

the art & business of foraging in aotearoa

In recent years, food foraging has become a growing practice amongst some of New Zealand's top restaurants and chefs. The practice is now considered by many as a symbolic measure of how involved and knowledgeable the chef is about the ingredients they are using, and how much they care about what they put on the plate.



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For some chefs, the focus is not only about the flavours, intrigue or beauty they bring to a plate, but also the story they can tell by incorporating the history and the landscape of the local area.

Local and seasonal are mantras in the industry and foraging seems to be the pinnacle of this ethos. The reach of social media has really spurred interest in the art of foraging on a global scale, and local chefs and foragers have slowly explored the practice on the New Zealand landscape, finding equivalent species on Kiwi soil to use in culinary dishes. Social media continues to be a place where chefs share information and creativity around the subject.

While there's a lot of buzz around "foraging", it's important to clarify exactly what we're talking about. Foraging refers to the act of searching for and obtaining vegetation and animals for the purpose of using or eating. However, only foraging of vegetation can be used commercially. Animals (such as

rabbits, goats, birds, and deer) and all seafood, including seaweed (apart from whitebait) are prohibited or covered by legislation – selling them without the proper licenses and rights can leave you with a hefty fine upwards of \$75,000 or \$300,000 for your business.

But if you do find a patch of wild blackberries, what do you need to know to take them from the bush to the plate? Firstly, you need to know what you are looking at. Some foragers spend hundreds of hours researching their targets and others learn from the experience of others. There are several great guides to wild foods available, including one by legendary forager Peter Langlands. Be very sure you know what you are collecting and check, check and check again.

Get permission from land owners and ask them about the area you're looking to forage. This is really important as they will know about any sprays being used, such as Roundup, or possible

contamination from other sources. Contamination could come from animals, effluent runoff, waste storage areas or buried pits, and many pesticides and herbicides. Don't assume that it's safe just because it looks clean. For land administered by DOC, the rules applying to the taking or collecting of feathers, shells and other native/natural materials (and also plants and minerals) vary, depending on whether the relevant land is a national park, a reserve, or a conservation area, which will involve differing considerations and requirements. The safest thing to do is to seek prior permission from the relevant DOC office.

Once you have the items back at your establishment, check their identity again to be sure. Then wash and sanitise them before use. There are several social media groups and websites that you can cross reference your haul and get opinions from others.

In the end, you are serving it to the public so if you make them sick, it's on you.





It would be a great idea to be able to show a verifier your process to ensure the item is safe. For example, your process could be that you researched the item and can identify it, you know that it's safe from contamination, you've cleaned and sanitised it, and you've informed your customers. You could even create a safety data sheet for the items you forage for reference.

Some guidelines to consider:

- When you find something to forage, don't take too much. A rule of thumb to follow is the 1/3 rule: take at most 1/3, leave 1/3 for others, and leave 1/3 for regeneration.
- Mushrooms are very dangerous and you need to be extremely sure about what you're picking. Check them again back in the kitchen in different light and then check each mushroom again individually.
- Most foragers will tell you they don't do it to save money. If this is your goal for foraging, it's likely that this will not be a winning business strategy.
- Forage away from where regular human traffic occurs. For example, don't take anything from the side of the road, near houses, or around industrial areas. Contamination is much more possible in these high-traffic areas.
- Any weeds from waterways – like watercress – need to be cooked as some pathogens can't be washed away.
- If in doubt – even a slight doubt – don't eat or serve it!

It's a way of life. I live and breathe it. The Banks Peninsula is one of the top foraging spots in New Zealand so it makes sense to do so for our restaurant [but] it's not for everyone.

–GIULIO STURLA, ROOTS RESTAURANT



Foraging gives chefs a much more diverse range of produce including some really special pieces of our national identity.

—PETER LANGLANDS,
CANTERBURY FORAGER

Whilst foraging can be an amazing and rewarding activity, it may not be right for your business. This will depend on how much time you have to do the research and ask the right questions. Keeping your customers safe is of utmost importance so ensuring the produce you do forage is both tasty and not poisonous is crucial. Keep in touch with your local council or your local certifier and don't be surprised when they come to check in.

Sally Johnston, Food and Beverage Manager at New Zealand Food Safety, MPI gave us some clarity on technicalities around commercial foraging.

Hunting and gathering wild food from our land, rivers, lakes and surrounding ocean is a traditional part of New Zealand culture. However, people should be aware of the risks, restrictions and rules of wild food, and food safety.

