



Blessed with bountiful waters and a sprawling floral kingdom that flourishes under the southern sun, it's little wonder South Africa is a mecca for culinary adventure. Jessica Johnson forages for her supper

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HELEN CATHCART



WILD *at* HEART



The bright, bristly spikes of a sea urchin instinctively seem to render caution. Yet, as our foraging guide Julian Mori tells us reassuringly, crack into one of these colourful critters and you'll find the 'wonder of the ocean'. Mori carves out the entire mouthpiece of the sea creature using a very sharp pair of scissors and a steady hand. Inside is nature's hidden prize. The fleshy gonads, a highly sought-after delicacy known as 'uni' in the sushi world, are a star-shaped formation of creamy, orange flesh which, later in the day, will form part of a decadent feast of seashore edibles on South Africa's western coast.

Bloubergstrand's vast belts of white sand are lapped by the Benguela current, which delivers nutrient-packed streams of water from the South Pole to nourish a thriving underwater larder. Native west coast rock oysters and abalone make their beds in the rich, dense beds of kelp, while at nearby Big Bay Beach it's common to see locals ankle-deep doing the 'white mussel shuffle'; wriggling out edible buried treasure using toes alone.

Ahead of high tide, before the sands of Small Bay Beach can near vanish underneath cold, rolling green waves, our group of culinary enthusiasts is invited to sample urchin innards 



Forager Julian Mori searching rock pools at Bloubergstrand. Opposite, clockwise from top left: the foraging team assemble; sea urchins at Bloubergstrand; mussels cling to the rocks; the urchins' spikes protect their delicious flesh; bounty from South Africa's shoreline



Left to right: shells scattered on the sand; Julian assesses the goods; the giant sea kelp that the mussels were later cooked inside. Opposite, clockwise from top left: a guest enjoys a poolside apéritif at Casa Mori; mussels fresh from the wood-fired oven; Julian and the team select the fattest samphire greens for the pot; soaking up the Stellenbosch sun; filling the bucket with foraged fare

Travel information

The currency in South Africa is the rand and the time is two hours ahead of the UK. April falls during autumn and, due to low winds and seasonal rains, this is the best time to see the Cape at its most verdant and when to forage its coast. Temperatures remain mild throughout the year, peaking during the midsummer months of January and February. Flight duration from the UK is approximately 12 hours direct.

GETTING THERE

British Airways offers direct flights from London Heathrow to Cape Town and Johannesburg. ba.com

Virgin Atlantic also offers direct flights from London Heathrow to Cape Town and Johannesburg. virgin-atlantic.com

RESOURCES

South African Tourism is the country's official tourist board. Its website, southafrica.net, offers an overview of South Africa's contrasting regions plus itineraries, maps and contacts. For the lowdown on where to stay, and what to visit and eat in Cape Town, visit capetown.travel

FURTHER READING

Free from the Sea by Lannice Snyman and Anne Klarie (Lannice Snyman Publishers, £8). In 1979, food writer Snyman was ahead of her time with this compendium of seafood covering the identification, prepping and cooking of everything edible in South African seas.

Strandveldfood: A West Coast Odyssey by Kobus van der Merwe and Jac de Villiers (Jonathan Ball, £16). From *bokkoms* (salted mullet) to a twist on the infamous *melkert* (milk tart) ice cream, Kalahari-born chef Kobus presents a mouthwatering collection of recipes and pictures from a year spent foraging across South Africa's western coast.

CARBON COUNTING

Return flights from London Heathrow to Cape Town produce 2.82 tonnes of CO₂. Visit climatecare.org to offset the emissions, which are priced at £21.17 for this trip. Donations go towards supporting environmental projects around the world.

straight from the shell. Mussels, prized from rocks, are de-bearded and devoured with a squeeze of lemon. An indigenous dark, earthy seaweed, dubbed by Julian as 'cat's tongue', owing to its rough, knobby texture, is a surprise hit with the crowd when nibbled raw.

