



LEGAL HIGHS

Emma Freud on foraging

Raid nature's pantry — and first-aid kit — for the fruits of the forest and a primal pick-me-up

Emma Freud | Saturday November 04 2023, 12.01am, The Times

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Fungi perform a digestive magic on the food in our gut if we eat them

GETTY IMAGES

I wanted to explore weed gummies for this month's column, but my law-abiding editor said they don't qualify as legal highs. Meh. So instead I've turned to a different type of edible.

My foraging adventure on Hampstead Heath in north London was guided by George Fredenham, a professional chef and forager known as Flavour Fred. I was expecting him to show me some local, sustainable, organic salad ingredients. What he actually did was blow my mind.

On the appointed morning we walked past the regally planted, silent lawns of Kenwood House and into its adjacent woodland. It's a gloriously chaotic explosion of wild ferns, shrubs, trees and lush vegetation wrapped in a cacophony of birdsong. And for the next three hours Fred revealed some of the valuable jewels it is hoarding.

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Before Britain had Boots the Chemists we had Woodlands the Chemists. The wild plants that grow in so many British cities have the capacity to treat so many ailments. The small plantain leaves that you'll have trampled over on many a stroll are antiseptic plasters in disguise. They grow with handy little strings along their spine so you can wrap the leaf around an infected finger, and they also take the sting out of insect bites. It's Savlon, Anthisan and a plaster in one tiny piece of green magic. As we unearthed mushrooms Fred explained their kingdom on the forest floor: the fungi that survive by dissolving dead wood into compost and perform a similar digestive magic on the food in our gut if we eat them. We snacked on Fred's sourdough bread, made with a wild yeast that is cultivated from the bloom on foraged plums, which creates a probiotic that's better than a Yakult.

Most compelling was the hemlock water-dropwort that grows wild all over the banks of the lake. It's deadly toxic - a few drops of its poison are enough to kill you, while causing your facial muscles to contort into a sardonic smile. It was the poison of choice for the ancient Phoenicians who used it to euthanise the elderly while, as Fred put it, "the uncomfortable grin created the illusion of gratitude to the euthanisers".

So good, so worthwhile. But where's the high in foraging? It's in the euphoric discovery that nature has given us these ancient remedies to nurture and heal us. We've lost the oral tradition that handed down our ancestors' hard-won knowledge on how best to utilise these plants, but the respite is still there waiting for us - and it's free. We're surrounded by woodland first-aid kits and organic greengrocers. A modern journey to rediscover that ancient wisdom is inspirational.

£40, flavourfred.com/walks