



# Food

## from the forest

One of the biggest trends seen by the Scottish food industry in recent years is the growth in demand for organic food. This trend has been driven largely by celebrity chefs, who have broadened consumers' horizons regarding the variety of ingredients and the methods by which they are produced. Not denying that Scotland still has some significant health problems, and failings in addressing these, nevertheless a significant number of Scottish consumers are now more informed than ever before about the food they eat.

This understanding is helping to facilitate a shift away from highly processed 'fast food' and towards food which is fresh, not processed or refined, and is organic and now, to some extent, wild-harvested. At Scottish Environment Week in February 2006, I attended a lunchtime presentation at the Scottish Parliament entitled 'Food as a route to environmental understanding', where several speakers and an MSP espoused exactly this trend and the importance of supporting both organic and wild foods in Scotland. I too fully support this idea, as wild food, and the associated health, cultural and social benefits which accompany it, are a significant part of the approach currently being piloted by Reforesting Scotland's Rural Alternatives project.

### Rural Alternatives

The Rural Alternatives project is a two-year initiative broadly based around developing community benefits from non-timber forest products (NTFPs). NTFP is a term which, unsurprisingly, people find rather academic and therefore 'wild forest products' [1] is sometimes preferable. The project has the remit to

recognise and increase the broad range of benefits which communities can obtain from local woodlands, with the specific objectives of enhancing people's understanding, appreciation and use of new and traditional NTFP knowledge and heritage and managing habitats for NTFPs and their income generation potential.

Rural Alternatives collaborates with four community groups based around Lochinver in Sutherland, the Sunart Oakwoods Initiative area in Lochaber, Kirkhill and Bunchrew near Inverness and the Doon of May in Dumfries and Galloway. So far a large number of initiatives have been developed by the communities, with help from the locally-based coordinators at each site. The mix of ideas and initiatives that have been developed in the first year has been broad but several have focused on wild foods from the forest. These have in turn been supported by the project through the provision of training workshops, which have allowed community members to develop specific knowledge and skills in their chosen interest areas. Three of the project sites so far have developed food-oriented interests.

### Sunart

The communities based around the Sunart area, in the Lochaber district, through the efforts of Isabel Isherwood, the local coordinator, and with support from Acharacle Community Company and local skills project, Sgilean na Coille, have focused on developing several food-oriented workshops. The first of these was a wild food workshop, which was attended by local chefs and focused on a variety of ways of preparing and cooking seasonally available food. The

course was held by Gill Gosnie of Ardshealach Lodge and looked at dishes using venison, brambles and wild-harvested fungi, such as chanterelle and wood hedgehog. Two of the workshop participants cook professionally and intend to use the recipes and ideas they encountered in future.

So there is great potential for this knowledge to add value to locally sourced forest produce and potentially contribute to boosting the local economy, which is an exciting prospect. The Sunart group also took part in a wild fungi identification workshop and a fungi foray, which was led by Graeme Walker, a member of the British Mycological Society. This focused largely on edible species and was very popular. There are future plans to look at honey production from forests and this would seem to offer great potential as many of the forest types common in the Sunart area are considered rich in tree species suitable for honey production.

### Kirkhill and Bunchrew

The Rural Alternatives project at Kirkhill and Bunchrew has benefited greatly from the practical wild food knowledge of the project's local coordinator, Les Bates, and his wife Sheila, whose business, Croft 7, is based largely on wild forest products. Consequently, ideas as to what could be used as food from the local Reelig woods and other nearby forest have come thick and fast.

A series of workshops have been held to train community members in the art of wine production using species such as meadowsweet, rowan berries, honeysuckle and elderflower, and in the production of jams, jellies, chutneys and syrups. Les and

Sheila's wine is famous, especially their pink elderflower wine, which is incredible. However, it was the broom flower wine which I was most intrigued to try after having heard that broom is, in fact, toxic. Two bottles later, with slight palpitations (I suspect from alcohol and nothing more) I am alive and invigorated and asking myself what all the fuss was about.