Before long, each member of the group is channelling their modern-day inner hunter-gatherer. With the sage words of Julian still ringing in our ears – 'Never turn your back on the sea' – we clamber over rocks and then wade through shallow pools of seawater in search of the meatiest whelks, sea snails, periwinkles and limpets, which, in line with sustainable practices, are picked from below the waterline. These creatures accompany a mound of salty vegetation including thick ribbons of kelp, a tangle of earth-coloured seaweed and sea lettuce by the handful.

For Julian, a South African winemaker who has been inspired by a worldwide culinary compass both as a chef and forager working around the globe, hunting for supper in the elements is the stuff of life. 'My father has a huge passion for the ocean,' he explains. 'I grew up fishing and foraging and probably have salt in my blood.'

'For me, foraging is about trying to understand where the process starts,' he adds. 'Just because it's a creepy-crawly, it doesn't mean it's not a tasty creepy-crawly. I encourage people to take a deep breath, brace themselves and try the bounty fresh from the sea.'

Add the ocean's pickings to South Africa's abundance of wild game, sun-drenched vineyards and slopes of wild fynbos (hardy, indigenous vegetation found sprouting everywhere from municipal pavements to Table Mountain), and it's not hard to see why the foraging bug has bitten countrywide.

Across Cape Town, fynbos forager and chef Loubie Rusch runs guided tours and pop-up private cooking classes that lift the lid on the province's most tasty and accessible vegetation. A passionate advocate of sustainable harvesting, Loubie picks 'prolific growers' such as dune spinach, *veldkool* (a wild, edible weed), sour figs and waterberries, which she pickles and pots in small batches for anyone wanting a flavour of the Cape's rich floral kingdom. Elsewhere, there's everything from truffle-hunting safaris in the Kalahari Desert to wild cooking adventures in an Eastern Cape game reserve.

The joy of foraging is in the eating and Julian Mori is looking forward to cooking up our coastal pickings. We first



‘Hunting for supper in the elements is the stuff of life. “My father has a huge passion for the ocean. I grew up fishing and foraging and probably have salt in my blood”’





‘Under the gaze of Table Mountain, we fill a bucket with some of the juiciest, softest stems of sea green before a drive past fields of wheat and canola’

What to forage in South Africa

Agave americana Brought to the Cape in 1820 by the British settlers, these luscious buds can be found thriving in the Karoo.

Cape Russula A pinky-purple coloured edible mushroom that grows in woods within an 80km radius of Cape Town. Peppery in taste.

Dune crowberry A hardy indigenous shrub that flowers during autumn, before producing abundant small dark-blue fruits that are especially delicious when steeped in gin.

Dune spinach A widespread salty plant with yellow-petalled flowers, found on sand dunes from southern Namibia to the Eastern Cape.

Kei apple Ripening over Cape summers, this sweet South African fruit boils down a treat for use in jams, marmalades, cordials and jellies.

Mussels To forage for mussels you'll need to acquire a licence from the local post office. This costs R96 (£5.50) for a year's use and allows for a daily quota of 30 black mussels and 10kg of seaweed.

Num num A favourite of foragers across the whole country, these sweet and juicy berries grow on a low, thorny bush and can also be found rising up from city pavements.

Spekboom Prevalent across the Eastern Cape, the leaves of this indigenous succulent are a popular addition to rice dishes, omelettes and frittatas across South Africa.

Veldkool This wild green bud looks like asparagus. Either sautéed or steamed, it is a flavoursome addition to salads and quiches. The flowers of the plant are edible as well.

Waterblommetjies The 'Cape pond flower' can be found in the lakes and rivers across the Western Cape.

Wood Blewit This purple mushroom, also known as Blue Stalk, comes tops for flavour according to Cape Town mushroom guru Gary Goldman.



Above: dining while Julian works the open kitchen; the menu du jour

stop off at Milnerton Marsh, a scrubby patch of marshland that unexpectedly houses some of the Cape's finest rock samphire. Under the gaze of Table Mountain, we fill a bucket with some of the juiciest, softest stems of sea green before a two-hour drive past fields of wheat and canola to Julian's family home, Casa Mori. Paying tribute to the family's Italian heritage, the old stone Tuscan-inspired house is tucked in the heart of the Stellenbosch wine region, surrounded by vineyards and olive trees that bear fruits for the estate's exclusive range of wine and oils.

