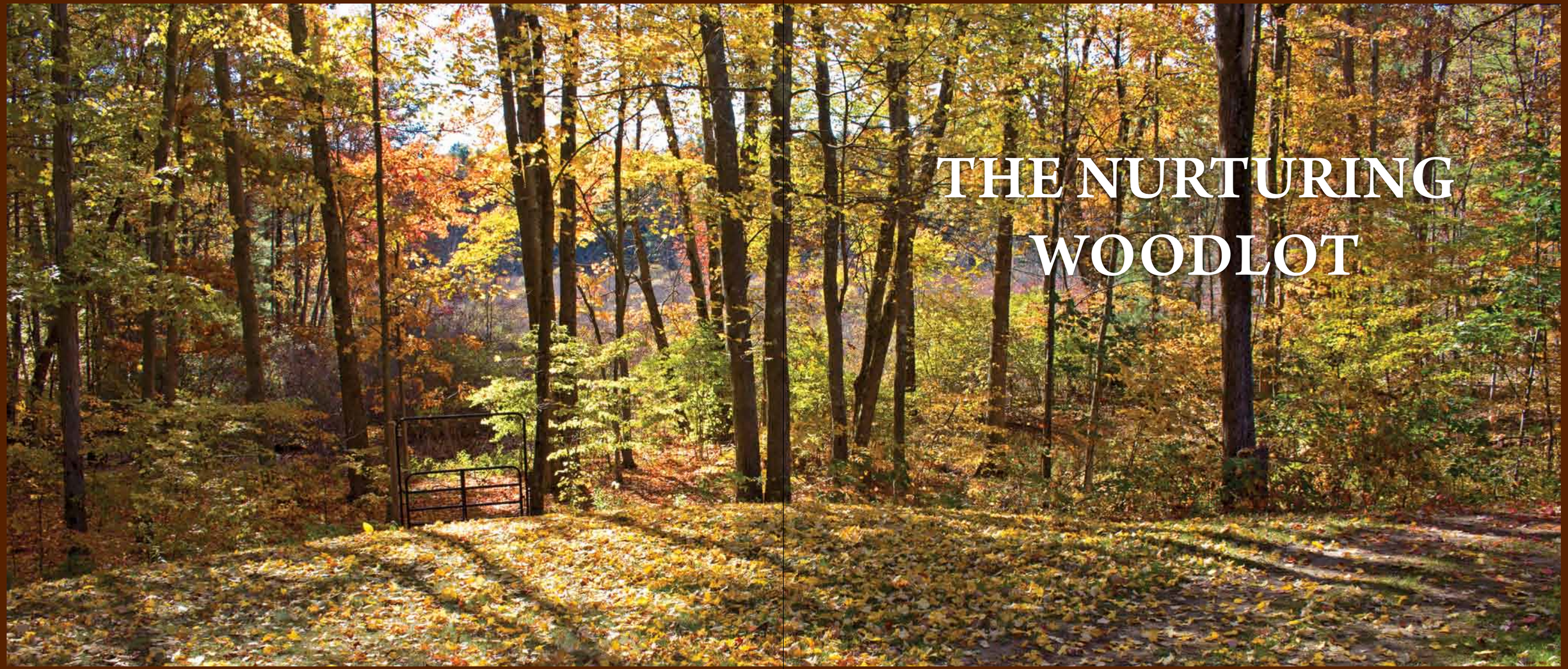

THE NURTURING
WOODLOT

I spend almost as much time roaming, foraging, and harvesting Nature's produce in our woodlot as I do preparing and serving dishes in the restaurant. This special parcel is not only a second home to me, but a home to many ingredients that have become an integral part of Native Harvest.

WARNING! Cutting down a tree of any size is dangerous and should be left to professionals. I've been cutting trees since I was 11, and even though I have a great deal of experience in getting them to fall where I want, I know when a certain tree is out of my league. Whether a tree is too big or leaning a peculiar way, I know not chance it. Even when a tree looks like an easy job, I think and re-think what could possibly go wrong and plan my get-away before I start.

