

## CHAPTER 1

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# Rediscovering the Past

In my last book, *The New Wildcrafted Cuisine*, I started exploring the concept of creating alcoholic beverages using local plants, sugar sources, and even yeasts and bacteria to represent, through taste, the various environments or regions we live in.

For example, if you live in Vermont, Maine, or New Hampshire, you can create delicious fermented beverages or “beers” representing a specific forest, mountain, or territory by using what’s available in that location: maple or birch syrup, wild sassafras roots, spruce, birch bark, white pine, yarrow, turkey tail or chaga mushrooms, local yeast from flowers, wild berries, or barks, and so on. You could call it *hyperlocal brewing*. I’ve found from my own actual research and experience that the number of possible ingredients you can use is mind boggling.

Based on the amount of emails and feedback I received, the brewing section of that first book ended up being quite popular, and probably for good reason. Many people (myself included) find it thrilling to be able to explore a location and create drinks such as beers, wines, or sodas that are a true representation of the site.

From a sustainability perspective, once you find local ingredients that you can use, you can also replant them and thus contribute to their long-term viability. Some of the people who have attended my classes and workshops are now growing native plants in their gardens or on private properties for culinary uses. It’s another way you can help the local environment and support its unique native flora and fauna.

In the last couple of years, I’ve done much more experimentation with various types of brewing and wild yeast extractions, and have traveled to other areas of the country and Europe. Today I’m still as excited as I was when I started years ago to create interesting fermented concoctions with what each specific region has to offer. While teaching food preservation

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Primitive brewing in a clay pot—open fermentation.

and fermentation at an environmental college in Vermont, after a few days of education about the local flora from fellow plant experts, we were able to create a primitive beer using plants, bark, and berries from their own private forest, extract local wild yeast from flowers, and use their homemade maple syrup (from the same forest) for fermentation. It was so good, I'm still dreaming about it.

In this book, my interest is to share with you not only the techniques I use but also the philosophy and approach behind them. Wildcrafted brewing is really a work in progress—and if you think about it, fermentation has been a work in progress since the dawn of humanity. To this day, thousands of years after the first primitive brews were made, we still obsess about creating the perfect beer or wine.

Honestly, when writing *The New Wildcrafted Cuisine*, I thought that my approach to cooking and creating alcoholic beverages was probably a bit too eccentric or unusual, but it ended up being well received. Since I was a kid, I've taken pleasure in researching, experimenting with, and mixing things. Fifty-five years later it seems that nothing much has changed. I find it thrilling to research new flavors and create interesting condiments for people to experience. And of course I use the same approach of mixing methods, ingredients, and techniques with beverages—especially fermented ones.

In fact, I even mix the definitions of *brewing*. Take a look at the two definitions of the word:

**BREWING:**

- (1) to prepare (as beer or ale) by steeping, boiling, and fermentation or by infusion and fermentation.
- (2) to make (a beverage) by boiling, steeping, or mixing various ingredients: brew tea.

Most of my alcoholic beverages—sodas, wines, and what I somewhat loosely call beers—are closer to fermented infusions of a sort: mixes of plants, sugar sources, fruits, and sometimes malted grains designed to achieve interesting flavors. As a wild food instructor and culinary researcher, I tend to concentrate on what I call the true flavors of a local “terroir,” which, from my perspective, means using what can be found in the original landscape as opposed to nonlocal or recently imported plants and ingredients (which would therefore include such things as hops).

For example, when I was visiting Vermont one June, making a local forest beer meant brewing with blue spruce branches and needles, wild sassafras roots, chaga mushrooms, white pine needles, maple syrup, local yeast from dandelion flowers, yellow birch bark and branches, and so on. If

I had showed up there in September, due to the different flora in late summer, I probably would have ended up brewing a completely different type of beer, which would have included local berries, for example. You can make many types of “forest beer” from the same forest, and each batch will have different flavors based on the season.

By the way, and just to make it clear, there is absolutely nothing wrong with brewing regular beers; in fact, as a good Belgian, I enjoy them very much and love to brew some as well. We’re just dealing with a different approach, very much based on nature and the bounty she provides.

To give a bit of background information and so you understand my approach a bit more, I became interested in the subject of brewing around ten years ago. However, at the time I wasn’t especially interested in making sodas, beers, or wines; I was in the process of researching all the various methods of food preservation that could be applied to local wild plants, and I saw brewing as another way to preserve what I was collecting. Pretty much in the same category as pickling, canning, dehydrating, or fermenting.

In my obsession to find culinary uses and preservation methods for my foraged goodies, though, making fermented drinks based on what I was able to collect quickly rose pretty high on my list. If you know how to make interesting and delicious fermented drinks, you can create countless other ingredients and condiments such as sauces, vinegars, and pickles, or even use them for cooking.

Given my upbringing in Belgium, and at the same time being so close to France (the French customs office was literally on the other side of the street), I was familiar with cooking with wine or beers; it was a very traditional way to add interesting and local flavors to food. One of my favorite dishes that my father used to make was a traditional French/Belgian recipe for Easter: roasted leg of lamb cooked in the oven with beer and Dijon mustard. I don’t recall the beer he used exactly, probably a type of fruity lambic, but the dish was so good that leftovers would never last very long in the fridge. My trusted companion, a Jack Russell terrier, would make a point of waking me up in the middle of the night, and together we would make quick work of the yummy leftover lamb, leaving no evidence behind after the raid but a clean bone in my dog’s bed.

My approach was to study brewing from a forager’s perspective. It was an unusual point of view with a strong emphasis on utilizing what I was able to find.

