

Foraging for fiddleheads

For three weeks in May, New Brunswick
abounds with this perennial delicacy

story and photography by Sandra Phinney

There's something about foraging for food that's extremely satisfying, especially when the "loot" is so abundant you find yourself grinning at every turn. This happened to me while foraging for fiddleheads just outside of **Fredericton**.

Called the ostrich fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*), fiddleheads are a perennial delicacy found along streams and river beds. For the last three weeks in May they are abundant in New Brunswick, especially along the Miramichi, Tobique, Restigouche and St. John rivers.

Lessons from a pro

Last May, Karen Pinchin, Heather Allaby and I lucked into meeting Melvin Nash who'd agreed to take us foraging. Although a big fan of *eating* fiddleheads, I'd never picked any, so I was looking forward to the excursion and getting insider information from a pro.

After a quick round of introductions, I hopped into Melvin's truck; my friends followed. We crossed Fredericton's Westmorland Street Bridge, turned right, and followed our nose for about 20 minutes to Jemseg. Along the way, Melvin explained that his mother was Mi'kmaq and his father was Maliseet. It was their custom to take the entire family out to pick fiddleheads for three weeks every spring. "I can almost hear them pushing through the ground," says the veteran picker. "The little rascals can grow two to six inches in 24 hours." In 1991, Melvin's growing appreciation for fiddleheads led him to pen a book titled *The First Ever Fiddlehead Harvesters Guide*, followed by *Cooking North America's Finest Gourmet Fiddleheads*, published in 1995.

Before I know it, we've arrived at one of his favourite spots just past Jemseg. Once we get out of the car and my eyes adjust to the landscape, I see them everywhere—little brown mounds with traces of green ready to unfurl.



Top, left: The reward of foraging fiddleheads in Jemseg, NB. Middle, left: Melvin Nash and Heather Allaby picking fiddleheads. Bottom, far left: Karen Pinchin and Melvin Nash stroll to another riverside location; the mouth-watering prize.



Tasty and abundant

Melvin uses a knife and cuts several “heads” at a time but I’m afraid of cutting too deep and damaging the crowns. So I use my thumb and snap away, one at a time. At some point I wish out loud that we could eat them raw, but had read somewhere they were carcinogenic and must be cooked first. Melvin chuckles. “Unless you are downstream from a factory or a sewage plant, they are fine eaten raw. Just use your common sense.” So I crunch down on one, then another, and another...

My friends also enjoyed the experience. Reminiscing, Karen says, “One thing I found fascinating is how sustainable fiddleheads are. As long as you don’t stomp on them or don’t cut into the crowns, fiddleheads will reproduce year after year.” In terms of recreation, Karen believes it’s the perfect getaway. “And you can save a wad of money by picking your own,” she adds.

Heather concurs. “I love the idea that you can pull your car off the highway and there’s food waiting right there. I was also reminded of the hospitality of Maritimers when we arrived at Carol and David Ray’s home. They didn’t bat an eye at offering up their stream to clean our fiddleheads, and their kitchen to cook them!”

Fiddlehead cleaning tips

If there’s any amount of wind, winnow the fiddleheads before you wash them. Place a blanket or tarp on the ground, hold your container of fiddleheads as high as you can, then slowly empty it. The wind will take away some of the chaff.

Now immerse your basket (or a bucket with the bottom and sides drilled full of ½ inch holes) in a moving stream or water bed, then lift the container out of the water and twist it back and forth until the water is drained. Much of the brown scale will fall off and flow away. Repeat a couple of times.



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Far left: Quartermain House B&B, in Fredericton, NB.

◀ Fiddlehead Quiche
 Courtesy Debra Quartermain,
 Quartermain House B&B, Fredericton

- 8 oz (250 g) fiddleheads
- 2 tbsp (30 mL) olive oil
- 1 bunch green onions, chopped
- 6 eggs, beaten
- 1 cup (250 mL) milk
- 1¾ cups (425 mL) shredded cheddar cheese
- salt and pepper to taste

Heather's referring to Melvin's friends, where we eventually ended up for a fiddlehead feast, and the most important lesson—how to cook them. Put in a pot, cover with water. As soon as the water starts to boil, set the timer for six minutes—seven at the most—then drain and serve. Have butter and a little salt and pepper close by. Some folks add a splash of lemon or vinegar. We lick our chops, and help ourselves to seconds.

Lightly grease a 9" pie or quiche pan.

In a medium saucepan, cook fiddleheads for about 5 minutes. Drain. (Set aside 10 fiddleheads.) Sauté onions in oil until soft. Add remaining fiddleheads and sauté for 2 minutes; drain off excess liquid.

In a medium bowl, combine eggs, milk, salt, pepper, fiddlehead onion mixture and 1½ cups of cheese. Pour into pie dish.

Bake uncovered at 325°F for 30 minutes; it will be partially set. Remove from oven and garnish with 10 fiddleheads and remaining cheese. Return to oven to finish baking until set. Makes 6 servings.

Finding keepsakes

After we bid farewell, I decided to stroll around **Fredericton** in search of fiddlehead souvenirs. I didn't have to look far. Shops like **Aitkens Pewter**, **Artful Persuasion**, and **Botanicals**, have fiddlehead motifs on everything from earrings to book marks,

tiles, frames, fabric handiwork, and more. Eventually I stroll into **Gallery 78** for a change of scenery, and am gob-smacked by Victoria Moon Joyce's acrylic painting of fiddleheads.

That evening, while contemplating what to order for dinner at the **Blue Door**, my server says, "Our feature tonight is prosciutto wrapped halibut laced with smoked tomato sauce, gnocchi and fiddleheads." Hearing that, I didn't even read the menu. As if that wasn't the perfect ending to a perfect day, when I returned to my lodgings at the **Quartermain House B&B** on Waterloo Row, owner Debra Quartermain asks, "Could I interest you in a Fiddlehead Quiche for breakfast?"

All I could do was nod and grin. 🍷

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Sandra Phinney



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Cream of Fiddlehead Soup Supreme

Courtesy Melvin Nash, *Cooking North America's Finest Gourmet Fiddleheads*

- 4 cups (1000 mL) diced potatoes
- 1 cup (250 mL) chopped leeks
- 1 tsp (5 mL) salt
- ¼ cup (50 mL) butter
- 1 lb (500 g) fiddleheads
- 2 cups (500 mL) milk
- 2 cups (500 mL) chicken stock
- ¼ tsp (50 mL) grated nutmeg
- ¼ tsp (50 mL) pepper
- 1 cup (250 mL) heavy cream

In a large pot, bring about 2 cups of water to the boil; add potatoes, leeks, salt and butter and simmer for 10 minutes. Add fiddleheads and simmer for 5 more minutes. Cool slightly; blend in a food processor until smooth.

Return to pot. Stir in milk, chicken stock, nutmeg and pepper. Heat. Add cream, stir and bring to simmer. Serve hot, or chill and serve cold garnished with chives and sour cream. Makes 4 servings.



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