TREES

There has always been an abundance of tree varieties on the property. I'm especially humbled by the many mature, majestic trees that contribute so much to the ambience of our restaurant. The woodlot trees are a virtual trove of ingredients: the branches, outer and inner bark, wood, buds, leaves, sap, nuts, fruits—and even the shade they provide—are essential for creating many of the staples, preparations, and distinctive flavors that characterize Native Harvest cuisine.

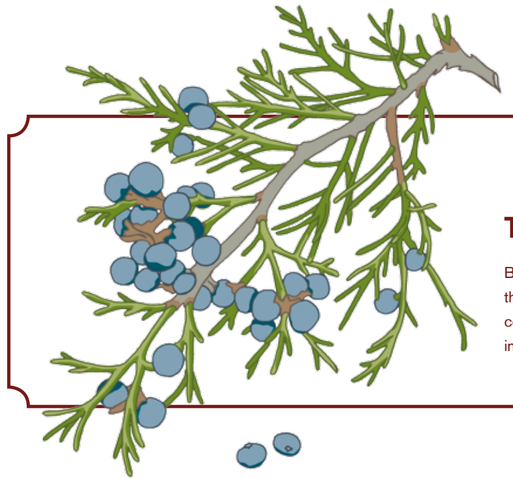
CEDAR TREES AND BERRIES

The northern cedar tree, in the juniper family, has become a staple in the evolution of Native Harvest. The dried boughs and wood provide a sweet and savory smoke for native plants, vegetables, meats, and fish. The wood slabs provide versatile cooking vessels for those same ingredients. I also create serving pieces with slices of the red-tinged grainy wood. A hot smoldering plank of native cedar is ideal for cooking my log-grown and wild mushrooms, which are especially flavorful when I toss them first in freshly pressed acorn oil.

But it's the tiny fruit from the cedar trees—the cedar berries—that most captured my attention in the late 1980s. The berries change from week to week, and month to month, throughout the year. In the early-to-mid-spring, they are tiny, light blue berries that add a mild, sweet spice to sweet or savory preparations. As spring edges towards summer, the berries gain a bit more intensity and are perfect to dry, pickle, or powder, or to add, whether raw or blanched in maple sap, to hearty salads.

As the berries get larger during the late summer and autumn, their flavor becomes even more intense. Dried and powdered at this point, they provide a powerful spicy essence for dusting everything from game dishes to fruits. Blanched in a cedar bough broth, then packed in sea salt, they produce a salty, spicy, crunchy surprise to enjoy the following winter when you're buried in the snow and cold.

By mid-autumn, most of the cedar berries have fallen to the ground. Those that are left on the tree are hard, having been dried naturally by the sun and wind. Ground in a stone bowl, they add a powerful juniper-cedar scent and aroma to herbal and plant teas, long and slow cooked meats, plants, vegetables, and seafood.



The Lone Berry

Before guests sample a variety of sugarless, dairy-free desserts, I sometimes serve them a single cedar berry on the very spoon they'll use to taste the desserts. The lone cedar berry explodes in the mouth and alters the flavor profiles of the other ingredients in a startling way, only to vanish in a few moments.

MAPLE TREES AND SEEDS

Maple seeds begin to spiral their way to the ground in September. After the wings are clipped and hulls removed—a much easier task if you let them dry for a day or two—the seeds are delicious raw or toasted. You can use them as you would sunflower seeds or dry and grind them into powder or flour. If I harvest the seeds when they're still on the tree, as I sometimes do, I press them into a unique maple-seed oil.

On the Rock

In early spring, the inner bark of the maple tree can be dried, then ground into slightly sweet flour that I use in a tiny dessert I call rock cake that's cooked on a hot bluestone. I top the rock cake with fresh sweet maple syrup, dust it with wild rhubarb powder, and serve it with dried wild fruits from the previous year's harvest.

THE BEECH TREE AND BEECHNUTS

The beech may blend in with other trees in the woodlot and not seem very distinctive, yet it is full of Native Harvest secrets and surprises. One of these is a rich, lightly amber sap harvested in early spring that has, when it's concentrated, a slightly savory, briny quality. The sap makes a great alternative to a salt or sugar brine for meats, vegetables, and seafood.

