

for people who love local food

AUTUMN/WINTER 2012

# taste

## west sussex®

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ISSN 1756-6320





# EAT THE BEACH

Imagine a food that is free, plentiful, highly nutritious and if you live near the sea is easily found. The food is seaweed and it grows in abundance all along the West Sussex coast.

For hundreds of years fishermen who lived in isolated communities used seaweed as part of their staple diet. As the coastline was developed the knowledge of how to 'eat the beach' was gradually lost so that today seaweed is seen more as a nuisance than a nourishing food.

In Cornwall, Devon and Wales the tradition of making and eating fresh laver (a type of seaweed) and laverbread has continued, although it has died out elsewhere in the UK.

However, West Sussex is home to the UK's biggest producer of seaweed products.

Over 650 varieties of seaweed grow around the UK and of these about 35 have been used for food. Many of these more edible varieties grow along the West Sussex coastline.

Generally speaking seaweed comes in three colours. Green seaweed tends to grow higher up the beach, brown below the tide mark and red out in the deeper sea.

Among the varieties that grow along the Sussex coast are Sea Lettuce which has a soft, delicate flavour, Dulse which has traditionally been added to bread, Mosses which can be added to salads or soups, and

Sea Spaghetti which is great as a stir fried vegetable.

In the spring and early summer the seaweed has a milder flavour but you can harvest it all year round. Time your visit an hour before low tide so you can follow the water out and find seaweed that is still growing and attached to rocks. Don't rip or pull the seaweed but instead cut through the stem to allow regrowth. Try to take just a few plants from each area.

But before you go picking it might be best to read a book that will help you identify the right seaweed to eat. It is illegal to pick some varieties and there are others that could give you a mild stomach upset. As a general principle you should ensure your harvesting site is not near a sewage outfall and you should never eat your seaweed without first thoroughly washing it under tap water.

How you cook seaweed depends very much on the variety you have picked. In North Devon for example after a thorough wash commercial producers put the laver in a pot to simmer without water for around ten hours. Then it is minced and packaged before being sold.

Seaweed contains protein along with valuable trace

minerals, vitamins, and iodine. The Victorians believed that promenading on the pier and "taking the sea air" was good for health.

Today scientific research has shown they were right. Iodine in the air from seaweed can be absorbed through the skin and lungs. Many people are iodine deficient so the sea air can give a health boost.

Most people may only be familiar with seaweed through eating Sushi or Chinese crispy seaweed (which is made from vegetables). Indeed in Japan the health benefits from seaweed are taken seriously. Many Japanese mothers would not dream of sending their children off to school without their daily lunchbox containing some seaweed.

In fact it was an English woman called Kathleen Drew Baker who showed the Japanese how to grow seaweed commercially. Her research on a variety of seaweed known today as Nori revealed how it could be propagated. Today she is celebrated in Japan as the 'Mother of the Sea'.

Before her research, seaweed was known as the "gamblers harvest" in Japan because it was impossible to predict when the seaweed would appear.

But if you want to reap the benefits of seaweed without going to the trouble of harvesting it yourself West Sussex is home to Seagreens, the UK's biggest producer of seaweed products.

The company's HQ is based near Gatwick Airport. The company's founding idea was to make it easy for anyone to include at least a gram a day of the most nutritious seaweed in their daily diet.

Today the company's products can be found in leading supermarkets and health food stores. They can be used in all kinds of cooking or sprinkled raw on salads. Their product can help to bring out the natural flavour of the food as well as being a health substitute for table salt.

Seaweed is extremely versatile and has all kinds of culinary uses. It can be grilled, stir-fried, chopped or added to soups, stews, and salads.

In fact you may already be eating more seaweed than you realise. Manufacturers are increasingly using it as a thickening agent in foods such as ice cream, jams, soups, sauces and wine. It is also used in toothpastes and cosmetics.

If you do take to seaweed eating your greens could take on a whole new meaning.