

TASTE THE TERROIR

This issue we meet a man who's wild about plants, women who make wonderful wine and chefs who are wowing Michelin inspectors with their green cuisine

Right: Ethnobotanist François Couplan; far right, François with his wife, Keiko Imamura; bottom right, picking rosehips



GOING WILD FOR FORAGING

French ethnobotanist François Couplan tells **Patrice Bertrand** why we must take better care of nature's larder

"Yesterday, for lunch, I had Brussels sprouts with some flatweed (a plant similar to dandelion) gathered in the snow. Even when cooked, flatweed, like all wild plants, is infinitely richer in micronutrients than any vegetable from supermarkets or organic gardens."

This harsh observation is from the charismatic François Couplan, the French ethnobotanist who has renewed public interest in edible and medicinal plants in France and internationally. A pioneer of wild gastronomy and 'soft' survival, with multiple diplomas (including a Ph.D from the prestigious Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris), this unusual character in his trademark trilby hat pursues, at 72, many areas of interest. He runs on-site workshops on edible plant recognition, lectures widely, is completing three new books (he's already written 113) and has created his own school in Lyon, the Collège Pratique d'Ethno-botanique (CPE), all with one goal: to increase awareness of wild plants and bring them, or rather return them, to our plates. Born in Paris, he credits his passion for wild plants, of which he has documented 1,600 edible species

in Europe, to his mother, a keen mountain climber who took him picking wild strawberries, blueberries, mushrooms and dandelions in Savoie when he was a child.

"Without plants, we wouldn't exist!" says François, who is married to Japanese chef Keiko Imamura and divides his life between France and Switzerland. "For socio-historical reasons, since the Middle Ages, wild plants were devalued and no longer part of our diet. However, they're a real nutritional bomb."

KNOWLEDGE IS KEY

François went to the United States in the 1970s, where he scoured the country for wild plants and organised his first workshops. "At times," he says, "I went by myself into the woods, made a base of flour, olive oil and onions, and added wild plants. Gradually, it was just wild plants. I did this for ten years. And I didn't die."

Indeed, don't mention Sean Penn's film *Into the Wild*, the story of a young American poisoned by eating a wild plant in the Alaskan wilderness. "I never wanted to see that. One guy eats the wrong plant and they make a film about

it. The idea horrifies me," says François, who has stopped being vegetarian but still eats nettles, wild asparagus, rose hips, mallow and plantago. "It's true, there are poisonous plants, but not many. You just have to know them. Moreover, my workshops are intended to unblock this fear of poisoning."

TOP CHEFS JOIN MISSION

To revive interest in edible wild plants, François has worked with top international chefs, including Marc Veyrat in France and Jean-Georges Vongerichten in the United States. "This attracted media attention," he explains, "so now, wild plants are in the spotlight, whereas they were completely forgotten."

Now edible plants are enjoying a renaissance. "But the problem," François says, "is they often don't know how to prepare them because they don't know them. They should take the time to connect with them. This is the essence of my message: wild plants are everywhere and if they interest you, you must cultivate the relationship with them that we lost."

● couplan.com