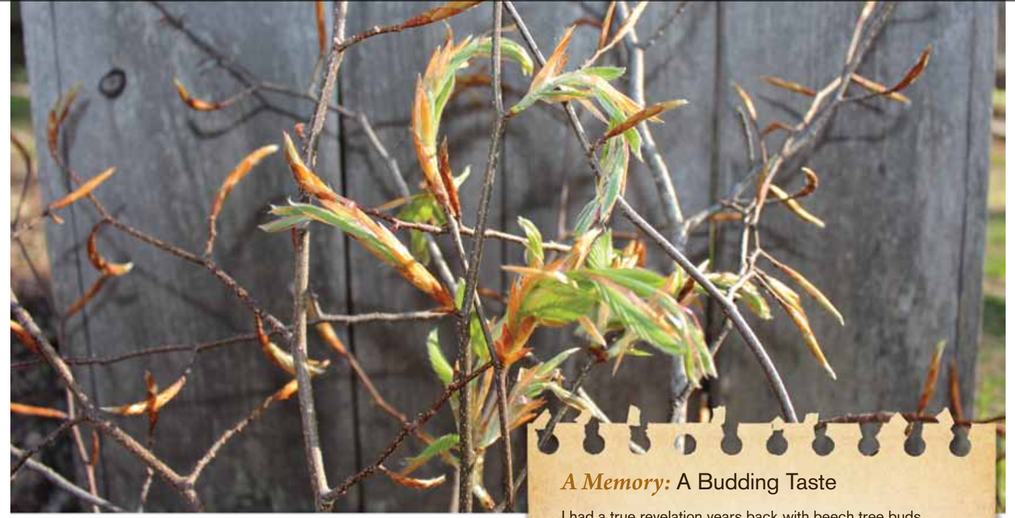
The wood from the beech, especially the smaller branches and twigs, provides a wonderful fuel and aroma for smoking, as do the fresh leaves when they've been dried. When beech wood is dried and charred, the ashes can serve as an accent for many preparations. Larger beech slabs and planks not only make wonderful cooking vessels, but can be used as plates and serving platters for unique presentations.

When dried, soaked, blanched, dried again, ground, and dried a third time, beech bark creates a unique flour that can be used on its own or blended with other varieties of flour.

The star-shaped beechnuts, which usually begin dropping from the trees by mid-August, are a special treat. They come wrapped in their own little spiny pod package and are easily opened to reveal the nuts. After they're dried, or cured, these tiny pod packages make a special fuel for smoking meats, seafood, native plants, and vegetables.

Beechnuts are delicious raw, toasted with salt or spices, caramelized into a brittle cluster, and chopped and used to crust meats, seafood, plants, and fruits. They can also be pulverized into beechnut butter, roasted and steeped into a tea served hot or cold, and even dried and ground into flour.

When the beechnuts are toasted before drying, the powder or flour has a cocoa-like flavor that makes a wonderful base or topping for final courses and as an accompaniment for cheeses.



A Memory: A Budding Taste

I had a true revelation years back with beech tree buds. While I've used these buds for years, and enjoyed their slightly bitter flavor, I discovered by accident that there is a three- to four-day window each year when the buds have a sweet-and-sour flavor.

I was harvesting sap in early spring just after a coating of snow. I had a five-gallon pail of sap in each hand as I worked my way up a hill. Suddenly, a low branch from a beech tree materialized right in front of me. With both hands full, I did the only thing I could think of—I bit off what was to be the first beech bud of the season. What happened next, I'll never forget. The outer sheath of the bud melted away in my mouth to reveal an amazing sweet and sour inner bud. I thought I was imagining the experience, so I had another one. Wow, again!

This flavor occurs only a few days each year when the trees are charged with sap, and you never know exactly when the magical period will occur. Just days later, buds unravel and become beech leaves. I always use some of the buds fresh, particularly in a paste for desserts. But I dry and powder others to sprinkle on food so guests can enjoy their sweet and sour taste throughout the year.

PAWPAW

We're fortunate to have several small pawpaw trees within our property boundaries. However, it's very rare that we actually get to enjoy the small fruits they produce, given the stiff competition from our local wildlife.

