchmark then, isn't it?

John: Yeah. Well, I'm going to get back the first set of information. Ideally what I'd like to do is I would like to get a few of the plants themselves tested. Because you cannot only as well as the soil quality you could test what's in the plants, but you could also test the nutritional content which is going to be extremely high when dealing with wild foods anyways. But like some of the plants have got an ability to deposit heavy metals and lay down heavy metals, and some of them are far better avoiding absorbing heavy metals. So it's not a topic I know a lot about, but it's something that I'm looking into.

Paul: It's worth investigating.

John: Yeah, it really is.

Paul: There are people have preconceptions about that, don't they? That the reviews about, like you say city's dirty. Country is clean, but that probably doesn't hold true in every case.

John: I really don't think it holds true and London's extraordinary. Greater London's 47% open or greenspaces. If you take all the parks, all the common land, all the back gardens, all the verges, all the bits of waste ground, you've got nearly 50% of London is naught concrete. It's not buildings. It's a very, very green city. I walked from Burgess Park up about a mile, a mile and a half north and there's 20 different parks and greenspaces, just in that little area of Peckham. There's such a lot to see. We're really lucky with this city. I think you tend to think of a city like Sydney or Vancouver or somewhere like that or Rio as being like an outdoor city because they've got the weather. Where we really haven't and most of the time we haven't. But London is a really outdoor city if you've got a reason to be outdoors. I've got a reason to be outdoors in January wandering around my local park, otherwise I probably wouldn't be.

Paul: True. It transforms, as well. On a day like today the wind's cold today. But on a day like today all of a sudden the café we were just in, and we talked about being along the canal, and there's a few little places along the canal, and they're often closed. But as soon as you get into the spring they're open then, and that's their open season, and you've got this almost like café culture appears, as the sun is out.

John: I'm not champy where we are here. I'm a lot warmer. I'm no survivalist. I've got no extraneous body fat. I get cold too quickly.

Paul: Well, I think it's probably worth mentioning that you're a climber as well. I think you're an outdoors person. You're a climber and climbers tend to be quite wiry and thin, don't they?

John: Wiry, that's the word, yeah. Wiry suggests strong as opposed to skinny which suggests weak. So yeah, and I do scarf an extraordinary amount of wild plants and I think that if you look at the nutritional content of eating wild plants, a super food is such a strange concept. It suggests that most foods shouldn't be super foods and unfortunately that's what we've got with our domestic food chain. You've got 99 products in the supermarket that are a bit crap and not very good for you and then you've got one which is called a super food which is extraordinarily high-priced. If you come back to wild food, everything is a super food.

Everything has got disproportionately high levels of vitamins, minerals, nutrients, antioxidants, phytonutrients, which are plant nutrients. Plant chemical compounds that protect the plant and which are very good for us when we ingest them, and masses of fiber and protein, and all sorts of other wonderful things going on in there. I tried doing a blog a while ago about wild foods versus super foods, but all wild foods are super foods. So it became impossible

to write it, really. Here what else have we got? We've got some Cleavers, otherwise known as sticky weed or Stickywilly or Goosegrass. There's some research to suggest that this is one of the first Neolithic crops. I don't think they were specifically farming it, but there's a crossover stage where settlements were helping manage the existence of plants around them, and trying to encourage them. They find lots and lots of this growing around early Neolithic sites. So yeah, this is related to coffee. If you were sufficiently motivated, you could gather the seeds of this and make a coffee from them.

Paul: It's not bad. We've done it.

John: I've never got round to it. It's one of those things.

Paul: You mentioned dandelion earlier on. I find it's much better than dandelion.

John: I like dandelion. I like dandelion root coffee. I'll have to do that then. That'll go on the tick list.

Paul: No, definitely try it if you haven't.

