

The Wildcrafting Brewer

Creating Unique Drinks and Boozy Concoctions
from Nature's Ingredients

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INTRODUCTION

Sugar Beers, Herbal Meads, Odd Sodas, and Funky Wines

This book is about brewing in general—not just making beer but having fun fermenting all kinds of delicious concoctions with whatever we find on offer from nature, be that the wilderness or our backyards or gardens. We’re talking odd, wild, and primitive beers, sodas, herbal meads, inebriating (or not) infusions, and many other types of fermented drinks that are sometimes hard to classify. It’s about exploring boozy possibilities in creative ways, the way humans have for a very long time. What’s not to like about that?

My big discovery when working on this book was the fact that brewing is really a continuous, linear activity. We like to chop up this creative line into small, discrete segments and impose etiquettes on them: *That’s a beer*, *that’s a wine*, or *that’s a soda*. But the truth is that humans, since the dawn of time, have been brewing boozy concoctions that often transcend regular labels. You’ll find all kinds of interesting drinks that are really a blend between beers and wines, or sodas and beers. And it’s all good: Brewing should be about creativity, flavors, and in some cases medicinal applications. Like many enjoyable activities, it’s a lot less fun when you’re told what you can or cannot do.

It’s an interesting statement for an author to make, but I would like you to look at this book not in terms of precise recipes you can make at home but more as a book of concepts and ideas that will enable you to explore and create with your own local ingredients. The fun is really in dreaming up and brewing your own delicious drinks, so look at the techniques described here and see what you can come up with!

If there is an overall message I want to convey, it is that brewing is fun, adventurous, and extremely rewarding. Don’t be afraid to experiment: You might make a few mistakes here and there, mostly in the beginning, but those will be dwarfed by the countless yummy drinks you’ll create and be

successful at making. Hopefully the basic procedures in this book will help, and I can't wait to hear about the delicious beverages you'll make with the plants surrounding you.

If you already have experience in making beers, you may find some of the methods described here a bit primitive and unusual: the use of molasses and other sources of sugar (including insect honeydew) instead of malt; wild yeast extraction from local fruits, flowers, and plants; unusual bitter wild plants instead of regular hops; and the overall lack of grains. I hope this book will nevertheless inspire you to explore your own terroir and possibly integrate some local flavors into your brews.

The most important message from this book is really: Explore, have fun, and create! That's the stuff life should be made of.

On Picking Wild Plants, or Foraging

Like many of our human activities, foraging can be done for good or evil: It can help the environment or intensify sustainability issues. Over the years I've learned to streamline my activities so as to minimize my impact on nature. It's been a learning curve with trials and errors, but these days I actually think foraging can be done such that you help your local environment, by removing non-native plants (around 90 percent of what I pick) and harvesting sustainably or growing the native plants you need. As far as I remember, at this point I've pretty much planted all the native berries and plants I use in this book in much larger quantities than I'll ever use, mostly on private lands owned by friends.

You don't need to be a fanatic tree-hugger to see that our planet faces several real problems such as pollution, climate change (naturally occurring or not), human expansion, loss of natural habitat, extinctions, and much more. At this point in our evolution, we absolutely need to be part of the solution, and this even applies to the simple activity of harvesting wild plants. We must make sure that our activity of picking wild plants for food, drinks, or medicine is done carefully with environmental health and integrity in mind.

Picking plants and berries for food or making drinks can connect us back to nature. It is a sacred link that, as a species, we all share. We are here because our ancestors had a very intimate relationship with nature, knew which plants to use for food or medicine, and, in many instances, knew how to sustainably interact with their wild environment. No matter where we live, it's part of our cultural DNA.

I don't think the impulse of trying to save nature by protecting it at all costs with a "look don't touch" mentality will work. Growing up in

Belgium, my love for nature came through a deep interaction with my wild surroundings. If you truly love something, you will take care of it and make sure it's still there for generations to come.

When I was a kid, raising animals, growing food in our garden, and picking wild berries, nuts, and plants wasn't considered weird or special—it was a normal part of life. The knowledge was kept by elders, who would pass it on to the next generation. In many modernized countries this cycle of transferring knowledge has been lost. Very valuable and nutritious food plants such as dandelion, mallow, and others are looked upon as “weeds,” and TV commercials gladly promote the use of toxic chemicals to destroy them. The people I've seen trashing the wilderness are the product of our current society: If you don't know or understand the value of something, you simply won't care for it.

So do it the right way! Respect the environment, learn which plants are rare or illegal to pick, don't forage plants in protected areas (natural preserves and the like), work with native plant nurseries, and educate yourself on how to grow native plants and remove non-natives.

If you take from nature, work with her and make sure you always plant more than you'll ever harvest so that future generations will still have the same creative opportunities that you do—or more.