

Culinary call of the wild

Chefs, NAU tout value of foraging for native foods

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COTTONWOOD - On a recent Tuesday, chef Tom Pristash drove up to the rolling pastures here to forage for lamb's quarter, dandelions, mesquite beans and stinging nettles with a group of Northern Arizona University scientists.

The next week, he used that harvest and other wild food to create mesquite bean-crusting sea bass, sautéed amaranth leaves and roasted lobster mushrooms at Alchemy at CopperWynd Resort in Fountain Hills.

The gourmet dishes aren't just about unusual tastes but demonstrate a trend in harvesting wild food that Pristash hopes will continue. After a few years of using locally grown lettuce, organic carrots and in-season heirloom tomatoes, some chefs are looking to the wild for their next culinary inspiration.

Pristash and other chefs are working with NAU scientists pioneering the harvest of wild food statewide. The program, run by NAU's Center for Sustainable Environments, matches farmers and ranchers whose lands are filled with edible berries, nuts, roots and greens with chefs eager to add the wild foods to their menus.

The idea is to use food grown as close to the kitchen as possible: It cuts down on fuel use, helps protect soil and water, and usually means better taste. Wild foods could become as practical as they are eco-chic.

"It's a culinary and environmental movement, and although still very small, it is a cause worth supporting," Pristash said.

A geologist turned chef, Pristash learned while attending college in upstate New York to appreciate food the land naturally offered. The wild foods fit into his commitment to using local foods ripe with flavor and nutrients.

While chefs see wild food as new flavors, some farmers like the taste that wild food adds. And some farmers see the future in wild food.

As Tim McKibben, a Cottonwood farmer and wild-food harvester, said, "Society tends to think of people like me who believe in eating local food and wild food as the weird ones. But when a head of lettuce costs \$5 because of shipping costs, we will be the smart ones."

Worries over food safety also could stimulate interest in wild food. Although admittedly farfetched, advocates believe wild local food could be lifesaving if growing and shipping produce were disrupted by war or catastrophic weather.

In addition, wild foods are attracting followers because of their health and medicinal benefits. Like organic produce, wild foods grow free of chemicals and pesticides.

For the wild-food movement to go from novelty to mainstream, several factors must fall into place, depending on who gets involved and whether an efficient and economical food-distribution system can be established.

"I literally pick up wild greens from a rancher and take it to a restaurant door and say, 'Hey, do

you want this wild spinach for tonight?" " NAU ecologist Patty West said. "Let's just say the distribution system is in the beginning stages. It could use a shot in the arm."

Government grants to farmers, ranchers and foragers would make harvesting wild food economically feasible, according to John Kallas, Oregon-based publisher of *Wild Food Adventurer Newsletter*.

"Wild food is a niche, but niche is not such a bad idea. There are a lot of people who want high-quality, good-tasting food that is not available everywhere," he said.

Another option is to cultivate wild greens, such as lamb's quarter and wild spinach, to sell to restaurants and grocers.

NAU hopes its wild-food harvesting program eventually produces enough to sell at farmers markets and possibly at food markets that specialize in local and organically grown produce. That way, chefs and the public could start using wild food in dishes.

The same chefs whose commitment to local, in-season and organic produce in the 1990s converted scores of home cooks to the organic-food cause can help do the same with wild foods.

"Chefs are today's food celebrities. They serve as the portals for our food values and changing tastes. They started cooking with organic foods, and the public followed. If they cook with wild food, so will people at home," said Gary Nabhan of the NAU Center for Sustainable Environments.

The challenge is creating a food-distribution system in which harvesters sell the wild harvests at a price restaurants can afford and still make a profit.

"When Mother Nature is the gardener, you cannot control the rainfall and other factors that determine when food is ripe," West said.

In addition, wild foods such as amaranth, dandelions and lamb's quarters are seasonal and can be offered only as in-season menu specials.

Even in erratic doses, wild foods can play an important role in preserving food traditions and heritage. Simply put, this means restaurants serving foods eaten hundreds of years ago by Native American tribes, such as piñon-nut flavored stews.

"Our nation's food is becoming so homogeneous, but when chefs can feature local, wild foods . . . it links us to our past with powerful smells and flavors," Nabhan said.

Executive chef Sandy Garcia agrees and serves saguaro fruit and cholla buds at Kai at the Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort & Spa near Chandler. These native touches to his modern menu allow diners to enjoy new flavors while understanding ancient traditions.

Garcia, who occasionally accompanies experienced desert foragers, also buys cactus fruit from professional harvesters.

"People think of the desert as a desolate place, but there's an abundance of foods that grow naturally," he said. "Why leave it out there where it would just go to waste?"