John: This is covered in thousands of tiny, little hooks and these hooks will dissolve when you stick this into hot water, if you're going to cook and just eat it like a pot vegetable. You need to not do what I did on one walk which was demonstrate to people how good it is as a salad plant, and then just basically have it caught in my throat for the entire walk. It turned into the Harry Enfield character, Bob Fleming, whose thing was he was permanently harrumph, clearing his throat. But yeah, that's at this stage in the year the top part of that plant is reasonably usable and reasonably versatile. Down here you've got a lovely plant with two brilliant names. The proper name for this is Black Horehound which sounds like a metal band, and then the other name for this is stinking Roger and stinking Roger grows in the lanes in Dorset where stinking Iris grows. So I like the idea that there might be a stinking couple.

Paul: Stinking Roger, oh, yeah.

John: Have a smell. It's really quite strong. It's more of a medicinal plant. It's used for making cough mixtures and things like that. In herbal medicine it would be thought of as a bitter plant. That's really going to really get your digestive juices going. It's not going to poison you, but it's going to be very bitter. It's going to be quite strong.

Paul: And that's not [inaudible 01:05:48] that I see there.

John: Yeah, it is. So that's a member of the Mint family. That's got all the key characteristics of the Mint family. It's got square stems. It's got leaves that occur in opposite and opposing pairs. It's got the third main characteristic of the Mint family which is strong smells.

Paul: Aromatic, yeah.

John: Yeah, really aromatic. Lots and lots of essential oils in there. Within the Mint family we've got a lot of our domestic herbs. We've got the basil, and thymes, and sages, and rosemary's and things like that, and all the mints, and then in wild terms, plants with lovely names like pennyroyal or bastard balm, and lots of different edible plants.

Paul: Yellow archangel.

John: Yeah, exactly yellow archangel, which you see that's planted quite a lot in parks as well, and there's nothing really in that group that you need to avoid. There's one plant called bugle which is deemed to be narcotic. As far as I'm aware you'd have to consume an awful lot of it to be that, and it wouldn't be a problem if you ate a few leaves or stems of the young plant anyway. One member of it can be used to create an oil which is then extremely poisonous. But none of the plants in that sort of form that you'd find them, are going to be toxic. So you've got 100 members in the Cabbage family you could forage for safely and you've got 50 members of the Mint family and all you've got to really do is learn two or three key ID features.

Like with the cabbages that they have petals. They have four petals arranged in a cross and they're almost always yellow or white, and those lovely strong smells, cabbage-y smells and cress-y smells, and then over in the Mint family same thing. I was talking about square stems, opposite opposing leaves. You've got to learn some really quite easy ID features, and then you can know what family you're in, and once you know what you're in, you can know how to behave. So were you to have gone into the Carrot family then you've got a totally different way of behaving because in there, you've got lots of deadly plants, haven't you?

Paul: Yeah, yeah.

John: So if you get one of your cabbages wrong, you might get an upset stomach. If you get one of your carrots wrong, you might just be dead. So learning plant ID I think is best done slowly and carefully and with somebody else who knows. But it's good to support it with some...there's a book written by

a lovely American guy called Thomas Elpel, and that's called Botany in a Day and what he does is he takes all the plant families, and does that. He just splits them up into their key characteristics. He calls it the pattern method. So the patterns of the Mint family would be that, square stems, opposite opposing leaves, flowers that occur very close to the stem, the main stem, either around it or in the case of lavender that little stack on the top of it.

Paul: Yes, some of the mints, as well.

John: Yeah, exactly in all the mints. But there's also almost a smell tribes within there, as well. There's all the things that have that minty smell. There's things that have a lavender smell, and there's things that smell like this in my hand. It's stinking royal jelly, this black horehound. It's a quite strong, musky smell to it. There's maybe half a dozen...

Paul: Things like Hedge Woundwort.

John: Exactly. Those that have that smell, too. So yeah, really good to know smells, to learn smells because they're just hardwired. You don't need to remember a specifics of a smell. You just remember it, don't you?

Paul: Yes, it's very evocative.

John: Yeah, really and then down here we've got the top of a lovely little plant called Wood avens. My mum would call this a Geum if she had this growing in her garden because that would be the cultivated variety. This is going to be Geum something or other, but I don't know the Latin name for it. I would call this wood avens or herb Bennet. So I'm looking at the top of this plant. It's got some nice green, slightly hairy leaves, and it's going to produce some little, yellow flowers, a little bit later on in the year. And it's going to produce a little, bright red seed head that's got little hooks on it, so it's handy for wind dispersal and animal dispersal.

