

Forward into the wild on Suffolk food safaris

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Polly and Tim Robinson are taking tourism to places it has never been before with their hands-on food-themed outings. **Sarah Chambers** got a taste of their Food Safaris as she went on the hunt for wild food around the Blythburgh estuary



A WILD Food Safari conjures up images of near lethal encounters with dangerous plants and beasts. So arriving at the Henham estate, near Southwold, to be initiated into the mysteries of foraging in the wild brought with it a frisson of apprehension.

Food Safari, the brainchild of Tim and Polly Robinson, takes tourism in Suffolk into a different dimension, allowing participants to get up close and personal with food, before enjoying the finished product, beautifully prepared, over a leisurely lunch.

Thankfully, the experience is more a journey of the mind than a forced march across miles of open countryside, and the plants we are seeking in the depths of the Suffolk countryside don't get more dangerous than the occasional encounter with a nettle.

Tim and Polly's food tourism foray began after the couple moved to Suffolk to begin a new chapter in their lives. "We moved to Framlingham last year because Tim grew up in Suffolk and my mother now lives in Norwich. We wanted a better quality of life and for the children to grow up closer to their grandparents," explains Polly.

"The great food and drink available here in pubs, cafes and from farm shops and delis was a factor in our decision to move to Suffolk – such a contrast from St Albans where we lived for a few years after the children were born.

"We set up Food Safari because we're both really interested in food and cooking and where food comes from."

When they lived in London, the Robinsons would shop at local farmers' markets most weekends and often went to Borough Market because they enjoyed coming into contact with food producers, and seeing their passion and commitment to their product.

Over time, they built up relationships with several producers to the point where they would go and visit their dairy farm, orchard or market garden.

"This made me think wouldn't it be a great idea to facilitate behind the scenes visits to food and drink producers in Suffolk. The idea was to take people one step beyond a traditional cookery school so before you cook and eat you go back to see where the food was made, grown etc and meet the people behind it. In our experience people who've dedicated their lives to producing food have a great story to tell and are passionate and inspiring."

The safari takes in some of the county's most striking scenery, starting at Henham,

trekkers enjoy a well-earned and adventurous lunch, taking the palate on its own educational journey.

Delicious and still warm flapjacks and coffee greet us on arrival at the lovely Henham estate, and Hector Rous, the son of the estate's Australia-based owner, the Earl of Stradbroke, known as the "Aussie earl" is there, along with Polly and Tim, to learn about the natural and free plant resources he can exploit in his own backyard.

"I met these guys (Polly and Tim) and I think they are really passionate about food and local food and it really fits with what we are doing at the estate. I think we are all quite passionate about food and this is learning about what we can forage from our own environment," says Hector.

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Mark Dorber, owner of the Anchor Inn, is also present, and our guide for the day is Jacky Sutton-Adam of the Cambridge Cheese Company, who has developed an expertise in the foraging of wild food.

She casts her eye knowledgeably over an uncultivated area against a kitchen garden wall and discovers a wild food feast within minutes.

"Foraging by its very nature is completely opportunistic, very pragmatic," she tells us.

So while you might head out in search of one particular ingredient, you may discover it is past its best or already exploited by a fellow-forager, but find something equally interesting during the course of your wanderings.

"I end up going there and someone's got there before me," she says. "Because of that, I now grow most of my foraging foods in my garden but I still go out."

an occasional nibble of edible plant life.

The first wild food stalwart on Jacky's menu is the nettle, where she selects just a few of the most tender top leaves of the youngest plants. It's one thing to know a plant is edible, she explains, but your work is wasted if you come away with something that doesn't taste good.

"You can use it as a real cut and come again crop," she says.

Ground elder is also there in good quantities, and is another forager's mainstay.

"It has been cut back and it's nice and fresh and I always look for ones that are young and tender. I look for the nice young almost slightly shiny looking leaves," she says.

She recommends treating your wild food crop like a spinach, broccoli or asparagus, cooking and preparing it in a similar way.

She selects and harvests her crop with a light snap of the finger.

"I try to be selective in the field and it's really interesting that you can use your hearing to select some ground elder," she says.

"Your finger tips tell you so much about the quality of the plant."

Cleavers, also to be found among the green mass, can be a good detox, she says, and as well as being free, many wild food plants are very high in vitamins and minerals.

"There's plenty of stuff you shouldn't eat or there's even more stuff that you can eat but isn't worth it," she adds.

"I only pick when I'm 100% sure I'm picking what I think I'm picking. No maybes about it."

One of the would-be foragers is worried about the possible presence of heavy metals and other pollutants within plants.

Jacky recommends not using areas which have recently been sprayed, are next to a main road, are popular dog-walking areas or which have been picked up chemically in other ways. If there are pollutants in the ground, the plant will suck them in, she warns.

"Pollutants are easy to absorb by plants so always try to look for good, clean plants where there's no spraying or little car traffic," she says.

We move on to the Blyth estuary where the scenery steals the show, but we successfully get to grips with our sea purslane and samphire



RECIPES BY JACKY SUTTON-ADAM

Three cousins salad recipe

The principle ingredients for this dish, carrots, coriander seeds and ground elder leaves, all come from plants in the same botanical family, Umbelliferae. A lovely vegetable side dish, inspired by a carrot and cumin salad with coriander recipe from the Moro cook book.

Serves 4 – 6

Ingredients:

450g whole carrots
2 good handfuls young ground elder leaves, chopped coarsely
1 teaspoon coriander seeds
1 clove garlic
1 tablespoon olive oil
Juice of 1 small lemon
A sprinkle of caster sugar
Coarse sea salt
Black pepper to taste

Peel and boil carrots whole until tender. Drain, then leave to cool. Slice into 1/2cm chunks. Roast the coriander seeds in a dry pan over a medium heat for a minute or two and crush in a pestle and mortar.