It's best to harvest pawpaw when they're unripe and let them ripen slowly off the tree at room temperature. They have a pungent fragrance that suggests a combination of apple and ripe banana. I mash them raw with our honey and lemon verbena powder and add a touch of stevia tea syrup. I top the preparation with crispy baked nasturtium flowers or drizzle them with oil made from pressing squash or pumpkin seeds in a garlic press.

I also dry the unripe pawpaw into chips and powder. When ripe, the powerfully scented, custard-like flesh of the pawpaw tastes somewhat like banana and can be used in place of bananas in breads and desserts.

WALNUT

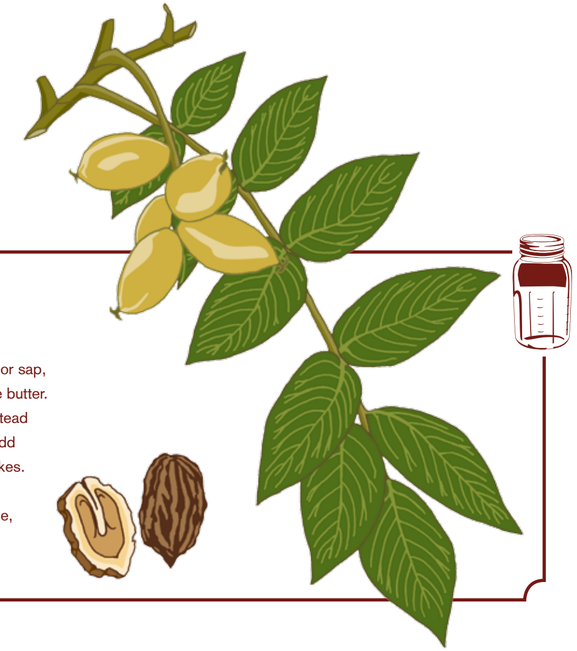
The butternut tree, also known as the white walnut or oil nut, and its cousin the black walnut have been fixtures on our property for many years. I think of these trees as the elder statesmen who occupied this property long before we did.

Both trees produce a very unique sap each spring that can be simmered and reduced to amazingly sweet syrup. I sometimes continue to concentrate the syrup until it crystallizes and then break it apart and pulverize it into butternut or black walnut sugar.

If I manage to harvest some young butternuts from the tree while they're still green, I either press them between two flat stones or in a shop vice to create oil or pickle some, unhusked, for winter use. They have a slightly firm, rich texture and add a wonderful brininess to preparations. When the nuts are a bit riper, they can be used like any other mild, sweet-fleshed nut—almonds or pecans, for example.

Although the nuts from the black walnut are a bit richer and sweeter, both butternuts and walnuts are wonderful in conventional recipes as well, such as cookies, cakes, and breads. They also add crunch to savory preparations. Both nuts can be pressed into a rich oil.

The hard dark wood from both of these trees creates beautiful serving vessels, which I make from fallen limbs only. I use the small branch trimmings and dried leaves as a smoking fuel and the small slabs from broken limbs to roast meats, seafood, and especially wild mushrooms.