Paul: Like a little burr.

John: Like a little burr, exactly so it can get blown onto different creatures or get blown off in the wind and things like that. But the bottom bit of that is what we'd eat which gives it it's currently popular name, clove root. It really is a root that tastes, it's not quite cloves. It's on the cusp of clove and cinnamon and nutmeg, and it would have been popular a few hundred years ago. It's something that like a lot of our native spices, it's become neglected. It's fallen out of use and various different reasons, modern living, two waves of the spice trade, having superseded a lot of things. There's a plant that grows in this park,

Alexanders, a known member of the Carrot family and the seeds of that were used as black pepper and it can smell and taste like strong black pepper.

Paul: Yeah, and it was potherb, wasn't it?

John: Yeah, exactly. I'm not a big fan of Alexanders. It's a little bit too...

Paul: Pungent.

John: A bit perfumed for me, a bit like Angelica, but the seeds are fantastic. We've got some Geranium here, as well.

Paul: The other thing I don't know if you know about herb Bennet or the clove root part of it was that I read some research somewhere that basically said that it's similar to how we would use clove oil to ameliorate a toothache. That was also stuffed against the gum, in between the gum and the side of the mouth when you had a toothache. People used it in the same way.

John: Yeah, it's got exactly that same effect like a teething fluid. Yeah, exactly. I've used it for all sorts of things. I make elder and clove cordial and I've been using clove root instead. I've been making clove root tincture, so as a tincture really it's a clove root bitters. It's clove root steeped in alcohol and it produces a strong, clove-y quite bitter thing to use as a cocktail ingredient. I made a native chai. So I wanted to see if I could make...with chai you've got...what do you got in there? You've got ginger, cardamom... I can't remember all the things that go into chai.

Paul: Cardamoms the one that I remember because that's quite a distinctive smell, isn't it?

John: Well, why I decided to try and do was create a chai using native ingredients because I think that we've got lots of interesting tropical and spicy and varied ingredients in this country that we don't use. Like I'd say rose hips, if you make rose hip syrup and you don't introduce masses and masses of sugar, you use about a quarter of the sugar the recipe recommends, you need to freeze it in order to keep it because otherwise it won't last. But what you produce is something that tastes of mango and tastes of papaya, and tastes of tropical fruit. It doesn't just taste as disaccharide table sugar. So we've got lots of interesting flavors.

So what I was trying to do was I'd made a jerk seasoning before using native ingredients and that was quite hard. Because you're trying to mimic pimento

and allspice and that had 21 different ingredients in it. So I tried to make a wild chai...

Paul: Did you do a blog on that one? I seem to remember reading.

John: Not on the wild...

Paul: Not on the jerk or did you just...?

John: Not on the jerk, no.

Paul: Was it just something you posted on Facebook then?

John: Yeah, I think so. I posted a list of the ingredients.

Paul: That's right, yeah.

John: But the one thing I couldn't completely substitute in that was chili. I used a plant called water pepper and the old English name for water pepper is all-smart [SP] and I used that and although it has the chili heat, it doesn't have that chili sweet warmth to it. So it wasn't quite cutting it, so I ended up using some of those Turkish chili flakes. But I figured that I'd got those from my local shops, 20 ingredients I'd foraged, and one I'd got from the shop, so I thought that was a good ratio. But with the wild...

Paul: There's a lot of Turkish influence that's stuck into it anyway.

John: Yeah, exactly.

Paul: It's kind of local.

John: Yeah, exactly. I can buy sumac and I can buy all the nice spices in a Turkish shop. Yeah, with the wild chai, I tried to mimic different ingredients. So the ginger I used magnolia petals because they've got a lovely ginger mix, chicory mix, celery kind of flavor to them.

Paul: They're just getting past their best now aren't they?

John: They're still there's quite a lot of species. There are still quite a lot coming through.

