

# SEAWEED

...and eat it!

Give your food some 'umami'! **Seren Hollins** checks out the great health and **taste benefits of seaweed** – a **fantastic natural resource** for anyone living on an island



**Seren Hollins**

Seren is a food historian and professional cook, who can be found most weekends dressed up in historical costume cooking up meals for various events and festivals.

Seaweed won't win any beauty contests, and it also has a reputation for being slimy, but its health benefits are hard to find in foods grown on land; for example, a serving of seaweed contains more iron than a sirloin steak. And before you suggest steak will be tastier, seaweed is a delicate treat for the taste buds when prepared correctly. Simmered in a savoury broth or made into an energising smoothie are just some of the quick ways you can get a health boost from seaweed.

With an unusually high proportion of protein, seaweed is also richer in essential vitamins and micronutrients than any other food group. A prime source of bodybuilding minerals such as iodine and potassium, this is the food of real-life Popeyes. It is also the only plant source of vitamin B<sub>12</sub>, which is necessary for the production of red blood cells, and often lacking in meat-free diets. In short, seaweed is a superfood; but before you start muttering about faddy health trends, these benefits have been known for centuries. Scientists have long believed that iodine-rich algae such as seaweed play a role in reducing the risks of cancer and other diseases. According to recent research, seaweed also contains a host of bioactive substances proven to lower cholesterol, reduce blood pressure, promote healthy

digestion, and even tackle free radicals that may cause cancer.

The most common seaweed is nori; you might associate it with hand-rolled sushi, but it is closely related to laver seaweed, can be used for a variety of recipes, and can also be found growing around the British coastline. Laver is a delicate seaweed, but inedible in its raw state, and it needs to be boiled for ten hours to release its amazing savoury, slightly salty, fishy taste. Rich in glutamates, laver is one of the ingredients that give food 'umami', and it's an absolute must for the creation of a true Celtic breakfast. Once cooked, it can be used in soups and fish stews, and made into traditional Welsh laver bread oatcakes that are then fried in bacon fat and served with cockles.

If you don't have a spare ten hours to boil up laver seaweed, Parsons Pickles produce, amongst other things, tinned laver seaweed. This is laver seaweed from the west coast of the British Isles. It is harvested by Penclawdd Shellfish Processing, which is no easy task, as laver attaches itself to rocks, making collecting it a laborious task. After picking, it is washed thoroughly to remove any sand, then it's cooked before being minced to create a smooth, pâté-type texture. Traditionally, it was collected and hand-washed before being cooked in

boiling pans over coal fires, but today the process uses the very latest boiling pans and technology, although the method of cooking remains the same.



## TRUE WELSH BREAKFAST –



### LAVER BREAD, BACON AND COCKLES

#### INGREDIENTS

FEEDS 4 PEOPLE (OR 2 VERY HUNGRY ONES)

225g ready-prepared laver seaweed  
50g fine oatmeal  
225g cockle meat, cooked  
25g unsalted butter  
1 leek, finely chopped  
1 tbsp fresh lemon juice  
1 tbsp flat-leaf parsley, freshly chopped  
50g bacon fat  
8 smoked bacon rashers, fried until crisp (to serve)  
Ground black pepper (to taste)

#### METHOD

1. Mix together the laver seaweed, lemon juice, parsley and oatmeal in a bowl until well combined, then season with freshly ground black pepper.
2. Melt the butter in a frying pan until foaming, then add the leek and fry for 3–4 minutes, or until softened. Add the cockle meat and cook for a further 1–2 minutes, or until heated through.
3. Take ‘golf ball sized’ pieces of laver bread mixture and roll it into balls, flattening the balls slightly to make small patties.
4. Heat the bacon fat in a separate pan over a medium heat and fry the laver bread patties in small batches for 2–3 minutes on both sides, or until golden brown all over.
5. To serve, divide the laver bread amongst four serving plates and spoon

over the cockles and leeks. Top each serving with two slices of bacon, and, if you want to be super indulgent, finish it all off with a poached egg.



### BUBBLE AND SQUEAK

If you are a lover of traditional foods but feel squeamish about eating green, slimy things, or struggle with getting greens into little tummies, then my mashed potato is a must for you.

#### INGREDIENTS

500g mashed potato  
225g laver bread (prepared and cooked)  
30g unsalted butter  
The juice of ½ a lemon  
1 egg yolk  
100g grated Cheddar  
Salt and pepper (to season)

#### METHOD

1. Peel the potatoes, then cook them in unsalted water.
2. Once cooked, drain and mash them together with the butter.
3. Beat in the egg yolk, seaweed and lemon juice, stir in the grated cheese, season to taste, then serve immediately.