Indeed, the local wine is as good as anything that the New World has to offer. Stellenbosch has 18 per cent of South Africa's vineyards on its gently rolling landscape and the wine it produces has accrued more awards per capita than anywhere in South Africa. Cabernet sauvignon is the region's most widely planted grape, often mixed with merlot to create some really delicious Bordeaux-style blends. This is thanks to the high-clay, free-draining soil with excellent water-retention properties that gives such an excellent grape yield year after year. Couple that with the generally hot and dry climate and you've got the ideal conditions for premium wine, for these full-bodied reds in particular.

When we return to the house, this local wine is already in full flow and the cooking of the day's harvest begins. The feast of wild culinary rewards starts with delicate heaps of salty rock samphire in a rich sea urchin butter, topped with a generous scattering of fresh periwinkles. The mussel harvest is divided into two; Julian gently cooks one batch in wine and garlic for the main course – a delicate lobster bisque risotto – while the remaining shells are stuffed into the belly of a giant piece of kelp before being buried in the wood-fired oven. The mussels are left to steam in their own natural juices under a saucepan lid, all the while being infused by a delicate mix of earth, fire and water. The ocean is on the table. □

A coastal foraging experience with Julian Mori costs £115 per person. This includes transport, foraging, licence, meals and one night's accommodation. Bookings, subject to change if weather conditions are unsuitable, can be made for between four and eight people. 00 27 71 086 5003, facebook.com/

Clockwise from left: foraged mussel risotto is served; dinner at Casa Mori; the team enjoy the fruits of their labour; Julian and his dad; the water's edge; a forager with her hands full.



'With the house wine in full flow, cooking the day's harvest begins – heaps of salty rock samphire in a rich sea urchin butter, topped with fresh periwinkles'



Clockwise from top: picking rock samphire from the marshland; selecting the juiciest stems; a bucket of soft sea vegetables; foraging in the shadow of Table Mountain. Opposite, from top: enjoying a freshly plucked canapé; samphire stems; Julian Mori in his coastal Cape realm



‘Harvest the Atlantic ocean for giant sea snails and molluscs, then scour the slopes of Devil’s Peak for pretty yellow-bloomed Cape Sorrel before taking a seat at The Chef’s Table for a culinary feast featuring steamed black mussels and mushroom pasta’



Foraging in South Africa

Gardens of plenty Fynbos forager Loubie Rusch substitutes shop-bought ingredients with their native counterparts whenever possible. A landscape gardener by trade, she runs monthly indigenous dinners that may include seared kudu encrusted with wild rosemary and wild sage, followed by seasonal fruits poached in a honeybush bath. Prices for a four-hour forage and lunch at Making Kos start at £28 per person for a group of 10 or more. 00 27 82 314 7200

From sea to sky Harvest the Atlantic ocean for giant sea snails and molluscs, then scour the slopes of Devil's Peak for pretty yellow-bloomed Cape Sorrel before taking a seat at The Chef's Table in The Mount Nelson Hotel for a culinary feast featuring steamed black mussels and mushroom pasta. The three-hour foraging trip is headed up by Charles Standing, a renowned hunter-gatherer who also appears on TV. Prices start at £xxxxx. 00 27 21 483 1000, mountnelson.com

A feast of fungi Known as 'The Mushroom Hunter', Gary Goldman left a job in IT to revive his childhood passion for foraging. He's now a leading expert on the potassium-packed fungi that are best cleaned, he advises, by simply brushing off the dirt gently with your finger to avoid water saturation. A mushroom foraging event in the Delheim Wine Estate includes foraging in the forest, wine tasting and a three-course lunch. £20 per person. 00 27 21 686 7188, mushroomguru.co.za