Paul: The ones I've seen recently have...I don't know. The ones I noticed recently were passing over.

John: There's a species that have got yellow blossoms as well, and they're just starting to come through, and we're in London. So different parts of the country they're just going to be on their way.

Paul: Yeah, I think the one that's the foremost in my mind is the one that's largely white with a slight pinkish, purplish tinge at the base of the petal. But yeah, so that's an area I'm not so familiar with because my focus has always been more out in wild places and what can we forage there. Yeah, it's interesting.

John: Yeah, that's a really underutilized ingredient. I've dried it, ground it up and used it to make gingerbread briskets for my son, and he didn't notice the difference.

Paul: Really?

John: Yeah, they were sort of semi-wild gingerbread. They had birch sap in them, birch sap syrup and magnolia petals, and ground up clove root in them. Yeah, the wild chai, the hardest thing about that was mimicking cardamom which I thought I was originally going to mimic it with bay leaf and juniper and I ended up using lavender blossoms, and fennel, and I can't remember what else. You'll have to read the blog, foragelondon.co.uk and it's on the front page of it, something like that.

Paul: I'll link it in the show notes on my blog, as well.

John: It's something like making a wild Masala chai. But that was basically an experiment in seeing where I could substitute native ingredients for flavors that we would naturally assume were more exotic. Because if you've ever tried growing a chili in the UK, you end up with something that's perfect looking, but utterly bereft of flavor. But then you can find those flavors in wild plants. The Alexander seeds taste like pepper. We've got different wild garlics and wild spices, and wild clove-y things, and I used another plant in there as well, called bog myrtle which has got a lovely, sweet, aromatic flavor to it. So yeah, the thing with a lot of this, my friend Mark up I Scotland he calls it a neglected native spice rack, and I think that we've got a lot of fascinating things that we could use were we to choose to, but generally we don't.

Paul: It's interesting looking back at some of the medieval recipes, as well. First off, it was a very different...there was a lot more sweet stuff and spicy, but different spices mixed with meat. But then a lot more use of our native plants as well. I think it's quite interesting how and why those things have gone by the

wayside. I think you're right, you mentioned the spice trade and I guess our imperial heritage, that we've assimilated a lot of different cultural food. Just look at London, the cultural mix of food in London.

John: London's a cultural stir fry isn't it? It's just everything going on there. That's one of the things that I love about this city. I was down Stronach and I had to go and have a meeting with a firm of architects who wanted to run some wild food walks, looking at what they might possibly integrate into the planting of an area that they're going to do. I came out of there and I went into a Vietnamese grocers and bought some rice paper sheets. I don't know why. I came out and thought, right, what would I do with those? So I walked over Stronach Park and picked a load of different salads and flowers, went home, and made spring rolls. My Vietnamese spring rolls motivated by there being a Vietnamese deli there. So yeah, a real cultural hodgepodge there, isn't it?

Paul: Yeah, it tis.

John: Do you want to have a look at another spot?

Paul: You mentioned the barberry off recording. That was before we set the microphone up.

John: Yeah, so this is Darwin's Barberry and it's planted all over the place. Like Mahonia, Japanese Mahonia, it's got quite rough evergreen, holly-like leaves on it and it's planted for that reason, really. It's used as an impenetrable border plant. It's used to make a bit of a barricade around playgrounds or municipal areas or things like that. But it's got delicious, little edible flowers on it. At the moment, a very, very citrusy. What are we in here? Are we still in April?

Paul: Yeah, just. This'll be out early May when people are listening to this. But yeah, we're recording this on the 28th of April.

John: Yeah, there are probably quite a lot of these that still have flowers on and obviously if you're in other parts of the country they're definitely going to be coming into blossom. The Mahonia's come and gone in terms of its blossoms in London. Often that flowers like a firework display in December with big yellow flower spikes. Then later in the year...well now in London they start to produce little purple berries that you can use for syrups, and sauces, and wines, and things. I'll show you some later.

Paul: Yeah, I've tried the berries off this, though.

