



“Wildman” Steve Brill

For 23 years, this self-taught forager has made New York City’s Central Park his produce aisle. **BY LISA WADDLE**



the dish

Name: Steve Brill

Age: 59

Job: Leads tours of public parks, teaching which wild edibles to pick and ways to cook them

Started: 1986

Where: New York City

Known for: Pith helmet, corny jokes

A penchant for: Soy milk smoothies with Juneberries from Central Park

Fine Cooking: What made you decide to start picking and cooking what many people dismiss as weeds?

Brill: My motivation was hunger. As a poor student in Queens, I was riding my bike past a park and noticed some Greek women gathering plants—grape leaves, as it turned out. I took some home and stuffed them. They were delicious. It was free food.

FC: We’re guessing that not everyone agrees that plants in public parks are free food.

Brill: Back in 1986, I was arrested for picking dandelions in Central Park by undercover park rangers. They handcuffed and searched me, but I had eaten the evidence. In court they dropped the charges, and the Parks Department offered me a job as a naturalist. They realized they couldn’t keep people from foraging and that it would be better to educate them. That launched my career.

FC: Besides the thrill of the hunt, why forage for food?

Brill: First of all, taste. The flavors of a wild mushroom or berry are so intense. Second is cost; especially with organic food being so expensive. Third, you can find foods only available in the wild, like Juneberries and goutweed.

FC: Isn’t it risky to eat wild plants?

Brill: I don’t fool around with anything I’m unsure about. The stuff you pick in Central Park isn’t sprayed with pesticides. It has fewer chemicals than

what’s in processed food or even what’s in a lot of the stuff in the produce aisles.

FC: Do you think foraging will become the next big thing?

Brill: Well, I’ve seen an exponential growth in interest lately. It used to be just hikers and tourists who signed up for my tours.

FC: Any advice for the neophyte forager?

Brill: Pick only wild foods you’ve identified with 100 percent certainty. Always collect at least 50 feet from heavy traffic, and wash all plants under running water. And I emphasize on all my tours that you shouldn’t decimate a plant—leave enough for future reproduction, as well as future foragers.

FC: What’s your favorite thing to make with what you find?

Brill: Nothing can match my Five-Borough Salad, filled with greenbrier shoots, blue violet leaves, ramp leaves, dandelion flowers, and black locust blossoms, all from New York City parks. I served it on the steps of the courthouse at my hearing, and the press ate it up.

FC: In all your years foraging, what’s been your most prized find?

Brill: My wife. I met her in Central Park while foraging. We’ve been married six years and have a four-year-old daughter, Violet.



Watch a video of Brill foraging in Central Park at FineCooking.com.