IN THE WEEDS

These days it seems as if everyone is wild for wild food. As chefs, home cooks, and weekend wanderers take to public parks and distant meadows to forage everything from sumac to spicebush berries, one writer picks up her gloves and clippers and joins the hunt—with a little help from the Audubon Society.

BY CHARLOTTE FRIEZE

PHOTOGRAPH BY GENTL & HYERS
It's the thrill of the hunt, the discovery of a huge cache of chanterelles in the evergreen woods, the savoring of spicy Queen Anne's lace seeds.
possible, the critical role-conservation plays in protecting our natural resources. To emphasize this message, New Jersey Audubon was holding its annual benefit dinner at Daniel, serving a menu featuring food foraged on properties under its stewardship.

So on an unseasonably warm March morning, I hopped into the back of a Giant New Jersey Audubon vans, following the Pauls Mill Road to what was the next stop. Turning the underbrush entrance to the garden of Watters Wholesale Center was more of a challenge. A small hand-painted sign identified a barely visible dirt lane. Following the winding track through the farmland and wildlife habitat, I crossed a scenic footbridge and a small mill, under the shadow of the golden yellow and purple wildflowers, taking in the beauty of the Audubon’s efforts to protect the natural environment.

It was raining lightly, and as we walked in the rain, the first few items of the menu were presented. The bread, a mix of white and whole wheat flour, was served with a selection of local cheeses and preserves. The first course was a fresh salad, featuring a mix of local greens, topped with a light vinaigrette dressing. The main course was a grilled chicken breast, served with a side of roasted vegetables and a mushroom risotto.

After dinner, we were treated to a short presentation by the Audubon staff, highlighting their ongoing projects and initiatives. The evening concluded with a silent auction, featuring items donated by various local artists and businesses.

As we walked back to our vehicles, the rain had subsided, and the sky was beginning to clear. The peaceful ambiance of the Audubon center was a fitting backdrop for the evening’s events, and I left with a newfound appreciation for the efforts being made to protect and conserve our natural resources.

With urban foraging on the rise, there are now guided tours and classes—even a Los Angeles map that locates “public fruit.”

One of the plants we gathered that day was the valerian. It’s a native plant that grows in a variety of habitats, including fields, meadows, and along roadsides. It’s one of the plants that we gathered that day, and it’s a great example of how foraging can be both educational and enjoyable. The taste of the plant is slightly sweet and mildly aromatic, and it’s a great addition to any foraging enthusiast’s list.

With the season of spring just beginning, I’m excited to get out and explore the wonders of nature. Whether it’s foraging for wild edibles or simply enjoying a walk in the woods, there’s nothing like the feeling of connecting with the natural world.

Photograph by Gentl & Hyers