John: They're very good. The main thing I would use, I would take these blossoms and I would just cook them up with a tiny little bit of sugar. I'd make a syrup or a sauce or a cordial. I would possibly make fruit leathers with them. I don't really like the word leather. It suggests something that's not particularly going to be nice to eat.

Paul: Chewy and unpalatable, yeah.

John: But you can make very, very fruit sweets with these, so I'd probably get a load of these blossoms. And at this time of year I'd probably buy some plums and apples from my local, and just chop them and cook them with the tiniest bit of water. And then just smooch them onto greaseproof paper and dehydrate them, either in a very low oven or if you're lucky enough to have a dehydrator and then you're going to produce really delicious chewy sweets that have got no unnatural or no processed sugars in them at all. I make all sorts of different fruit chews throughout the year with just whatever's available, and sometimes that might be completely wild fruits and sometimes that is a mixture of wild and domestic, and sometimes I get the mixture slightly wrong and bulk it out with a banana or something like that. Then just smear it onto greaseproof paper and dehydrate it.

Paul: Yeah, that's a South American species, that one.

John: Is it now?

Paul: Yeah, because it was Darwin on one of his Patagonian expeditions discovered it, as it were. Even though locals weren't using it, and that's where the name comes from. But there's a European barberry as well. Can you use...because I've not used the flowers on that. I've had the berries of that one, as well. Do you know if you can use them?

John: I honestly don't know.

Paul: Right.

John: That will be the first thing I find out when I get home.

Paul: As we were saying before, there's always more to learn, isn't there?

John: This is *Berberis darwinii* or *Berberis darwinii* or something like that. It's quite specific and easy to identify. But I don't know about the other species.

Paul: That's interesting.

John: I would look on...there's a good website that's not 100% accurate, but then nothing ever is. There's a really good resource called Plants for Future.

Paul: Yeah, PFAF.

John: So if you Google any plant name that you're curious about and you just put the name of that plant in, and put PFAF. That will take you to the page on Plants for Future and there, they've got about 7000 or 8000 different species on there, and they'll list the edible and medicinal uses, and whether there's any sort of toxicity or anything like that. Look at the robin over there. He's very friendly isn't he?

Paul: Where's he gone?

John: He's gone. He didn't like you.

Paul: He'll come back. There he is, yeah. Cool, that's interesting.

John: The garlic mustard actually is just producing its earliest flower buds. Should we try those and see what they're like? We should road test them.

Paul: Road test them, yeah. A bit broccoli to start off with.

John: Yeah, like a lot of wild plants, they have a gentle beginning, and then they come for you.

Paul: Kick you in the backend, yeah.

John: So some of the mustard plants have got a real, sharpie, eye watering, pain up your Eustachian tubes kind of approach, which I really enjoy. I think a lot of wild plants have got real wild flavors and we're not quite used to that. Most people's bitter range is...

Paul: It's very narrow.

John: ...well off kilter these days, isn't it?

Paul: So many salad plants in the supermarkets are so bland. You mentioned Rocket earlier on and that's probably the most pungent salad you can get in a store these days. Even watercress seems to be pretty bland when you buy it from a supermarket.

John: Yeah, and if you go out and you pick, you can pick wild rocket. If you pick perennial wall-rocket, it's really feisty. It's got a beautiful, amazing flavor to it and then it just gets stronger and stronger as you eat it. It's quite an intense experience, which it should be really. I think if you're making a wild salad it's the polar opposite to a supermarket salad that comes in that fart-y smelling gas. The taste is never the same. You would make a wild salad with a blandish base ingredient, something like chickweed or something like clover and then into it you would introduce lots of small quantities of strong flavors.

So you might be going with something very garlicky to something very peppery to something spicy to something like lemon balm or something else that's aromatic, like a mint. Then you might be going over to something sweet, and then you might be going to some flavor that's very bitter. Every mouthful should be an experience. I've made a lot of wild salads, but I tend to slightly homogenize all the flavors by using something like a rose hip vinegar or a sweet vinegar and what it does is it takes the edge off the bitter flavors, and it's slightly intensifies the sweet flavors. So sometimes it makes things more palatable, but yeah, I'm trying to train my bitter range. It's not that I think I should have like Wildman credentials.

