



FANTASTIC
feasts
&
WHERE TO
find THEM

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'ROUND THE BACK OF COTTAGES ON GEORGIAN BAY'S ROCKY SHORES, SOME MAY SEE WEEDS AND BRUSH—DEREK BLAIS SEES DINNER

Late afternoon,

on a rocky point near Georgian Bay, Ont.'s Honey Harbour: as if on cue, the sun breaks through the clouds for the first time all day—just as Derek Blais' fishing line goes taut with a serious strike. Within minutes, a two-foot pike joins the small-mouth bass already on shore, and the evening's earlier dinner plan goes up in smoke. "I call this foraging for dinner," he says.

His dad, D'Arcy, sizes up the fish. "I think it's your biggest pike yet." That's saying something, considering that Derek, 34, has been fishing here since he was old enough to hold a fishing rod. The rocky point is part of a 2½-acre, water-access-only property that Derek's great-grandparents bought in the 1940s, and the family cottage is just a stone's throw away.

But Derek isn't focussed on the fish's size; he's already planning how he wants to cook it. "I'm thinking whole, stuffed with lemon thyme and rosemary, over a fire with juniper branches."

Back at the cottage, he presses some of that abundant juniper into more immediate service, clipping sprigs for an unconventional garnish for sundown G&Ts. Later, he'll gather full boughs to add to the firepit, to create fragrant smoke once the fish has partly grilled over wood from a dead pine nearby. "I've tried throwing pine needles into the fire too, when I'm doing fish. But that doesn't work; they're too resinous, and the smoke is gross."

That kind of experiment is common here. Derek has made flour from the inner bark of white pines; turned dandelion flowers into crunchy salad croutons; deep-fried the springy green lichen that grows on the rocks for a crispy snack; and created ice cream flavoured with hay. "Very earthy and grassy," he says.

You'd be forgiven for thinking him a chef, but he adamantly refuses the title; in fact, he has no formal training. During the week, he's a creative director at a Toronto advertising agency. On Fridays, he pulls the cord on what he calls his "ejection seat" and heads to Georgian Bay, and the laser focus of his creativity turns to cooking. "I lead this dual life. Monday morning I arrive back at Bloor and Yonge smelling of woodsmoke."

Still, creating new dishes has become far more than just casual cottage fun. On alternate Saturday nights, from early summer through mid-fall, Derek runs a pop-up restaurant called Sunfish out of a tent overlooking the water behind the Hive, a shop and eatery in Honey Harbour. Ten sought-after seats. Six season-based courses. His interpretation of Canadian food—which means he cooks only with ingredients grown in Canada. If they're wild and foraged, all the better. »

Sharing the magic of wild and unconventional ingredients runs in the family. "My grandpa took me outside when I was 12 and popped a pansy in my mouth, and I was, like, 'Whaaat?' The flavour that comes through is insane," says Derek, pictured here with Madeleine.



“IT’S ALL
outrageously
DELICIOUS”



Forage Tip
CATTAIL HEARTS

Reach below the surface, and break off the stalk at the roots. Use the part about 8" above the break point, and peel away its outer layers. Eat raw or cooked.



PICKEREL
IN THE SHALLOWS

When the pike and bass arrive at the table, smelling of juniper smoke, Derek peels back the skin and sprinkles on sea salt and white-pine vinegar (made by steeping white pine needles in apple-cider vinegar). He then garnishes the fish with lemony sorrel, which grows wild behind his cottage, and peppery nasturtium leaves. No Lemons, his black, Sunfish-logoed T-shirt says, and he means it: they don't meet his definition of "indigenous" foods. "They can be introduced here from elsewhere, but they have to be able to survive and thrive in our Canadian climate," he explains. "And they can't remind you of another place. My nightmare would be if you're eating a dish at Sunfish, and you're thinking it's like something from a different culture."

Because his self-imposed rules bar citrus, Derek is always chasing other forms of lemon flavour. He replaces it with lemon thyme and sorrel, lemon geranium, spruce tips, and vinegars infused with sumac, white pine, and wild leek. "And I've only just started experimenting with lemon replacement."

His dad, who's made a killer Caesar salad to accompany the fish, leans in. "I'm allowed to use lemons," he whispers, as we dig in to the delectable dinner.

