

Her island entree: seaweed

By Kari Bodnarchuk
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

SOOKE, B.C. — Diane Bernard's knee-high rubber boots squeaked and slurped as she walked across seaweed beds on a rocky spit on Vancouver Island's southern coast. Behind her, Washington's Olympic Mountains rose above a band of mist and an incoming tide surged through the Juan de Fuca Strait.

"Look at this, they're just pouring in here now," Bernard said of the dozens of varieties of seaweed washing onto shore. "What's this?" she said, picking up a handful of red, balled-up seaweed and slipping a piece into her mouth. "Very nice texture. Very crunchy. A bit of a muddy aftertaste to it. Might be dulce," a type of seaweed often used in salads or flaked and sprinkled on meat and seafood.

Bernard, known locally as the Seaweed Lady, hand-harvests seaweed for a living along this temperate coast, and sells her catch to more than 200 spas and restaurants across Canada and 30 spas in the United States. As founder of Outer Coast Seaweeds, she also runs Wild Seaweed Tours in the sleepy, coastal town of Sooke, teaching people about this ecologically diverse region and the value of these often misunderstood sea vegetables.

"Poor seaweeds have gotten a bad rap," said Bernard, 56, a third-generation seaweed harvester. "I just want to dispel the myths that they're ooey, gooey, sloppy, and slimy, and no good for anything but fertilizer."

More than 600 types of seaweed grow along the coast from Washington to Alaska, with 250 species found in British Columbia. Southern Vancouver Island has a particularly wide variety of

If you go . . .

Where to stay

Sooke Harbour House

1528 Whiffen Spit Road, Sooke
800-889-9688

www.sookeharbourhouse.com

The 28 rooms have fireplaces, hot tubs, and private decks with views of the ocean. From \$260.

Where to eat

Red Fish, Blue Fish

1006 Wharf St., Victoria
250-298-6877

www.redfish-bluefish.com

Sit at outdoor tables on the wharf and enjoy fish and chips, fish tacos (cone-shaped fish tacos), or the chowder. Fish and chips \$8.50-\$14; chowder \$5.

What to do

Outer Coast Seaweeds

Sooke
250-642-5328

www.sea-flora.com

Tours \$25.65 for 12 and older.

Sapphire Day Spa

714 View St., Victoria
250-385-6676

www.sapphiredayspa.com
Seaweed treatments.

healthy seaweed, thanks to the deep and fasting-moving Juan de Fuca Strait, the body of water between the Canadian island and Washington's Olympic Peninsula.

"Seaweeds are an excellent barometer of the health of the ocean because they completely absorb what's around them," Bernard explained, as she led four of us across Whiffen Spit during a two-hour seaweed tour. "The Juan de Fuca Strait can really cook through here, so the water is fantastically clean. The highly

oxygenated water combined with the continental shelf combined with the cold water really makes things thrive."

Bernard's seaweed tours started serendipitously in 2001. Guests staying at the Sooke Harbour House, a charming seaside inn that overlooks the spit, could see Bernard wandering along the shore and foraging for seaweeds. They would often lean over their balconies and say, "What are you doing?" or "Can we come?"

Bernard welcomed anyone interested in learning about the seaweeds and her passion for them. She now runs tours for up to 10 people at a time from late May to mid-September, based on the low tides. Bernard provides visitors with rubber boots and hiking sticks and takes them on a short walk along the intertidal zone, stopping often to sample seaweed, identify the species, and talk about their importance and benefits.

"Seaweeds have no fat, no cholesterol, and no calories, and they're high in vitamins and fiber, and chock-full of nutrients," she said.

Wearing our rubber boots, we followed Bernard through a rock garden to a sea grass bed. Harbor seals sprawled on the rocks nearby, and gulls hovered overhead.

"Welcome to our ocean garden," Bernard said, gesturing to an expanse of rocky coast and the open ocean. "You can see a band of bull kelp out there," she said, pointing to a dark spot just beyond the spit. "That's the fastest-growing plant on the planet. It can grow three to four feet a day during the peak time and up to about 120 feet in a season."

Bernard picked up a piece of bull kelp and used it to explain the basic anatomy of seaweed:

the holdfast, which grips onto rocks or other hard surfaces and serves as an anchor; the stipe, which is the plant's stem or stalk and helps hold it up in the water column; and the fronds, which are the broad, thin, leaflike structures that attach to the stipe and absorb nutrients.

"In the First World War, bull kelp was rendered down to ash and used as a filler in gun powder," Bernard explained. "Then it was used in floor polishes, paints, and glues. I have some hardcore insomniacs who buy this stuff because it's good for treating insomnia. It has very high-quality sodium, potassium, and magnesium in it that are ideal for people who have difficulty sleeping or are stressed out. . . . You can also wrap halibut steaks in the fronds and bake it."

Like anything in the wild, seaweed isn't predictable, so we had no idea what else we would find. "It's not a grocery store out here," said Bernard.

As we wandered, Bernard pointed out *Costaria costata*, which looks like a big quilt and is great for soaking with in the bathtub because "it oozes an aloe vera-like gel that's excellent for your skin and good for body and muscle aches," she said. We also found plenty of *Egregia*, which looks like a feather boa and can be pickled, added to soups and stir fries, or used to make a "deadly martini," according to Bernard, who likes to experiment in the kitchen.

"I give these seaweed barbecues and people come and try all these things — salads, broths, pies, sauces, and condiments," all made with seaweed, she said.

We continued wandering through a seaweed field, noticing all the species underfoot. They



KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Diane Bernard leads a tour on a seaweed gathering expedition — it's her business — on Vancouver Island, B.C.

came in reds, greens, and browns, and a huge variety of textures. Some had rippled edges, felt like wax paper, or were paper thin. Others, like *Pterygophora*, had fronds that stuck out and gave them a crazy-hairdo look.

"Are any of the seaweeds poisonous?" someone asked.

"No, but there's one type, called *Desmarestia* or 'acid kelp,' that isn't edible," said Bernard. "It won't harm you, but it will make you sick. As with any type of wild foraging, you have to be careful."

While you're in the area, enjoy a meal at the Sooke Harbour House, which has been incorporating Bernard's fresh seaweeds into its soups, salads, meat dishes, and even breads since 2001 (as of 2009, her seaweeds have achieved organic certification by the US Department of Agriculture and the Organic Crop Improvement Association, or OCIA International). I tried a delicious creamy shrimp soup with a scoop of *Alaria*, an olive-green seaweed, on top. Chef Edward Tuson served the soup with a bubbly

rose wine that made the seaweed flavor come alive without being overpowering.

Bernard has also developed a full line of organic skincare products, called *Seaflo*, that she supplies to spas across North America. Sapphire Day Spa in Victoria, about 45 minutes east of Sooke, uses Bernard's sea salts in its body scrubs, foot scrubs, and nail treatments, and offers seaweed body wraps and facials.

"Seaweeds go across the cell wall, take out what you don't need, like excess sodium and excess fluids, and pull in what you do need, like essential minerals and vitamins," says Heidi Sherwood, owner of Sapphire Day Spa. "They have tremendous therapeutic and long-lasting benefits."

Some people may still think that seaweeds are ooey, gooey, and slimy, said Bernard, but they are starting to realize that what's good for you internally is also good for you externally.

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