On the way here I bought coffee from the shop and things like that. So I'm not a purist in any way. But there's a tendency with foods to think that bitter is bad, and bitter is not bad. Bitter is really good, certainly for our digestion and for sending signals to our liver and our stomach to get on with the process of breaking food down. So yeah, I was talking about coffee earlier. I've been drinking my coffee black without sugar, instead of what I'd naturally gravitate towards, which is sissy boy's coffee which is white with two sugars in, probably.

Paul: Yes, lots of creamy milk and sugar.

John: Exactly. The other thing when you're eating a lot of these plants is nature isn't the supermarket and you mustn't assume that it is. So if you try something and you don't like it, that doesn't necessarily mean it's not a nice tasting plant. It very likely means you've got the wrong time of year. It may mean it's not a nice tasting plant. We're all different. We're all going to like different things, but if you try something in midsummer, it may have a particular plant chemistry so it's 90% bitter and only about 10% sweetness or one of the main flavors in my experience is completely absent.

You try the same plant again in January and February and it's possibly going to be sweet and tender. So a lot of the time you have to visit things at different stages in the year to find out what's the right time, and sometimes it might be

like a micro season, like I was talking about the Mahonia flowers. They tend to flower in London, in December and January and what you're looking for is what looks like a holly hedge. But nothing else is in flower and this has got bright, yellow spikes, huge spikes that are about a foot long, and little yellow flowers on it. The season is like a micro season. They're in flower for two or three weeks, but there's a time period during that when they'll taste sweet or they'll taste like little grapefruits, or they'll taste bloody horrible.

And dependent almost on what day you get them you're going to get it right or you're going to get it terribly wrong. So if you get something that tastes really horrible it doesn't mean that it does taste horrible. It means that you may have got your timing wrong. So yeah, I think more and more about that concept of micro seasons with cherry blossom, and cherry blossoms are going to taste of three different things. They're going to taste sweet or they're going to taste bitter or they're going to taste of a kind of almond oil essence, which is like really familiar to lots of those plants. Dependent on which blossom, which tree, which part of the tree, which day you're going to get sweetness, followed by almond or you're going to get almond followed by bitter, or you're just going to get bitter.

So yes, as well as hiding in plain sight, I think another book should be called Suck it and See because that really does apply to foraging. Nature just isn't a supermarket and the plants aren't ready when you want them to be.

Paul: No, and I think we've been conditioned into being able to go to get what we want when we want it because of the supermarkets. But also we've been conditioned that there are four seasons where are in the northern hemisphere. There's spring, summer, autumn, and winter and it's very delineated, and it isn't. As you say it's a continual cycle where things overlap. Each year things are different, as well. Some things will be out at the same time one year. At other times they're spaced out more. It's different every single year and we haven't talked much about fungi. But fungi even more so in how they vary in terms of what's dominant. You'll get a lot of I don't know...winter chanterelles one year and the next year you see hardly any, but there's lots of something else. It's really interesting.

John: Yeah, things are always play catch up, aren't they? Like you say plum trees a really obvious one or elder or something like that. If they have a bad year, chances are the following year they have a very good year. It becomes quite evident, and definitely with mushroom hunting every year there's one or two species that are having a hell of a good year. And then like last year for me, porcini mushrooms, pretty much nonexistent. Hopefully this coming year I've got this completely unfounded theory about a seven-year cycle for fungi, and

I'm hoping for at some point that perfect storm with regards to my top secret porcini patch which is about probably a quarter of a mile square, and it's in the least likely place for your to find porcini mushrooms.

But the year that I found it, it probably produced...I don't know...at least 1000 kilos of mushrooms. It's extraordinary and some of them weighing over a kilo each. It was just absolutely amazing, and I'd been looking in Carluccio's, Mushroom Book the day before and there's this picture of this woodland with all these amazing porcini growing there, and I was just thinking, "Well, it's just like one of those photos you see in books." And I was in the woods the following day and we were looking for something for my wife's photograph, and I got a bit bored. And I walked for through some bracken and went down a little slope and up the other side, and then suddenly like a heavenly moment, like the sky opened, and uh-ah-uh.