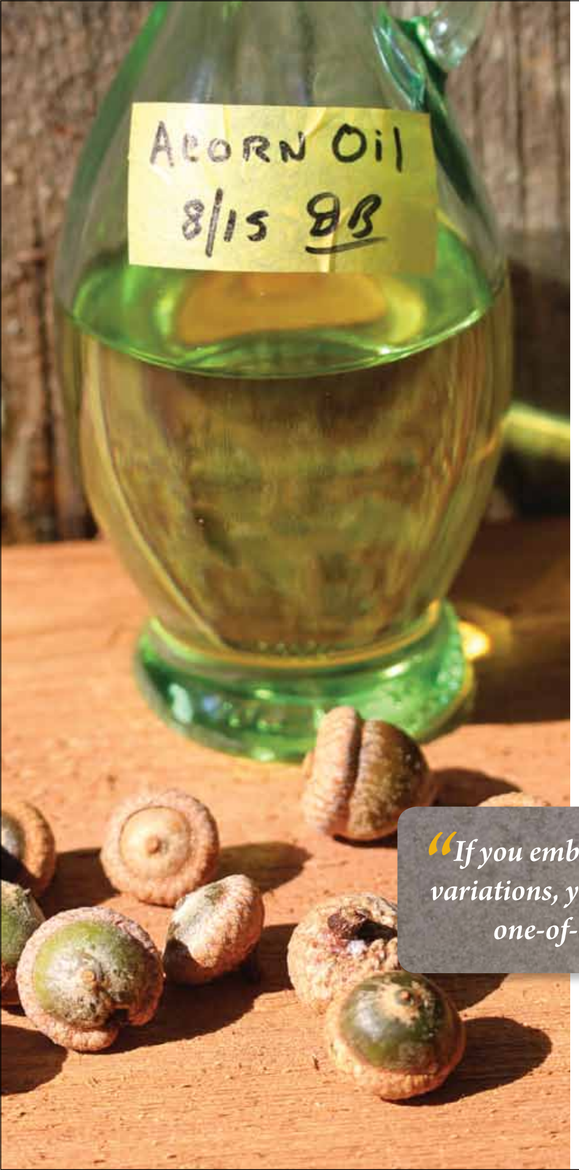
Butter That's Not Butter

When I have a large harvest, I make butternut butter. I simmer the nuts in water or sap, letting the oil they release rise to the top. I skim off the oil and chill it to make the butter. I don't discard the butternuts or water or sap in which they were simmering. Instead I remove the nuts, dry them in a 100-degree oven until crispy, chop them, and add them to the butternut butter to enjoy on breads, vegetable chips, and griddle cakes. I also concentrate the leftover water or sap by 50% to 60% or until savory and slightly sweet. I use that liquid to brine and poach meats, chicken, duck or goose, and seafood, including salmon, monkfish, and trout.

WILLOW

The willow is one of the most overlooked native trees. Willow branches are very flexible, so they're handy in the garden for trellising a variety of plants, including cucumbers, pole beans, peas, and tomatoes.

The most edible part of the tree is the inner bark, which can be harvested in small page-like sheets. Like many other inner barks, willow can be dried and ground into flour. When harvested at the right time, the bark has a semi-sweet flavor, and can be shaped with a knife into strips and slivers that make a wonderful addition to soups, broths, sauces, and slow-cooked hearty preparations.



The texture of the bark, if it's not overcooked, can resemble pasta noodles. I've even made a tiny willow bark macaroni and cheese, using willow bark noodles instead of pasta and one of my homemade cheeses. The preparation can be enjoyed on its own or with crispy quail or other meats. I also use ashes prepared from the tender inner bark as a perfect crust for vegetables, seafood, and meats, and I dry and powder mild young willow leaves for use in a variety of preparations.

WHITE OAK AND RED OAK ACORNS

Folks are always surprised when they find out that acorns, which come from the many white oak and red oak trees found on our property, are so prevalent in Native Harvest cuisine. In particular, they've always been a major source of oil and flour for my preparations.

The white oak tree produces large crops of acorns, usually every other year. Luckily, we have enough trees that seem to be on alternating annual schedules. Maybe they work out in advance who will produce acorns each year!

The white oak acorns are much more versatile than red oak acorns. They are much less bitter, and you can use them in cooking, much as you would use a walnut, pecan, or almond. They can be pressed into acorn oil and dried and ground into acorn flour as well. But since our harvest yields fewer white oak acorns than red ones, I usually use the red oak acorns for oil and flour.

As with most Native Harvest ingredients, the color, size, shape, texture, and especially the flavor of acorns vary from plant to plant, from tree to tree, and from one location to another. That's one of many reasons you'll have so much fun experimenting with them. If you embrace and work with the variations, you'll be rewarded with one-of-a-kind results.

"If you embrace and work with the variations, you'll be rewarded with one-of-a-kind results."

FRUITS AND BERRIES

Discovering and using the many varieties of native fruits and berries found on the property—some of which are highly elusive—has been both challenging and rewarding over the years.

The biggest challenge is that native fruits and berries are the basis of a natural competition—everything wants to eat them! That, combined with the unstructured, inconsistent, and mostly unpredictable way they grow and ripen, as well as the very short time to harvest them, makes for a feeding frenzy each growing season.

