

## ***Wild about Nettles***

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As the demand for fresh, local and seasonal increases, so does the popularity of foraged ingredients. Spring is the perfect time to delve into nature's wild offerings and, on the West Coast, there are many. Stinging nettle is an early spring green that many associate with the painful 'sting' and red welts that follow a close encounter with the plant. In reality, stinging nettle has a wonderfully rich flavour and may be put to good culinary use. Its vibrant, emerald-green colour excites food lovers at the potential of the season ahead, reminding us all that other tasty local ingredients, such as asparagus and fiddleheads, will be available soon.

Often considered a 'superfood' because of its high nutritional content, the nettle is rich in vitamin A and C, as well as iron, potassium, calcium and protein. In addition, nettles are said to improve circulation and kidney function. This nutrient-rich plant isn't only good for humans, though. Tea made from the nettle may be given to cows to increase milk production or chickens to accentuate the golden hue of the yolk. Although the stinging nettle is often considered a weed, it's also a natural deterrent for aphids, and provides strength to weaker plants when used in compost. The fibrous stems have even historically been used to make rope.

Stinging nettle is commonly compared to spinach because of its slightly nutty, earthy flavour. Like most greens, it wilts when cooked, but the nettle has a firmer texture than spinach. If prepared correctly, it's just as versatile. Nettle aficionados recommend using the plant in a seemingly endless list of ways: in soup, pesto, sauces, or even simply sautéed. In many cases, the leaves can be used as an appropriate stand-in for any mild green.

Be sure to exercise caution when foraging or preparing stinging nettle, though. The plant is covered in small, hollow hairs filled with formic acid, the toxin that gives the nettle its name. When cooked, the nettle loses its stinging properties but until then, handle with care. Use gloves and wear long sleeves to trim and wash the leaves, then cook thoroughly. Steaming is the most effective method of cooking because a quick sauté isn't enough to deactivate the sting. After cooking, some recommend wrapping the leaves in a towel and squeezing out the liquid, which can be reserved and used as tea.

Once the plant is cooked, it's safe to handle and the possibilities are numerous. Combine with sorrel for a lemony, fresh flavour, or puree, portion and freeze to use whenever convenient. Add it to pasta, quiche, polenta, or enjoy it on its own.

See this week's recipe box for a great stinging nettle recipe, compliments of Mara Jernigan.

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