You may think there aren’t that many things out there to brew with, but after many years of research and experimenting, I’ve found well over 150 possible ingredients that can be used in the creation of my wild beers and other fermented concoctions. We’re talking wild berries, plants, and

barks; fruit molasses, tree saps, or wild honeydew as sugar sources; leaves, roots, wild yeast, insects, and much more.

One of the fascinating aspects of what I do is the fact that very often I realize that I'm not really creating anything new; I've simply rediscovered some lost knowledge. A good example is the use of willow bark as a bittering ingredient for beer. I thought I had an original idea when I used it in some of my beers, only to find out quickly that it was used in traditional medicinal beers and even still is used in Germany to make a specific style of beer (Grätzer beer).

On the other hand, you can discover new possibilities from time to time. For example, in Southern California there are few if any recorded native uses of local plants for alcoholic consumption, but we do have some very interesting species such as California sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*) and yerba santa (*Eriodictyon californicum*). These are fantastic to flavor beers and were used medicinally as tea in the past.

California sagebrush is related to wormwood and mugwort, both herbs that were used instead of hops in older unhopped beer recipes. Yerba santa is a local aromatic herb that was used as a medicinal (cold and flu) tea. The flavor is really in the sticky sap, and if you boil it, you end up with quite a bitter tea. Because of these characteristics, both plants are used as bittering agents, like hops, in some of my primitive brews. You'll even find sagebrush and yerba santa beer recipes later on.

With a bit of research and experimentation, you can also create unique regional alcoholic drinks. By using what you have available in your vicinity, you're actually going back in time and rediscovering how the more refined and civilized beverages of today were invented in the first place. For example, the current near-obsession with using just hops and grains to make beer is somewhat of a modern anomaly in the history of brewing, which spans thousands of years—if not tens of thousands.

The quest to rediscover those long-lost flavors is an amazing journey. In his book *Uncorking the Past*, author and fermented beverages archaeologist Patrick E. McGovern made some fascinating discoveries about early alcoholic brews by analyzing residues from pottery. It seems our ancestors, in their quest for the perfect intoxicating libation, didn't hesitate to mix various brewing techniques, local ingredients, and sugar sources.

One of the earliest beers, over 9,000 years old and analyzed from dried residues in pottery at a Neolithic burial site in China, was found to have been made of mixed fermented ingredients such as grapes or hawthorn fruit, honey, and rice. I was absolutely thrilled to find a whole chapter devoted to early European brews, too. Analysis of pottery vessels and cauldrons from Scotland, Denmark, Spain, and other European countries

revealed a similar approach to making inebriating drinks. Their mixing of grains, berries, honey, grapes, and bittering or flavorful herbs and spices made me feel much more confident regarding my unusual concoctions.

I found it very interesting that my use of mostly foraged ingredients to create my own brews resulted in the creation of, apparently, very similar drinks. In fact, many of the same plants I've used, such as mugwort, willow, yarrow, wild berries, and birch resin, were found in some of the residues that McGovern analyzed.

From my perspective the ancients' approach to brewing makes a lot of sense. You create with what you have and try to make it as flavorful as possible. It's really the basic rule for primitive brewing.

Just as I do now, ancient peoples created all kinds of brews with what could be found in their immediate environment; the concept of mixing all kinds of local ingredients to create a complex drink came naturally to them. If you think about it, raw honey is an awesome source of wild yeast, so it would be an obvious choice to mix into your brewing solution, especially if you lived in a colder climate such as Scotland, Sweden, or Denmark. It's also a good sugar source, albeit more limited and valuable than grains.

Maybe my own ancestors reached the same conclusion I did: There are no real rules! If it's enjoyable, somewhat tasty, and does the job, you've done your work!



### *A Note on Wild Plants and Pregnancy*

I don't advise the use of wild plants or new types of food or beverages to anyone who is pregnant, especially when it comes to alcoholic beverages. Quite a few herbs and plants used in traditional brewing—horehound, licorice, wormwood, yarrow, mugwort, and many others—should be avoided during pregnancy. To be on the safe side, it's probably better to stay with your regular diet and wait until after your baby is born to experiment with alcoholic beverages and the recipes in this book.

## On the Use of Wild Yeast

I often use my local wild yeast when making sodas, beers, wines, and other fermented beverages. I have done my best in my recipes to accurately convey the amounts of sugar and yeast used, which usually results in the specific alcohol content desired in the final beverage. However, because of the (wild) nature of what I do, you probably will end up with variations from time to time.

I don't see these variations as a burden; they're simply a representation and an intricate part of nature. Over time and through your own experimentation, you will establish a close connection with the peculiarities of your local terroir.

For example, the rule stating that wild yeast will ferment up to a certain point and then die (usually around 5 percent alcohol) is *mostly* true, but guess what? To

this day, I continue to find exceptions. The yeast present on my local elderberries will produce a wine that can come close to 10 percent alcohol.

As a wild yeast source, raw honey is highly dependent on what can be found in the immediate environment. Over the years, I've had a couple of instances of beers or wines approaching 13 to 15 percent alcohol, which I attributed to the proximity of vineyards and the possibility of feral yeast—basically a takeover of a vineyard by the commercial yeast used to make wine.

From experience, I know that the same thing (a higher percentage of alcohol due to feral yeast) can happen if you make yeast starter from grapes purchased at the farmer's market or your local store.

So don't get discouraged if something doesn't work exactly the way you want it to the first time out. It's all part of establishing that special relationship with your local wild yeasts and their intricacies. If your yeast doesn't behave like you expected, work with it and feed it if necessary. Very soon you'll be able to tweak your recipes based on what you learn and create fermented masterpieces.