Sometimes it's almost impossible not to miss something at its peak. If you're not paying attention, some other critter is, and will likely enjoy the native fruits and berries before you do. Hopefully, there will be enough for everyone to enjoy!

Apples, pears and cherries, several varieties of wild grapes, wild strawberries, blueberries, blackberries, and black raspberries all grow on both the open and wooded sections of the property. The 100-plus-year-old majestic mulberry trees bring back childhood memories of gathering and eating as many of these delicious berries as possible during their very short but plentiful harvest. I remember having purple stained hands and lips for nearly the entire two weeks!

Lesser known native fruits and berries always inspire me, and they spark deep interest in my dining guests. Wild currants and elderberries may sound somewhat familiar, but how about juneberries or service-berries? You don't find fruits from the wild partridge berry, barberry, mountain ash berry, or chokeberry bushes in local markets. Some of these plants and bushes are very elusive, with very low yields of fruit. But that makes them even more precious to me. When I find them, I feel like I've hit the lottery!

Of course, we enjoy all of these fruits and berries when they are fresh. But as with most Native Harvest ingredients, a portion of the harvest is preserved by drying, powdering, pickling, or turning it into vinegar. That way, the ingredients can be recalled and savored throughout the year by incorporating them into other seasons' bounty.

So remember, before you take the weed whacker to that messy tangle of what looks like bushy shrubs and sticks, it may just be the makings of a tiny native garden, with beautiful culinary treasures waiting to be discovered.

PINE NEEDLES

One of the first lessons you learn when you're growing plants and vegetables in native soil is that fallen pine tree needles usually pose a problem. The needles, combined with yellow pollen, react with the soil to sour, or acidify, it, making it difficult to grow most things. A pine tree near the compost pile slows down the decomposition of the organic matter, resulting in a slightly sour soil that even the worms don't seem to like.

Of course, certain native plants and vegetation actually like the acidified soil. Wild onions and strawberries growing in the yard are a sure sign the soil is slightly acidic. And pine needles come in handy as mulch for cultivated strawberries and blueberries: They add a slightly acidic bonus to the soil that some plants enjoy. The final result is, most importantly, sweeter, more delicious berries.

Like all plants and trees, conifers, popularly known as evergreens, have their own growing season. Even though the pine trees stay green all year, they go through various stages: new growth, shedding, and dormancy during the winter months. With each season, the needles undergo drastic changes in color, size, flavor, and texture.

Spring is the season the trees get their new growth. Buds, which are deep shades of rich green, quickly become tender young shoots and then needles, before emerging on the tips of each branch of pine, spruce, and hemlock. The buds and shoots are delicate, savory, sweet, and delicious and regularly find their way into my preparations. Early to middle spring is also the best time of year to create hemlock needle oil. The young hemlock shoots and needles have a bright, floral-herbal flavor with a touch of citrus.

> *"Nothing goes to waste when harvesting a pine tree, or any other tree. Think of the process as nose to tail, or, in this case, needle to root."*

Needling Ingredients

When I began this journey in the 1980s, I already suspected that pine needles, and conifers in general, held amazing possibilities for my cuisine. How could I capture the acidifying reaction that pine needles have on the soil? How could I create and then use this tool, which Mother Nature was dangling under my nose, as a part of my brining, curing, and cooking process?

But using pine needles in Native Harvest cuisine has always raised eyebrows. Whether I'm serving tender young shoots that have a mellow, sour-sweet flavor when harvested in the spring, or infusing a fresh-pressed hickory nut oil with mature pine needles, guests are invariably surprised by the flavor and texture of tree parts they thought were inedible.

> *"As with many things in Native Harvest, it's not the easy way, but the experimental and painstaking way, that's most fulfilling in the long run."*

But harvesting the shoots and needles is a challenge. Climbing trees—with and without ladders—and sometimes getting hoisted up in the tractor bucket, while clipping, pruning, snapping, shaking, and inspecting each shoot, may sound daunting, or even crazy, but it all has to be done on a specific schedule.

