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Search

HOME / SAJOR / 'LIVE LIKE A CAVEMAN'

Savor

'Live Like A Caveman'

Nabe Bowerman forages for edible food in forests and fields

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Nabe Bowerman, wearing red gloves, leads class members, including Jeremy Mossman (light green shirt) and Brett Walters (black shirt) in a vocal appreciation of Mother Nature.



If you search for something to eat in the fields and forests of Kalamazoo County and you aren't Nabe Bowerman, chances are you're going to find something dangerous.

"A lot of people bring stuff (to me) and ask questions," Bowerman says. "Most of the stuff is poisonous."

Bowerman, a 63-year-old Korean native whose given name is Chom Tok, has been foraging her whole life; it's a skill she learned from her parents and has since taught to her three, now grown, sons. Bowerman has spent

about 20 years working at Bonamego Farms, in Lawrence, foraging for vegetables and weeds on its 350 acres of property in Van Buren Township, just north of I-94.

During the winter, Bowerman is able to find a few hardy plants under leaves buried beneath the snow. In spring, though, the variety of her finds improves. She waits until the morning dew has dried before heading into the fields; it's less of a mess that way, she says. Each foraging trip takes about an hour, although she says these trips seem to last a little longer each year, since there's always a new edible to find, bring back to the kitchen and experiment with.

"Dandelion, nettle, chickweed — go outside, get a dandelion and pop it out of the ground," she says. But she warns against plucking the yellow flowers growing in suburban backyards; they might have unsafe pesticides or weed killers applied to them.

Outdoor classroom

Bowerman isn't stingy with her knowledge of what can be found to forage. She leads classes on the topic in the spring and summer at Bonamego Farms. The former martial arts instructor places an emphasis on healthy eating in her classes, where she demonstrates how to search for plants, which plants are safe to eat and how to clean, prepare, cook and enjoy wild plants once you've found them.

Currently, her summer class, which began in May, is offered every other Sunday. Classes are free, but registration is required at the farm's Facebook page, facebook.com/BonamegoFarms, or at its booth at the Kalamazoo Farmers' Market.

"We start with field trips," she says of her classes. "You can find vegetables under your feet. Then we go on to weeds and seedpods."

Bowerman is happy to answer questions and sort through what her students discover.

"You have to be familiar with the woods," Bowerman says. "It's not all on the ground. You have to look up on the tree. Mushrooms grow up there."

Foraging is not regulated by the state, except for mushroom hunting. Mushroom hunters require a certification from the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development before they can sell mushrooms to the public. Eating the wrong kind of mushroom can lead to serious illness or death. Bowerman, who often sells what she forages, usually looks for flowers and other greens instead of mushrooms.

Talk to the trees

Bowerman is a fixture at the Kalamazoo Farmers' Market and the Bank Street Winter Market, where she sells what she forages — such as horseradish root and daffodils — along with Bonamego Farms' tomatoes, apples and onions. At the Winter Market, she sold homemade spring rolls as well. In recent years, Bowerman has also been foraging for herbs, using them to make aromatic, comforting teas. She has about 60 varieties of herbs now and sells her teas at the Farmers' Market and Winter Market as well.

Bowerman also eats meat, sometimes hunting with a bow and arrow. For Bowerman, eating is about being close to the land, whether that's digging in the dirt or just staying away from the grocery store shelves.

"Take off your shoes. Touch the earth," she says. "I want to live in the woods like a caveman. Why would I want to be in front of a computer every day when I can go out and talk to a tree like a crazy person?"

She also experiments with new meals. Lately she has been making kimchi, a traditional Korean dish of fermented cabbage. Bowerman's version, however, is made with stinging nettle. She explains that the plant just needs to be soaked in water to get rid of its sting, but she notes that it's "a challenge to find it, cook it and eat it."

Bowerman says she's able to meet nearly all of her own food needs by foraging and goes to a grocery store only to buy paper products and other non-food items.

"Sometimes I just say, 'I'm going grocery shopping,' and go into the fields," Bowerman says. "You don't even need a chopstick. Just go out and pick up a twig."

Bowerman realizes not everyone will forage each day as she does. But it is her goal to help people to develop healthier eating habits and to better appreciate the environment where their food grows.

"The sun gives really powerful flavor and taste (to plants)," she says. "Big companies use chemicals on everything. Even homegrown, you have to water it and fertilize it. I'm interested in what nature can do."

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