But a modicum of fear, or more appropriately phrased, 'respect for nature', seems to go hand in hand with harvesting from the wild and I remember vividly Marla Emery describing this as a common sentiment amongst wild product harvesters when she presented her seminal work [2] on wild product harvesting at 'The future of wild harvests in Scotland' seminar at Beaulieu in May 2006.



Photo: Isabel Isherwood

### Culag

The third project site is working with communities based around Lochinver in Sutherland through the Culag Community Woodland Trust. The local coordinator, Hilary MacDonald, has been in contact with North West Sutherland Food Links (see article on page 28) and there is the potential to provide them with wild food products should supplies be developed in the future. There are also plans to hold a joint celebration of wild and local foods with North West Sutherland Food Links as part of the Highland Year of Culture.

As far as the development of specific products goes, there was some initial

interest in the use of bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) as a source of 'fiddle-heads' (young bracken fronds) for food. This followed a visit from a Ukrainian contact who had suggested that there was great potential for this around Lochinver, where invasion by bracken is a serious problem. What an example that would be if a problem could be turned into an opportunity! However, unprocessed bracken is highly toxic and there seems to be a mix of opinion as to whether it could ever be made edible. That said, Ray Mears' latest series, 'Wild Food', currently airing on BBC2 has attempted to extract starch for food from bracken roots. The method they used involved drying and boiling several times to process the roots first and in the end they decided not to eat the resulting paste. The Culag group are

currently investigating a less risky use of bracken in their food chain, as an organic ash fertiliser and mulch, but it's still a win-win situation if they can get it to work.

Just as fascinating is the attempt being made to develop birch sap syrup as an enterprise. Although this is still at the business-plan stage, it is an unusual and innovative way to capitalise on what is a very common and under-valued tree species in Scotland. I also note with interest that birch sap is supposed to cure baldness (Queen Victoria was apparently a big fan) and being in need of this service myself, I will be following the production of this concentrated follicular-invigorator with much interest over the coming year!

### Food and learning

Of all the potential that wild forest products hold for human benefit in Scotland, it is probably in their use for food and drink that they are most recognisable. This, at least, was what the recent report from *Wild harvest from Scottish woodlands* by Marla Emery and others suggests [3] and the experience of working with the Rural Alternatives project certainly seems to support this. But in many ways it is academic to compartmentalise what we get from the forest in this way. Because forests provide much more than food for the belly and our immediate physical needs – wild products are also food for the imagination, a potential cornucopia of opportunities to develop new solutions and rejuvenate traditional ones to address the contemporary needs of Scotland's communities.

Forests as a source of food and drink have certainly been a recurring theme for products and workshops which have come out of the Rural Alternatives project. But I would hope that, come the project's end, people will have felt their lives enriched and their horizons broadened, to a new vision for forests, not as monocultures but diverse mosaics of habitats and species with the potential to provide a wide range of products and services and where humans have a healthier and more holistic working relationship with the land.

### References

- [1] The term 'wild forest products' was suggested at the Future for Wild Harvest in Scotland seminar, held in Beaulieu, near Inverness, in May 2006.
- [2] Emery, M., Martin, S., and Dyke, A. *Wild harvest from Scottish woodlands: social, cultural and economic values of contemporary non-timber forest products*, 2006, Forestry Commission. ISBN 0 85 538 695 9
- [3] See Table 2, p.5 of *Wild harvest from Scottish woodlands* (as above).

*Jake Paul is Reforesting Scotland's Rural Alternatives Project Co-ordinator. If you would like to find out more about the Rural Alternatives project please look at the Reforesting Scotland website (Rural Alternatives is listed on the left under 'Projects') or if you are interested in a new research and development project to support the Scottish NTFP/wild products sector visit [www.foresthavest.org.uk/](http://www.foresthavest.org.uk/) or contact Jake on T: 0131 554 4321 or E: [jake@reforestingscotland.org](mailto:jake@reforestingscotland.org)*