

Keeping it wild: Outdoor food and forays

SAVOR THE FRUITS OF YOUR LABOR.

John Motoviloff

Editor's note: This issue, we debut John Motoviloff's, "Keeping it wild: Outdoor food and forays" column. We often hear from readers who enjoy the "What's cooking" section and decided to expand on that, featuring Motoviloff's expertise and experience in the field as a hunter, fisher and forager, and in the kitchen having conducted wildfoods-cooking workshops throughout the region. Motoviloff wrote Wild Rice Goose and Other Dishes of the Upper Midwest.



KERRY MOTVILLOFF

Hunters dream of long seasons spent harvesting a variety of species. Yet, while Wisconsin boasts nearly a million hunters, many of them never get out for a season that lasts all summer and has a full menu of options. That's too bad. They're missing lots of fun and flavor in the form of wild berries.

Berry season in Wisconsin begins as the tree canopy is leafing out, around Memorial Day in the south and mid-June in the north. During this lush time of year, wild strawberries begin to dot the edge of forest trails and clearings. Look for tell-tale three-lobed leaves and tiny white flowers growing in sandy, well-drained soil.

These forest jewels are tiny — about the size of a fingernail. But good things come in small packages. A handful of these fragrant rubies is a treasure in its own right. Eat them on the spot. They will never taste better.

Black raspberries, or blackcaps as they

are sometimes called, are next. They begin to ripen in late June, turning from dark red to deep purple. It seems I'm always off on some fishing idyll — walking along a trout stream or unloading the canoe into a wilderness lake — when there are the blackcaps, hanging dark and heavy on the bush, and I'm thinking of two of my favorite things: fried fish and cobbler.

Of course, you don't have to be a fisher to find blackcaps. State parks and wildlife areas are good places to look. Fortunately, Wisconsin has an abundance of lands (municipal, county, federal, state, paper company, tax law and voluntary public access) open to public foraging. Hunt around parking areas, gates or trails. Blackcaps thrive in areas disturbed by mowing or burning. Some of my own best finds have been in the Lower Wisconsin State Riverway from Spring Green to Prairie du Chien.

Blueberries and closely related huck-

leberries follow close on the heels of black raspberries. They begin as tiny green nubs and ripen to a dark purple in the early part of July, and continue to ripen well into August. Sunny hillsides, forest clearings and raised streambanks are good places to look. While other wild berries are distributed throughout the state, blueberries prefer the sandy soils of central and northern Wisconsin. Necedah Wildlife Refuge and the sandy barrens of Polk and Bayfield counties are productive blueberry areas. Always secure permission if you plan to gather berries on private land.

Waiting until August and September to ripen, big, dark blackberries seem to be languishing in the heat of summer. In fact, everything is bigger on blackberry bushes — the fruits, the thorns and even the canes which can be 5 or 6 feet high. Look for blackberries growing along ditches, fencelines and sunny hillsides. If you're a rabbit or grouse hunter, you've likely picked your way through blackberry bushes.

This is thorny business, so dress accordingly. Long pants, long sleeves, a hat and garden gloves will help protect you from thorns and bugs. A plastic gallon milk jug — with the top cut off and a string run through the handle and secured around your neck or waist — keeps the hands free for picking. Store berries in the shade. You can refrigerate them, covered in plastic wrap, for several days. But they rarely last that long in our house.

Before you eat wild berries, however, you need to remove all hulls and debris, rinse them thoroughly in cold water and allow them to dry. The simplest possible thing to do is to plop your fresh find over vanilla ice cream and enjoy the contrast of tart fruit and rich, creamy dairy.

For jam, keep it simple by adding one cup of sugar for every cup of berries. Cook this mixture down in a heavy-bottom kettle until it drips slowly off the back of a metal spoon, about 20 minutes. Seal in hot, sterilized jars.

To freeze berries, spread them in single layers on cookie sheets in the chest freezer. Transfer frozen berries into zip-top bag and squeeze out excess air.

While I will never refuse a slice of berry pie, I rarely go through the trouble of making it. The gooey goodness of berry cobbler tastes every bit as good — or better — and takes a fraction of the work to make.



CLASSIC COBBLER

(adapted from Wild Rice Goose and Other Dishes of the Upper Midwest)

- 5 cups of washed and hulled berries
- 1 cup of brown sugar
- 1 stick of butter at room temperature, cut into pieces with wrapper reserved
- ¾ cup flour
- ¼ teaspoon salt

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Grease a 9-inch pie pan with the wrapper from a butter stick. Add fruit. Cream together sugar, butter, flour and salt. Spread over fruit. Bake until topping is golden brown and berries are bubbling — about 45 minutes. Top with vanilla ice cream or whipped heavy cream.



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