Nothing goes to waste when harvesting a pine tree, or any other tree. Think of the process as nose to tail, or, in this case, needle to root. The outer bark, which I remove with a pull knife, is used for pine bark mulch. The wood, branches, and stumps are turned into beautiful tables for the restaurant, raised garden beds, retaining walls, planters, firewood, and wood chips.

As with many things in Native Harvest, it's not the easy way, but the experimental and painstaking way, that's most fulfilling in the long run.

BRINING WITH PINE NEEDLES

To experience the full culinary potential of pine needles, I decided to use them as a substitute for salt to brine and cure various meats, plants, and seafood. But capturing that acidic reaction and applying it to food involved more than simply touching the needles to the ingredient I was trying to acidify.

The Pine in the Brine

For brining, I generally use new growth spring shoots and needles, which have a fairly subtle flavor. First, I create pine needle juice either by pulverizing the needles in a stone bowl with a little fresh tree sap or water, or using a juicer or food processor to create the juice and pulp. Next, I make a pine needle powder by drying the shoots and needles to remove the moisture before grinding them into powder. You can create pine needle powder using needles from any season, not just the spring growth.

Once the powder, juice, and pulp are ready, it's time to apply them to the food. This process varies greatly, so the technique I'm describing is meant to be a guideline for this type of preparation that allows you to improvise based on the ingredients you have available. I use briny concentrated sap of the hickory tree, but a rich vegetable or meat broth, perhaps with some vegetable oil added, will also work. There are no real rules. So there is lots of room to improvise and adjust to the ingredients you have available.

When I started brining foods this way over 25 years ago, I used pork and venison. But I've found that generally tough cuts of beef, lamb, goat, and game meat will also work well. Legs, thighs, and necks from duck, goose, turkey, chicken, and game birds are also prime candidates for pine needle-brined, cooked preparations.

When I cook the brined meat or poultry, I use a low temperature and cook slowly to retain moisture. The serving presentation can be as formal or informal as you like.

WARNING! You'll need to make sure that anything coming into contact with the meats you'll be using with the pine needles is absolutely, pristinely clean. That includes all containers, surfaces, and especially your hands. Since needle brine does not have the bacteria-killing properties of salt, for safety reasons you might want add a small amount of salt to the brine. I don't, but it's better to be safe than sorry

THE ABUNDANCE OF SAP

Most of us know that sap comes from trees, and that maple syrup is created by boiling and concentrating the sap from maple trees.

But what is sap? How can it be useful in our daily and culinary lives? The answers may surprise you. Like most Native Harvest discoveries, saps open a whole new world of natural possibilities.

Each year I collect sap—which is mostly water—from many different species of trees. While maple and birch are the most common sources, I also collect sap from sycamore, hickory, hardwood cherry, ironwood, beech, butternut, walnut, and even mulberry trees. Keeping track of, and collecting, the many saps from all corners of the property, sometimes in deep snow, turns into a marathon workout before it all ends several weeks later. Yet I have to collect it for year-round use when it's available since tree saps play such a huge role in Native Harvest.

Tree juice, or saps, can be used for brining, curing, flavoring, infusing, sweetening, preserving, cooking, and enhancing almost any ingredient or preparation. They also make a great base and starting point for home-made vinegar. Sap is especially delicious straight from the tree! I often serve it chilled instead of water.

The sap usually begins to flow in late winter and continues well into spring, right before the trees start to bud, though the actual dates vary from year to year. Many factors play a role in how much sap trees will produce. Snow pack, water table, amount of sunlight, and air temperature all seem to affect each year's crop. As the season begins, the tree is emerging from its winter dormancy, pumping naturally filtered ground water up from its deepest roots through its various layers. Just as different woods have different aromas when charred—some wood smells sweet, some spicy or bitter—the wood from each species of tree imparts its own unique flavor to the sap as it is filtered through the tree.

Sap varies in color, and slightly in flavor, from tree to tree. One has sap so crystal clear you would swear it was an exotic mineral water. Another, while equally delicious, has its own distinct, slightly cloudy, not quite amber color. That's what makes the harvest so exciting each year: I get to experience saps with subtle, wonderful differences, produced by two trees of the same species, growing only feet apart.

