

EAT ME. DRINK ME

When the book “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland” was written by Lewis Carroll in 1865, he included the words “EAT ME. DRINK ME.” The words were labels on a cake and a bottle and enabled the heroine to shrink herself to enter a small door and access a magical realm where all manner of transformative experiences was possible.

I am using this metaphor to enable more people to transform their experiences in urban environments by eating and drinking wild foods, sometimes called “weeds.” Everyone can enter this Wild Food Wonderland and experience radical shifts in their eating patterns by “nibbling with nature.”

Alice in Wonderland was narrated in Oxford on a boat trip on the Thames with daughters of the Liddell family through the ancient common land called Port Meadow. This grassland, grazed by commoner’s cattle and geese for longer than the establishment of Oxford University, is the oldest institution in the city. It is a Site of Special Scientific Interest and, at the river’s edge, has a niche for the Cuckoo Flower (*Cardamine pratensis*). Port Meadow is not far from where I live, and when my book “EAT WILD” was published in 2010, the British Broadcasting Company sent a reporter to interview me. We met in an urban car park. I explained that there were 15 visible species of edible wild plants as we talked live on the radio about the benefits of acquiring knowledge of wild food and the joy of eating it; we paused when I spotted a Cuckoo Flower. I picked a leaf and asked him to chew it between his front teeth on the tip

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of his tongue. I held the microphone and counted to 5. It takes about five seconds for the peppery taste of Cuckoo Flower to reach your tastebuds, but when it does, it explodes. “Blimey!” he exclaimed live on the radio, “that’s flipping hot!”. I felt that I had made my point about wild food being a transformative experience.

Cuckoo Flower is also called “lady’s smock” and flowers when the European Cuckoo bird (*Cuculus canorus*) arrives in England to breed and is associated with summer’s coming. The oldest known song in England, written a short distance away in the town of Reading in the thirteenth century, “*Sumer Is Icumen In*,” celebrates cuckoos as cultural timekeepers. The Cuckoo Flower likewise has a vital role in the sur-

vival of the Orange Tip Butterfly (*Anthocharis cardamines*), whose caterpillars feed upon it. Folklore suggests that it is unlucky to pick Cuckoo Flowers because it is the sacred flower of the fairies.

What I am expressing here with this example is the cultural depth lying unspoken in many places (including urban Columbia) when it comes to using wild food rather than cultivated varieties of (once-wild) food. Refined foods become brands and soon lose their wonder. Combining Colombia’s coca leaf (*Erythroxylum coca*) and Africa’s kola nut (*Cola acuminata*) might once have been a transformative wild drink but now is merely a fizzy brown sweet liquid owned by the world’s greatest plastic polluter.

Quote as: Mackay, D. Eat Me. Drink Me. P. 244. In: Mejia, M. A., Amaya-Espinel, J.D. (eds.). *BiodiverCities by 2030: Transforming Cities with Biodiversity*. Bogotá. Instituto de Investigación de Recursos Biológicos Alexander von Humboldt. 2022. 288 pages.