Paul: The sea parted.

John: Yeah, and I was just staring at an endless, endless sea. Had I, which I'm not and I never have been, but was I a commercial forager I would have been just looking at thousands, and thousands, and thousands of pounds, just lying there in the woods. I still had the pub at that time, so we picked about 25-30 kilos.

Paul: What you could carry out with you.

John: Yeah, I hasten to that. This is on private property. So it's got nothing to do with the Forestry Commission's limit on how many mushrooms you can and can't pick because I wasn't Forestry Commission land. But yeah, I had them in my van and it covered the entire floor in it, a huge mound, and I still had the pub at the time. I took them back there and we had porcini everything for a couple of weeks. But yeah, I'm hoping that that will come round again because it hasn't.

Paul: Right.

John: Like last year that patch produced not a single mushroom, not even a bit of evidence of the fact that this amazing occurrence could ever happen again.

Paul: Yeah, that's fascinating, isn't it?

John: Yeah, fingers crossed.

Paul: Yeah, so that's really been interesting. Just one tiny little corner of one quite large park that we've been looking at there.

John: Yeah, I'm sure we could up stakes and probably walk about 20 yards over there and look at another half dozen plants, and so on and so forth.

Paul: Yeah, and as you say what you reckoned in here, maybe 200-250 different species we could look at, if we wandered around enough.

John: I think if you really wanted to drill down into it enough, in my local park, I'm up to about 170 different species of plants that I have picked, and used, and eaten, and it's not because I've been trying to catalog or get up to a certain number. I just actually went to write a blog called, "What I learned from Glassell Park," and I thought I should finish it off with a list, and I could think of that many. But I'm sure, yeah, and a lot of the parks have a got the same plants, but then there's also quite a few things that grow here that won't grow just two miles up the road, and so and so forth. I think if anybody wants to look into the ideas of open foraging the best place that you can do it is in your most immediate greenspace, your most local greenspace. So the place that you can visit most often, and the easiest access to it, so as you can visit and revisit the same plants in all of their different stages of development.

Paul: That's really important.

John: It's learning in a different way. It's the polar opposite of the internet where all the information's readily available. It's a very slow and gentle learning process, that's really rewarding. Because you might look at something and you might not know what it is, but two weeks later all you have to do is pass the same plant, and it will have created some additional information. It might have put out some flowers. It might have put out some different leaves. It might suddenly become blatantly obvious what it is, and it might not. You might have to exist with something for a period of time in order to find out. But yeah, definitely the way to learn is just be visiting your local greenspace, and no excuses, really. Because if you live in London you've definitely got a local greenspace because everybody has. It may not be the ideal place to harvesting lots of food, but it's certainly going to be a good place for learning about foraging.

Paul: And as we mentioned before, you often get, in a more concentrated area, you get a wider diversity of plants perhaps, than you get if you go to a similar sized area in the countryside which tend so to be a little bit more homogenous. Yes, you're going to get the variety over a larger area perhaps, but then you may be limited by soil type or you're maybe just limited by more native species and

fewer introduced species. So yeah, the parks can be a great melting pot that's really quite focused in terms of what you can see in a small space.

John: Yeah, exactly and also focusing on the idea that learning a few plants that you can use in different ways throughout the year and that they're going to give you multiple crops, I think's really important. Just like I say being able to identify an elder, being able to identify a cherry, being able to identify a plum tree. With foraging for foods is it a plum tree or is it not a plum tree, well, it doesn't matter until it's got plums on it, and then it is evidently a plum tree. So as long as you can identify a plum, you can work backwards in identifying a plum tree.

Paul: And just make that mental map, so you can spot them earlier in the year, and then go back to them. Once you know what they look like without the plums you can go, "Oh, there's a plum there. I'll come back there later in the year."

