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Quick, what comes to mind when you think seaweed? Is it decomposing matter strewn across the rocks, or a multi-million dollar industry that has the potential to do good things to the Island's economy?

Seaweed's Silver Lining

BY JOANNE HATHERLY

Special to the Times Colonist

Gardeners spread it on their compost heaps while spa therapists spread it on their clients.

It's served in the farm-feeding trough as well as at gourmet restaurants.

It's used to clean our teeth and some say it can shed our fat.

The most populous nations in the world want it and Canada has lots of it. What is it?

It's common seaweed.

Canada, with the longest coastline in the world, boasts the richest diversity of seaweeds. Yet only 1.3 percent of the world's seaweed crop is harvested from Canadian shores – less than 12,000 tonnes a year – compared with Asia's 12 million tonnes annually.

Diane Bernard, 50 owner of Outer Coast Seaweeds, works solely with wild seaweed that she harvests and provides fresh for spas and restaurants.

Bernard spent her childhood summers on the Magdalen Islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, where seaweed was a regular food item. She migrated to Vancouver Island and found that even though the West Coast enjoys a richer variety of seaweeds, they were hardly considered edible outside of the aboriginal and Asian communities.

Bernard says that when people think of seaweed, they think of masses of rotting kelp tossed on the shores by fierce storms. She says people need to look past the decomposing mounds to the tidepools to find fresh, edible seaweeds, still alive and growing like lettuce in a vegetable garden.

"It's as if I invited you to see my garden, but before you get to the lilacs and rhododendrons, you have to wade through my compost heap first," says Bernard.

To prove her point, she steps over the uneven, rocky surface of the low-tide zone into a clear-water tidepool that is thick with waves of green and red seaweeds. She snips off a burgundy-coloured ribbon of seaweed called *palmaria palmata*, more commonly known as dulse. She offers the blade (seaweed leaves are called blades) and challenges me to eat it. I take a small nibble and am surprised at the light saltiness and al-dente texture.

Bernard emphasizes that people shouldn't just show up on a beach and start picking, as there is one variety of seaweed, known as acid kelp, that leads to upset stomach when eaten.

"You need to learn about the varieties first," she says.

THE ICK FACTOR

If you are one of Vancouver Island's beach strollers, you've probably seen mounds of seaweed belched up on the shores after a storm. Little black bugs form a moving cloud over the seaweed, crabs scuttle underneath the blades and chewed-up chunks of white shells are salted all over the ropy stipes.

You don't see women lifting masses of kelp to exclaim, "I'm putting this in a vase!"

It was in the spirit of skepticism that I listened to the top-level chefs praise the epicurean glories of seaweed. I smiled and nodded as the chefs described their seaweed cooking methods, but all the while I was thinking, "liars."

But to prove it, I had to sample the seaweed. I lined my stomach with a few gulps of Maalox before heading out to the Sooke Harbour House where Chef Edward Tuson offered up a seaweed sorbet.

Setting my gag-reflex to "spew", I closed my eyes and gingerly licked the amber-brown stuff. It didn't taste bad. In fact, it was good. Tuson's culinary skill must have covered up the evil seaweed slime.

I accepted a dare to eat fresh seaweed from wild-harvester Bernard. She gave me a palm-sized blade. I tore off a small piece.

"That's not big enough to experience the flavour," said Bernard.

I nibbled. The wafer-thin blade was soft and velvety on my tongue. For a moment, I felt as though it was a hot summer day in my grandmother's garden and I was crunching down on green pea shells. OK, I'll admit seaweeds do not invoke the gag reflex.

But what about the spa where clients soak in seaweeds? I accepted spa therapist Michelle's offer of a seaweed treatment. In preparation, I drank a whole bottle of Maalox, although I wasn't sure it would help.

When I arrived at Michelle's Sooke studio location, she gave me a massage, obviously trying to numb my brain so that I wouldn't react strongly to the seakelp soak.

Just when my lungs were so relaxed they were in danger of forgetting to exhale, she led me to a candlelit room with a soaker tub. Inside the tub were –I am not kidding—two giant alligators. I put on my eyeglasses. They weren't alligators after all; they were giant seaweed blades that resembled alligators, even with my glasses on.

Setting my body reflexes to "leap", I slipped into the water under the giant kelp blankets. Instead of the dreaded slime effect, I found the kelp blankets felt like a layer of bubbles brushing against my skin. The kelp texture had the strength of leather but the soft feel of velvet.

As for claims made about seaweed improving the cardio-vascular system or regulating blood pressure, I was so mortified at the prospect of coming into physical contact with seaweeds that I forgot to check my heart rate and blood pressure before and after the treatment.

I guess I'll just have to go back for another spa session.

Joanne Hatherly

Courtesy of Joanne Hatherly