Scarborough fare After foraging on the shores of Cape Town's Scarborough Beach, tuck into the likes of kelp and avocado salad and sea-lettuce scones. Then sip pelargonium-iced tea, flavoured with flowers grown in the on-site nursery. The outdoor spread is prepared at Gael's Beach Cottage and run by Gael and Roushanna Gray. Guests leave with tide charts, recipes and tips on how to forage responsibly. The half-day coastal foraging course at Good Hope Gardens Nursery is held on weekends, for 10 to 12 people. £22 per person. 00 27 72 234 4804, goodhopegardensnursery.co.za

Cape crusading Forage-hop your way around the Cape under the guidance of Charles Standing. After returning to Table Bay Hotel with anything from crayfish and mussels to bracket fungi mushrooms and nasturtiums, resident chef Jocelyn Myers-Adam will cook up the day's finds. Try dishes featuring num nums paired with pork belly, and geranium syrup with springbok carpaccio. The foraging expedition and meal is for groups of four. From £55 per person. 00 27 21 406 5988, suninternational.com, theurbanhuntergatherer.com

Truffle love Rains in the African bush this April promise a bumper crop of the elusive Kalahari truffle. The delicacy, named *Inabas* by the indigenous San people, is distantly related to the French truffle and grows close to the desert melon with which it shares a symbiotic relationship. Kalahari

Truffle Safaris, helmed by private game reserve Tswalu Kalahari, can be arranged if the right weather and harvesting conditions permit. These include truffle hunts and the chance to prepare and cook truffles under the guidance of chefs. 00 27 11 274 2299, tswalu.com

Eat shoots and leaves Guests are encouraged to forage for their own salad leaves for lunch at Babylonstoren, a deluxe, minimalist Cape Dutch farm that is surrounded by the Franschhoek mountains. Join in planting sessions or take a guided walk to learn more about each one of the 300 edible plant varieties in this 3.2-hectare garden that relies on a time-honoured natural irrigation stream. Breakfast here includes honey from the farm's own bees, freshly laid eggs and garden-grown fruits and juices. Doubles from £300. 00 27 21 863 3852, babylonstoren.com

Vine dining Home to 400 species of herbs and flowers ready for the picking, the Dik Delta Culinary Garden is found at a wine farm in Stellenbosch. Here, chef Shaun Schoeman cooks up heritage food from the fresh indigenous produce grown. Schoeman's menu features dishes such as sticky glazed pork belly with Cape gooseberry and pickled *spekboom*, and a traditional *Kaapse snoek* parcel basted with lemon and *wilde roosmaryn blatjang*. The 'A Taste of our Food Heritage' experience fuses Cape Malay, Boerekos and Veldkos dishes and includes a tour of the garden. £9 per person. 00 27 21 874 3937, solms-delta.co.za

Relish the thought The vast and ancient landscape of South Africa's Great Karoo covers a huge swathe of the country and boasts a rich culinary heritage that reflects its community, comprising a mix of indigenous Koi, San and Dutch and British settlers. Popular local dishes include ostrich carpaccio and 'prairie oysters' – chopped lamb's liver and speck wrapped in caul and pan-fried. The African Relish Cookery School in the sleepy town of Prince Albert offers a three-night stay, including tours of local farms, orchards and markets, nature walks with a local botanist, food, accommodation and all culinary tuition. From £790, based on two sharing. 00 27 23 541 1381, africanrelish.com

Into the wild The unique vegetation of the Klein (Little) Karoo is a fertile, semi-desert landscape just a three-hour drive from Cape Town. It's populated by a unique species of sheep that survives on local shrubs. The all-inclusive cookery course at the Sanbona Wildlife Reserve includes local farm visits and foraging walks where guests discover the medicinal benefits of native plants such as the ubiquitous aloe, and the gwarrie – an evergreen tree that fruits fleshy edible berries. Classes can be interspersed with game drives, holistic treatments, bush *braais* and campfires. A four-night stay includes accommodation and all meals. £1,350 per person. 00 27 21 421 4653, cookingwildsafaris.com

