THE FORAGERS

Mendocino restaurateurs, plus baby, take local philosophy to heart

By Olivia Wu
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER



FOOD CONSCIOUS

When Nicholas Petti and Jaimi Parsons decided to take the Pennywise challenge, stunned friends asked, "Why?"

Why indeed? Nicholas, 44, and Jaimi, 40, are new parents; Jaimi breast feeds 9-month-old Marlon. Would she jeopardize her health and comfort for a week of stringent eating? Plus, the couple owns Mendo Bistro in Fort Bragg, known for its hip, sustainable menu.

Petti sends restaurant scraps back to an organic vegetable and pig farm for composting and recycling. He emphasizes seafood caught by Fort Bragg boats, makes salumi, and compiles a Mendocino County-only wine list. Why mess with this delicious and moral high ground?

"My mother said, 'Are you done starving yourself yet?' " he says, chuckling, on the day the family drove into San Francisco to their time-share apartment in Japantown. But Nicholas has always been a forager, and rather than rest on his laurels, he chose to rest on stinging nettles, hoping to use foraged food to help meet the challenge.

In the city, they foraged in open lots and public trails. The family spent part of a morning gathering greens, pushing Marlon in a stroller, with scissors in a cloth bag draped over the handles.

Each meal of the day would include a foraged element. At this stage of spring, the foraged greens saved perhaps 10 percent of the $20 a day recommended Pennywise allowance. Come summer, a dedicated forager could really do well with fruit — blackberries for example, says Nicholas — and save perhaps 20 percent. Meanwhile, wild onions, which were plentiful the day they foraged in the city, could be sprinkled over their Sinclair Ranch eggs and fingerling potatoes (from Sonoma Organics) for breakfast.

Breakfast was the meal at which they allowed exemptions to the 100-mile rule. Jaimi would not give up coffee with sugar and cream. Nicholas would stick with green tea. As for salt, "I made sea salt when I first got to Mendocino, so I know that if we were in a real food security situation, I'd be all right," Nicholas says.

The first day of the weeklong challenge went fine, says Jaimi. For lunch, Nicholas concocted cream of kale and seaweed soup, and a roasted Rocky Jr. chicken breast with arugula; for dinner, there was chicken with rice from Colusa County, mixed greens and Straus yogurt.

By the second day, however, she had changed her tune. "This sucks. You really have to think about it," she says. When she took a walk with her mothers-and-babies group, and the group wrapped it up with a trip to Jenny's Giant Burgers, she headed home instead, where Nicholas had cooked locally caught sturgeon.

"I couldn't do it if my husband was not a chef," she says.

To keep the family on track, Nicholas developed cost-effective strategies: Mexican requeson cheese instead of Laura Chenel goat cheese; meat bought in bulk and used three or four ways throughout the week — what used to be called stretching the ingredients. "I appreciate what my mother used to do," he says. For salad dressing, he used Navarro Vineyard's verjus (grape juice) and Stella Cadente olive oil from Butte County.



Photos by CRAIG LEE / The Chronicle

Nicholas Petti, chef and owner of Mendo Bistro in Fort Bragg, scouts a patch of greenery for wild onions while foraging with his wife, Jaimi Parsons (holding son, Marlon), in San Francisco.

"Foraging made the meals interesting; there were a lot more flavors."

JAIMI PARSONS

"We're lucky, there's a real cornucopia here," he says. "In other places in winter, the Europeans were eating turnips, rutabaga and kale, every day. That's why the Dutch headed to the East Indies."

Jaimi's exemptions grew as soon as she gave in to ice cream, which led to chocolate, which injected vanilla, both of which are imported. She also missed flour in toast, bread, pizza — the kind of snacks she would normally reach for without thinking. But by the middle of the week, "I woke up feeling better than I usually do." And the baby did not suffer at all.

Nicholas points out that eating at home for every meal, and having the big meal of the day at midday — a traditional practice — probably contributed to Jaimi's well-being. What they couldn't do in preparation for the challenge — bygone habits of building a pantry by canning, drying, cellaring and freezing — would have also added up to better health as well as more diverse flavors.

"Foraging made the meals interesting; there were a lot more flavors," Jaimi says, as she takes a forkful of the greens in a peppery "gathered" salad of nasturtiums, miner's lettuce, radish and oxalis flowers and Lilybet's kale. "I'm realizing how crucial herbs and spices are needed to keep things interesting," Nicholas says.

They have also influenced their families. Nicholas says his mother might now think of going to the strawberry farm as she used to do, instead of buying the fruit at a supermarket.

If the budget had been larger, say $15 or $20 per person, "We could've gone out to eat, or had crab on the weekend," he says.

When the couple reflected on the Pennywise challenge, the question that most perplexed them was why food isn't more highly valued in our culture. "If people are not cooking at home, as we keep hearing, what are they eating on this budget?" Nicholas asks. "I think people should spend more on food," says Jaimi.

"I want to ask them what their cable bill is," says Nicholas.

For foraging tips and guidelines, see "Flavors of Home," by Margit Roos-Collins (Heyday Books, 1990); "America Eats," by Nelson Algren and David E. Schoonover (University of Iowa Press, 1992).

E-mail Olivia Wu at owu@sfchronicle.com.



An artichoke is stuffed with ground pork seasoned with wild fennel and garlic. Wild onion flowers make an exotic garnish.

Nicholas Petti's Wild Fennel Sausage-Stuffed Artichoke

Serves 4

For this locavore creation, chef Nicholas Petti uses foraged fennel instead of the fennel seed he would normally season sausage with. Feel free to substitute your favorite sources for ingredients.

The Sausage

- 1 pound fatty pork shoulder, sliced (Old Mill Farm)
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- 2 garlic cloves, minced (friend's garden)
- ¼ to ⅓ cup young, wild fennel fronds, chopped fine, (foraged, or substitute purchased fennel fronds)

The Artichokes

- 4 globe artichokes
- Wild onion flowers or minced green onion for garnish

Instructions: Preheat oven to 400°. Grind all sausage ingredients together, or pulse in a food processor. Work mixture by hand or with a spoon to combine ingredients and emulsify them.

Trim tops from artichokes; remove tough outer leaves and prickly inner leaves. Remove choke with a spoon. Place in steamer basket. Steam 30-35 minutes, until soft. Cool. Spread out some of the outer leaves.

Stuff cavity with sausage, working mixture into the outer leaves. Bake until sausage is cooked, about 30-35 minutes. Garnish with wild onion blossoms.

Per serving: 300 calories, 25 g protein, 14 g carbohydrate, 17 fat (6 g saturated), 79 cholesterol, 980 mg sodium, 7 g fiber.

Apple Granita

Serves 4

- 2 cups unfiltered apple juice (Gowan's Apple Farm)

Instructions: Pour juice into shallow container. Place in freezer. Stir every 20 minutes, for about 2 hours. The finished texture will be slushy. Scoop out and serve.

Per serving: 60 calories, 0 protein, 15 g carbohydrate, 0 fat (0 saturated), 0 cholesterol, 4 mg sodium, 0 fiber.