John: Exactly and then eventually you reach the point where when your other half says, "Can we go for a walk?" And you say, "Yeah, yeah, I'd like to go for a walk," and she says, "No, I mean a walk where we actually walk, not where we just stand still."

Paul: Please, stumble about 100 meters over the course of the walk.

John: I'm surrounded. My house is about three minutes from Arsenal Tube Station and I could pick a dozen things just to nibble out of people's gardens on the way were I to want to. It's probably not the best place in the world for foraging, but it's like I say. The city's a brilliant place for learning about foraging and so long as you select where you choose to forage, not from busy roads, not from places that might have some sort of industrial history and things like that, and you use a bit of commonsense, it's boundless really.

Paul: Absolutely. So hopefully that encourages more people to go out and see what they've got around them. Where can people find out more about your foraging? You mentioned your blog just for people to make notes, where is that again?

John: So I'm very easily findable on the internet. If you just search for Forage London, and on Forage London, there's my blog which is monthly roughly and I just write about what's in season or what I've been doing, and I've got various different events on there. I've got some walks in parks in London coming up. I've got a lot of mushroom hunting events coming up in Hampshire in the autumn. I've got a seashore foraging event. I've got some other stuff that other

people are running for me, some herbal medicine workshops and things like that. There's always different stuff on there, and yeah, the book's coming out. The book's *The Edible City* and it's coming out in September. I think I plan to launch it the first week of September. Because I think that Christmas run-in for books as they're all being launched, they get launched the first week of October. So they're planning to launch it then which is quite a nice time of year for launching a book about foraging because you've got the crossover between the autumn fruits and fungi, and lots of stuff going on.

Paul: It's definitely more at the forefront to people, I think spring and autumn are often the time when they're at the most of the forefront of people's minds.

John: Certainly the time where the press wants to write loads of lazy articles about mushroom hunting.

Paul: Yeah.

John: Enough about that.

Paul: Cool. Well, yeah, people can find you there. Please say hello to John on social.

John: I'm on Facebook, as well. Obviously you've...

Paul: Well, that's how I found out about you originally.

John: For more regular stuff when I'm spending time in front of the computer, for my sins I do tend to put a lot of posts on Facebook, just generally about what I'm picking and what I'm doing with it. So that's actually quite a good way to be aware of what's happening seasonally.

Paul: Right now.

John: Just like mentioning magnolia blossoms or something like that, people might not have been aware that they could use them. But they may have a magnolia tree growing in a garden or just opposite them. So yeah, Forage London on Facebook's a good source of information.

Paul: Yeah, and is that linked from your blog as well? I'll put the links to all of these in the show notes online, but can you get to all your social profiles from your blog?

John: Yeah.

Paul: Yeah, perfect. If people find Forage London, they can find you where they want to from there on the proliferation of social platforms that exist today.

John: Or they could just find me, like look for a weird bloke in the park, in about three weeks time, with a huge pair of scissors and bright, yellow marigold gloves, stepping out of a massive patch of stinging nettles with a huge grin on his face, and that'll probably be more.

Paul: That'll probably be you. Fair enough. Well, we'll leave people with that image. Thank you, John. It's been a real pleasure. It's been a lot of fun.

John: Thanks.

Paul: And it's been nice, finally to find a warm spot compared to where we were just...

[Crosstalk]

John: Yeah, nice, isn't it?

Paul: It's quite pleasant here in the sun.

John: Cheers, thanks very much.

Paul: No, thanks for coming on and thanks for talking to us. Cheers.

Thanks again, to John for his time. I really enjoyed our chat and our look around, just once small corner of Victoria Park. There's a lot more there to see and I will certainly be back there having a more extensive look around. It's a really, really nice area, and nice greenspace in the city and please do check out John's website, foragelondon.co.uk. Look out for the book coming out in September. I'll certainly be getting a copy of that when it comes out. The illustrations I've seen so far are absolutely gorgeous and I really enjoy John's writing, as well. So it will be an interesting book. Please also, if you do not already subscribe to my podcast, if you're listening to this on a podcasting platform, please subscribe.

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