### STRAWBERRY AND SEAWEED SMOOTHIE

Strawberries are rich in vitamins and minerals, and have diuretic, purifying and detoxifying properties. In addition, red fruits are recommended and beneficial for asthma and allergy problems. Add this to the fabulous mineral qualities of seaweed and you have a powerful tonic to help eliminate accumulated toxins and start the day full of energy.

### SEAWEED FORAGING TIPS

Look for a remote stretch of coast far from sewage outfall buoys, and avoid mouths of estuaries.

Look for healthy looking plants still attached to rocks.

Never collect washed-up or floating seaweed – it may have begun to decompose and could be toxic.

Take good, sharp scissors with you, as they are useful for snipping off the top sections of the plant.

Take a small bucket rather than a bag – a bucket avoids seawater leakage on the way home.

Once collected, seaweed needs washing in clean, fresh water at least three times before cooking.

With the exception of laver seaweed, most seaweed only needs a light steaming. Importantly, take only what you need.

#### INGREDIENTS

5 strawberries, hulled  
1 teacup of rice milk, oat milk or almond milk  
1 tbsp cooked laver seaweed  
Twist of lemon  
Pinch of sea salt

#### METHOD

1. Cut the strawberries into pieces, add a pinch of sea salt, then leave to marinate for 20 minutes.
2. Mix the rice, almond or oat milk with the strawberries in a liquidiser.



Above: Cafe Môr. Photo courtesy of Owen Howells.  
Right: The Green Goddess, and Strawberry and Seaweed Smoothie.

3. Add the seaweed and lemon, then liquidise again.
4. Serve over ice.

## THE GREEN GODDESS

### INGREDIENTS

- 1 frozen banana, peeled and chopped
- ¼ pineapple (including the core), chopped
- 300ml cold water
- 2 tbsp cooked laver seaweed
- 2 tsp local honey

### METHOD

Put everything in the blender, blend until smooth, then pour into a glass and enjoy immediately.

## IN CONCLUSION...

With such evident health benefits, it puzzles me why we don't cook with seaweed more often. It is a natural and abundant resource, growing freely around our coastline. Dried seaweed is available from oriental stores and health food shops, or for a fresh taste of the sea, Iain McKellar runs [justseaweed.com](http://justseaweed.com), Britain's only fresh seaweed store, selling rock-grown algae cut from the waters off the Isle of Bute. Iain is a fountain of knowledge when it comes to seaweed, and if you don't fancy picking your own, but want to cook using fresh, his company offers a great way to sample different fresh seaweeds.

There is even a cafe dedicated to

seaweed; Cafe Môr is a small street food outlet at Freshwater West beach in South Pembrokeshire, serving up delicacies including Welshman's Caviar and Mermaid Biscuits, as well as fresh crab and sea vegetables. They run all sorts of seashore foraging courses and even beach picnics. Visit [www.beachfood.co.uk](http://www.beachfood.co.uk) to find out more.

Unlike foraging for mushrooms, which can have unpleasant consequences, you should come to no harm with seaweed – although not all varieties are tasty, none will harm you.

With seaweed being excellent for the mind, body, and even your skin, there really is no better time to eat up your greens, so get some seaweed on the dining table and explore the different varieties and health-giving properties.

**Bon appétit!**



## SEREN'S GUIDE TO SEAWEED FORAGING

### CHANNELLED WRACK

A leafy, fronded algae that holds its finger shape when cooked – to prepare, rinse through with boiling water and serve as an alternative to cabbage.

### BROAD KELP

A thick and meaty variety that looks like pasta ribbons, which requires soaking to reduce its salt content. A thorough boiling makes it edible. Great as a stand-alone side vegetable, or chopped into chunks in soups, or even baked as delicious crispy strips in a very hot oven.



Broad kelp.

### PURPLE LAVER

With a distinctive flavour like olives and oysters, this smooth and fine variety boils down to a dark-green pulp – perfect for making traditional Welsh laver bread.



Sea lettuce.

### SEA LETTUCE

A bright-green algae found in rock pools, which has a strong flavour similar to sorrel. It can be added to salads,

or pressed and dried into crispy green sheets used to wrap Japanese nori rolls.

### SEA SPAGHETTI

This grows in billowing strands in deep waters, so you'll need more than a snorkel to harvest your own. When boiled, it has a crispy bite and the texture of bean sprouts. It's green, slimy and something few of us would consider putting in our mouths, but following a string of recent scientific studies into the benefits of seaweed,

it could soon be replacing superfood side dishes such as kale and broccoli.

Sea spaghetti.