Add the garlic and half a teaspoon of salt and pound everything to a paste. Mix the lemon juice, olive oil and a touch of sugar with the garlic and coriander mixture and then combine with the carrots. Add the ground elder leaves, and a grinding of black pepper then mix thoroughly and serve at room temperature.

Dead nettle bhajis

Nettles or many other wild foods can be used to make these. Why not try red clover flowers, stinging nettle tops, young comfrey leaves or hogweed flower buds.

Ingredients

30 dead nettle flowering tops – about 3cm in length
180g chick pea flour also known as gram flour of besan
2 teaspoons ground nut/corn oil
2 teaspoon coarse sea or rock salt
250ml cold water
Ground nut/corn oil for frying

Put the flour into a bowl and rub in

the ground nut oil. Stir in the spices and salt. Pour the water in a slow continuous stream while beating the mixture begins to thicken slightly. It should be of a pouring consistency, like double cream. Cover the bowl and let it rest for about half an hour to ferment slightly.

Heat about 5cm oil in a heavy bottomed saucepan until hot but not smoking (190C). You can test the temperature by dropping a bit of the batter in it. It should bubble and turn golden within 10 seconds. Dip the nettle heads into the batter, let the excess drip off, then place them gently into the hot fat.

Be careful not to fry too many at once, or the temperature will drop and they will stick together. Turn the tops over after a minute and when nicely golden, remove from the oil with a slotted spoon and place on several sheets of newspaper or kitchen towel to drain. Serve immediately.

private land, and to ensure that you are not over-zealous. Pulling plants up from the root is unnecessary and destructive, whereas topping them will encourage new growth.

"Regenerate the site by leaving a few healthy specimens untouched to complete their life cycle, and only take what you know you can use," she says.

Finally, we end our journey, appropriately enough, at the Anchor, where, while a wild food feast is prepared, we are guided to the pub vegetable patch, to be shown the wealth of wild foods growing around previously cultivated areas which are being rested. Even the common poppy has "lovely, lettuce" style leaves, but don't confuse them with the very different cultivated or other varieties, she warns.

We end our tour with a cautionary note.

"If you start pushing your boundary and think it's all right if you push the boundary of one thing, it gives you the mental attitude it's OK to push the boundaries," says Jacky.

"There's no room for making up and no room for maybe."

She recommends picking up with experienced

foragers and experts in botany, and learning from them before striking out on your own.

Polly and Tim, both aged 36, began their Food Safari adventure last September when they trialed the idea at the Aldeburgh Food and Drink Festival. Following on from the success of that, they decided to roll it out.

"We did our first proper event at the end of March, which was a good event with the Wild Meat Company. We took a venison carcass and a butcher did a demonstration of how to break it down," she says.

Other successful outings followed, including a pork-based safari including a farm walk around Blythburgh Free Range Pork, run by farmer Jimmy Butler, "which was a lot of fun", she says.

Polly and Tim became interested in the idea of setting up their venture after moving to Framlingham with their two young children, Bea, six, and Ned, four, who attend the town's Sir Robert Hitcham's primary school.

"We wanted them to grow up more in the countryside and closer to their grandparents and I suppose Framlingham is a bit like the

village I grew up in so I suppose it's that rather clichéd thing of wanting our children to grow up in a similar environment," says Polly.

"Tim grew up in Suffolk in Felixstowe and we always said we would move back to Suffolk and we moved back in July."

The couple met while they were studying at university in Newcastle, and afterwards lived in London for about 11 or 12 years.

"My background is really marketing and events but my aunt and uncle are organic farmers in north Wales and I suppose that's caused my interest in food," she says.

"I remember my aunt used to make her own butter and I remember my cousin wasting a load of butter and my aunt saying: 'Do you realise how much grass has been wasted?'"

Tim, whose background is in publishing, continues to work full-time, partly from home and partly in London.

They linked up with Mark and Sophie Dorber and from there developed the idea of a tour of the senses, from the "safari" element to food preparation, and finally to a communal meal at the Anchor, where participants can enjoy the food under scrutiny, beautifully prepared by Sophie, and matched up in the case of the wild foods with a stunning selection of fine beers, perfectly matched to each dish and selected by Mark, an expert in the field.

"Mark and Sophie immediately understood what we were trying to do," says Polly.

Back at the pub, we enjoy hors d'oeuvres of samphire and gram flour pancakes and top shoot tempura served with Green Jack's Summer Daze beer. We sit down to three cousin salad (see recipe), stir-fried sea cabbage and asparagus tips, nettle and feta flat bread and chicken of the woods risotto. Chicken of the woods is one of the fungi, found on willow trees, which Jacky feels confident about foraging, and it adds its own unique and delicious flavour to the dish. A perfect meal is rounded off with elderflower panacotta and a selection of cheeses.

"Food Safari is all about getting closer to real food. It doesn't get more real than growing in the wild," says Tim.

Polly hopes that they can team up with other food producers in order to create further culinary and food adventures.

"At the moment events are every three weeks or two a month but I would eventually like to do

one every week, but it will take me a while to get to this point. Obviously, this one, wild food, has captured everyone's imagination," she says.

Brewing days and bread making are just two of the ideas simmering in the background, and Polly also hopes to link up with accommodation providers to provide all-in packages for discerning tourists. She also sees potential for developing team-building or corporate bonding outings – they ran a sausage-making event, which created a very enthusiastic response with plenty of friendly rivalry. She also feels that Suffolk lends itself to this type of tourism, where the dots are joined to provide an experience to remember.

"I think Suffolk is becoming increasingly recognised as a good destination for a long weekend or even a full week family holiday. The weather may be less reliable so you maybe need something that's a focus," she says.

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