—SALLY JOHNSTON, FOOD & BEVERAGE
MANAGER, NEW ZEALAND FOOD
SAFETY, MPI

She states that under the Food Act 2014, food businesses (including commercial food harvesters) are given greater flexibility to manage food safety risks. The Food Act helps strengthen food safety in New Zealand, through a modern and common-sense approach – everyone working in the food industry has a responsibility to make sure that the food sold is safe and suitable to eat.

Johnston comments “When it comes to trading foraged produce in restaurants, for instance, the bottom line is it must be safe and suitable (it won't make people sick, it meets compositional and labelling requirements, and is in the condition the customer expects it to be).”

Where do bugs fit in?

“The rules around foraging for bugs for commercial sale as food are not as clearly defined, as the risk processes are not as well established,” says Johnston. “In this case, the forager is more likely to need a custom Food Control Plan under the Food Act. In a custom plan, the forager must identify the range of food hazards that may occur wherever they gather plants and/or bugs, and how they manage the risk of these arising in the products they sell. Existing research and analysis indicates that the main way of managing key risks is to ensure that what the bugs were eating was safe and not contaminated.”

If an establishment is conducting research on foraged items while keeping informed on contamination issues and believe the products are safe and suitable to consume. Is this good enough according to MPI?

Johnston comments that “When it comes to foraging food that is then sold, the operator needs to do some due diligence around what they are gathering, and where they gather it from. They can do this in a number of ways, but at all times must ensure the food is safe and suitable. The commercial forager will need to be registered under the correct Food Act 2014 plan or programme, and will need to find a food safety verifier who will check that good practices are followed that ensure the foraged products are safe.”

In most cases, someone foraging for wild plants for commercial sale as food, will need to have a registered National Programme 1 under the Food Act 2014. A National Programme 1 can be registered with local councils. There are some risks to manage for commercial food plant foraging, including the safety of the location the plants were extracted from (i.e. any danger of chemical contamination, toxic algae...) and the cleaning and handling processes used for the plants.

If an establishment did something that resulted in poisoning or sickness, what could possible consequences be?

The Food Act states that the onus is on the operator of the food business to take all reasonable steps to assess and confirm that food sourced for sale by the business is safe and suitable.

"If a food business did something that resulted in poisoning or sickness, the first priority is to make sure no one else gets ill and the food business puts in place appropriate actions to prevent a recurrence," Johnston advises. "Action, including prosecution, may be considered depending on the circumstances. This would depend on a number of factors, including how many people got sick, the seriousness of the illness and whether there was negligence involved".

If this is all new to you, start with some easy-to-find and easy-to-identify items for yourself and family. For most of the top foragers, it's a way of life and not just a trend. Make sure that making this addition to your operation fits in with your business values and goals, and you're not just doing it for the sake of keeping up with food trends or cutting costs.

If you wish to use foraged ingredients but you don't think foraging is quite right for you, New Zealand has some great suppliers in the industry that have done the work for you. Other alternatives you could consider include growing to order the items you want to use, which also eliminates some risk for your business. Lastly, if you have the space to grow your own produce onsite or in a known location, many wild and heirloom varieties can be grown this way with sustainable practices and controlled known risks.

Foraging Resources

Maximum Residue Levels for Agricultural Compounds
mpi.govt.nz/document-vault/11329

Te Kai Manawa Ora Marae Food Safety Guide
mpi.govt.nz/document-vault/1053

Wild Capture – wild foods and foraging – NZ
facebook.com/forageNZ

Where Do I Fit?
mpi.govt.nz/food-safety/food-act-2014/where-do-i-fit

From Foraging to Fine Food

Nestled on the shores of Lake Rotama is a small close-knit community surrounded by pristine native bush. The local Iwi are the care takers and each day come rain, hail or shine they take their kete and sustainably forage for edible New Zealand Indigenous herbs on behalf of the NZ Premium Foods team. Kawakawa, Horopito and Pikopiko are the most common but there are many other examples such as Kareao which is also known as Supplejack vine, Ramarama berries and Hakeka, a delicious edible fungus! These have been used by Māori for centuries as a food, nutritional and medicinal source. The team returns from mahinga kai, they carefully clean and pack the **foodies** New Zealand Native Herbs, and freight them overnight to the distribution teams, who then deliver to the eateries creating 'Kiwi Cuisine' around New Zealand.

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