

# Urban foraging

Our writer takes a tour with one of the world's foremost "gastrobotanists" to discover hidden bounties in northern Spain

Words/Nione Meakin → Illustration/Michael Parkin



When I first pictured myself foraging, I'm not sure it involved jumping up and down on the cobbled streets of Girona's Old Quarter, trying to pinch a piece of a ghost plant trailing from a first-floor balcony.

But it turns out I have a lot to learn. When you're foraging with Evarist March Sarlat, in-house gastrobotanist at one of the world's most famous and experimental restaurants, even grandma's pot plant has the potential to wind up on a plate.

"People think when you use plants in cooking it has to be something exotic but it doesn't," he explains, between leaps. "You just need to use some imagination."

This particular graptopetalum succulent is apparently delicious when injected with tequila. It's a popular appetiser at El Celler de Can Roca, the three-Michelin-starred Girona restaurant that's

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Evarist Sarlat has 20 years' experience as a gastrobotanist; his samples are kept in jars at El Celler de Can Roca until they're needed

been twice voted the best in the world. When not running workshops and tours through his company Naturalwalks, Sarlat has worked with the brothers who run El Celler for the past seven years, helping them embellish their inventive dishes with flowers and plants that bloom in this corner of the Med.

"When I started at El Celler I was a freak. I did not have the white jacket and chef's hat. I was there in shorts, with my knife," the veteran botanist tells me as we amble along the crumbling city walls of the Passeig de la Muralla towards la Vall de Sant Daniel, a cool green oasis of bay trees and rosemary bushes.

Today Sarlat is an established member of the team, using botany skills he's honed over 20 years to provide the restaurant with between 15 and 20 different plants and flowers every week. Some of these are used fresh; others preserved for months.





All those saved are documented along the kitchen corridors, each labelled with its Latin name and exactly where it can be found.

He tells me that the diversity of the north-eastern Catalan landscape – the coast, the Pyrenees mountains, the forests – means there’s always something fresh to be discovered. Even in the arid summer there’s tangy sorrel, sweet fennel and wild garlic. Sarlat plucks a delicate flower from the latter; it’s punchier than its common cousin, blasting my taste buds with its pungency.

Some of the plants are less appealing: an alfalfa sprout we find in the remains of an old courtyard tastes like the health food it is, while a piece of buddleia is like, well, eating a flower. But the team finds ways to make each plant sing, as I discover later in the El Celler kitchens, where head of research and development Yunju Choi feeds me a

leaf from a mulberry tree – something not generally eaten in this part of the world. It’s been lightly coated with rice paste and fried for a few seconds to become an impossibly light, airy and crisp titbit.

Choi then dips into another bag and tweezers out something that tastes earthy and mysterious. It’s a poppy stamen. The petals, meanwhile, have been used to infuse a deep red vinegar.

I wish I were able to jump the queues to try these amazing ingredients on the plate. In the meantime, I’ll have to get creative with that pilfered piece of ghost plant.

*Foraging walks with Evarist March Sarlat start from €45 per person for a two-hour expedition.*

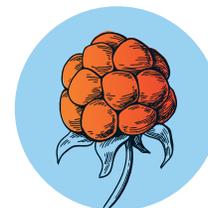
[naturalwalks.com](http://naturalwalks.com)

*Girona is 90 minutes’ drive from Barcelona;*

*Norwegian flies to Barcelona from 20 destinations.*

*Book flights, a hotel and rental car at [Norwegian.com](http://Norwegian.com)*

## More edible excursions



**Ranua, Finland**  
Get “cloudberry fever” in Ranua, Lapland – ground zero for this dinky Arctic delicacy. Every July, locals drop everything to hunt for the sweet yellow fruit in their native swamps. [visitranua.fi](http://visitranua.fi)



**New Forest, UK**  
Forage London runs picking trips around the capital – and their mushroom identification forays to the South Coast are worth the schlep (some include pizza-making workshops). [foragelondon.co.uk](http://foragelondon.co.uk)



**Schliersee, Germany**  
Forget your walking boots and go full hippy with a barefoot foraging walk through the Alps, looking for wild herbs and plants with herbalist and guide Christiane Viehweger. Just mind out for those mountain cattle. [wildkraeuterkuchl.de](http://wildkraeuterkuchl.de)