A Memory: A Tale of Many Buckets

My first experience with sap took place when I was a kid, and my mother decided to try to make maple syrup from our own trees. The process was a group effort. It was late February when my father drilled holes in the maple trees and hammered in a few small pieces of pipe as taps. My job was to hang the small buckets with a nail so the sap would hopefully fill the bucket. I say hopefully because the late winter winds, combined with the weight of the sap, knocked the buckets from the trees and blew some of them so far way I never did find them. My parents must have realized at this point that I wasn't going to be an engineer.

Once these technical issues were resolved, however, the sap was flowing! Some days I couldn't keep up. I emptied the buckets into larger ones before school and carried them out of the woods to the garage. By the time I got home from school, the buckets were often overflowing. Fortunately, my mother took over and strained the sap before adding it to the four large pots that were boiling away in our kitchen.

The results, while delicious, were not very impressive. After having the whole house smell like boiling maple sap for weeks, running out of propane, and my father having to eventually replace the ceiling tiles and wallpaper that fell down in the kitchen, we had a few small jars of our own homemade maple syrup. It was so limited and precious, I wanted to save it rather than eat it.

Over the years we improved our techniques. Recently, while removing a fallen tree from my father's property, I came across a pipe tap still in the tree. Though I was supposed to remove all the taps at the end of the season, I guess I missed one. Small slip-ups can create wonderful memories.

What I did learn from my childhood experience with sap, which turned out to be one of my earliest Native Harvest discoveries, was that the great outdoors might be concealing many other culinary treasures just waiting to be discovered.

These unexpected and delightful variations are in many ways at the heart of Native Harvest cuisine.

Once the birch and maples start producing, the beech, sycamore, hickory, walnut, and others follow. Sycamore sap comes from the tree mostly in spring but also at other unusual times of the year, sometimes even in September. Like most sap, it looks like pure water right from the tree and has a refreshing mineral water flavor. The goal is to concentrate the sap in a heavy pot until it achieves both a sweet and salty flavor with a color that varies from light amber to slightly brown.

Perhaps one of the most interesting, yet low-yielding, saps comes from the hardwood cherry. When it's concentrated, this sap becomes salty, sweet, and slightly bitter, with faint herbal essences of marjoram and even lavender. Sometimes the sap does not turn out this way, since native ingredients are not always consistent or predictable. But when it does, it's transforming.

When tapping a tree, the first thing to consider is its location. You'll want to place the taps on the south or east side of the tree—or sometimes both—since that's where trees get the most sun in late winter and early spring. Cold nights, ideally in the mid 20s, followed by milder days, somewhere in the mid 40s, really seem to be the ideal temperatures for charging the trees with sap and energy.

There are special tap sets available, but a stainless steel or galvanized piece of plumbing pipe that's one-half or three-eighths inch in diameter by three inches long will work fine as well. Either can be paired with a galvanized metal or food-grade, BPA-free plastic bucket with a lid and hung from the tree with a nail.

Simply drill a hole slightly larger than the pipe about one to two inches into the tree so that one inch of the pipe will be exposed after tapping. The hole should be about two-and-a-half to four feet from the ground at a very slight downward angle. After drilling, clean the hole of shavings before gently tapping in the pipe with a hammer or wood block.

TIP *Make sure the pipe fits into the hole snugly, but not too tightly, as you'll need to remove it after sap season.*

To hang the bucket, hammer a large two- to three-inch nail about one-half to three-quarters of an inch into the tree on a slightly upward angle. Be sure to pick a spot so that when the bucket handle rests on the nail, there is very little space between the tap and the bucket lid.

TIP *High winds are common at this time of year, so consider securing the lid to the bucket and the bucket to the tree with flexible safety wire or stretchy cords. As you already know, I had buckets blow away when I was 10 and I'm still looking for them.*

Don't be alarmed if the sap in the buckets freezes. This is normal since temperature swings are extreme this time of year. Frozen sap is still beautiful sap.

Once the sap is harvested, remove the taps and insert natural wine corks to fill the entire hole. This will help the tree heal and prevent insects from entering and woodpeckers from pecking. Choose a different location on the tree to tap the following year.