The three-dormered wood cottage, with its narrow screened porch and creaking doors, is crammed with the accumulated stuff of four generations of the Blais family. A full shelf of Thermos bottles. Another of monster-sized martini glasses. Enough Mastercraft tool chests to rival a small-town Canadian Tire. Vintage snowshoes and paddles, and a surfeit of lamps, with and without their shades. Plus a stack of coolers, baskets, and boxes to cope with overflow from the narrow, cramped kitchen. Ignore its sleek espresso machine, and it lacks even the slightest shred of a postmodern cheffy feel.

"The cottage grew like Topsy," says Derek's uncle Chris the next morning at breakfast. "Each generation added something." One of D'Arcy's five siblings, Chris is visiting from Montreal with his daughter, Anne, 22, and her boyfriend, to celebrate her birthday at the cottage, a tradition that started when she was a young kid. Breakfast here—D'Arcy is the cook—is likewise governed by cottage tradition: it's a given that his huge, scratch-made sticky buns will appear one morning (a love of cooking clearly has deep roots here) and that each person will get to choose which particular hot-gooney-brown-sugar-pecan-currant-cherry-glacé-dripping bun he or she wants. Guests and birthday girls get to go first, of course. Another morning, it's D'Arcy's patented crêpes: "I remember him making stacks of them when he was 12,"

Chris says. Though, with this breakfast, Derek's influence also shows: the crêpes are served with maple syrup's unusual and not-very-sweet cousin, birch syrup, made from yellow birch sap tapped in Central Ontario.

Lunch is entirely Derek. Working in a minuscule corner of open counter space, he meticulously places paper-thin slices of raw New Brunswick scallop, strawberry, purple radish, and pale-pink rhubarb onto plates with tweezers. When he was growing up, the family lived on both coasts. "I love branching out beyond Ontario into the rest of Canada's bounty, especially with seafood. It's out of control, it's so good." He remembers catching lingcod with his dad in British Columbia and prying oysters off the rocks in Nova Scotia. "I'm subconsciously pulling from all those memories as I'm developing dishes."

"Super pretty," says Madeleine Hayles, as Derek adds a few tiny geranium leaves to the plates. Madeleine, 30, is a Toronto sommelier whose non-traditional take on wine made her a natural fit when Derek was looking for someone to choose the wines—all Canadian, of course—to accompany his cooking at Sunfish. White wine with the scallops? Not so fast. Forget the old rules for pairing wine and food, she says, and forget points-based ratings. "Wine needs to be less cerebral, more easygoing and hedonistic. You should drink what you feel like drinking, what you're in the mood for. As long as the base quality is good, it's likely going to taste good."

Meanwhile, Derek is retrieving the garnish from the overstuffed fridge and adding them to the plates. "Borage flowers," he says, passing around the tiny, pale-violet blossoms, which he gets from Liz Foers, who runs nearby Essa Seedlings, an Egbert, Ont., farm. They taste exactly like cucumber.

"My most amazing memories of cooking are of my grandpa up here," Derek says. "He was the first one to show me that flowers can be edible—that they can bring flavour to the plate in a magical way."

In fact, he admits that without the cottage, without growing up on Georgian Bay, his explorations of Canadian cuisine, and Sunfish, wouldn't exist. But it took almost dying—from a motorcycle crash in California's Death Valley during a solo trip in the summer of 2016—to make it happen.

After weeks spent recovering in hospital and rehab, he knew that instead of returning to his Toronto loft when he was released, he wanted to be at the cottage. "I thought it was the best place to focus on healing and to process my almost dying."

Focussing on healing made him focus on food. "I began getting into what was local, seasonal, freshest. And that had me



Derek finds inspiration all over, but new Nordic cuisine cookbooks that used cultivated and foraged ingredients helped form his cooking philosophies. "I thought, This isn't just Nordic cooking; this is Canadian cooking. We have similar ingredients growing at similar times of the year."



HALF-TORCHED HEIRLOOM TOMATO SALAD



Forage Tip BUY INSTEAD

Not certain on an ID? Find micro-greens, edible flowers, and the like at farmers' markets and specialty food stores, such as Forbes Wild Foods (wildfoods.ca).



VENISON WITH BEETS

FORAGING 101

How to get started

✦ Forage on your own property—“that way you get to know what’s on your land, and it gives you a stewardship role,” says lifelong forager Jonathan Forbes, the owner of Forbes Wild Foods—or ask permission on other private land.

(Though foraging is permitted on some Crown or other public land, check local bylaws and with local conservation groups first.)

✦ Start by foraging for one readily recognizable food at a time: fiddleheads, for instance;

cattails; or berries, such as strawberries, raspberries, and blackberries.

✦ Forage in areas where the risk of pollution is low.

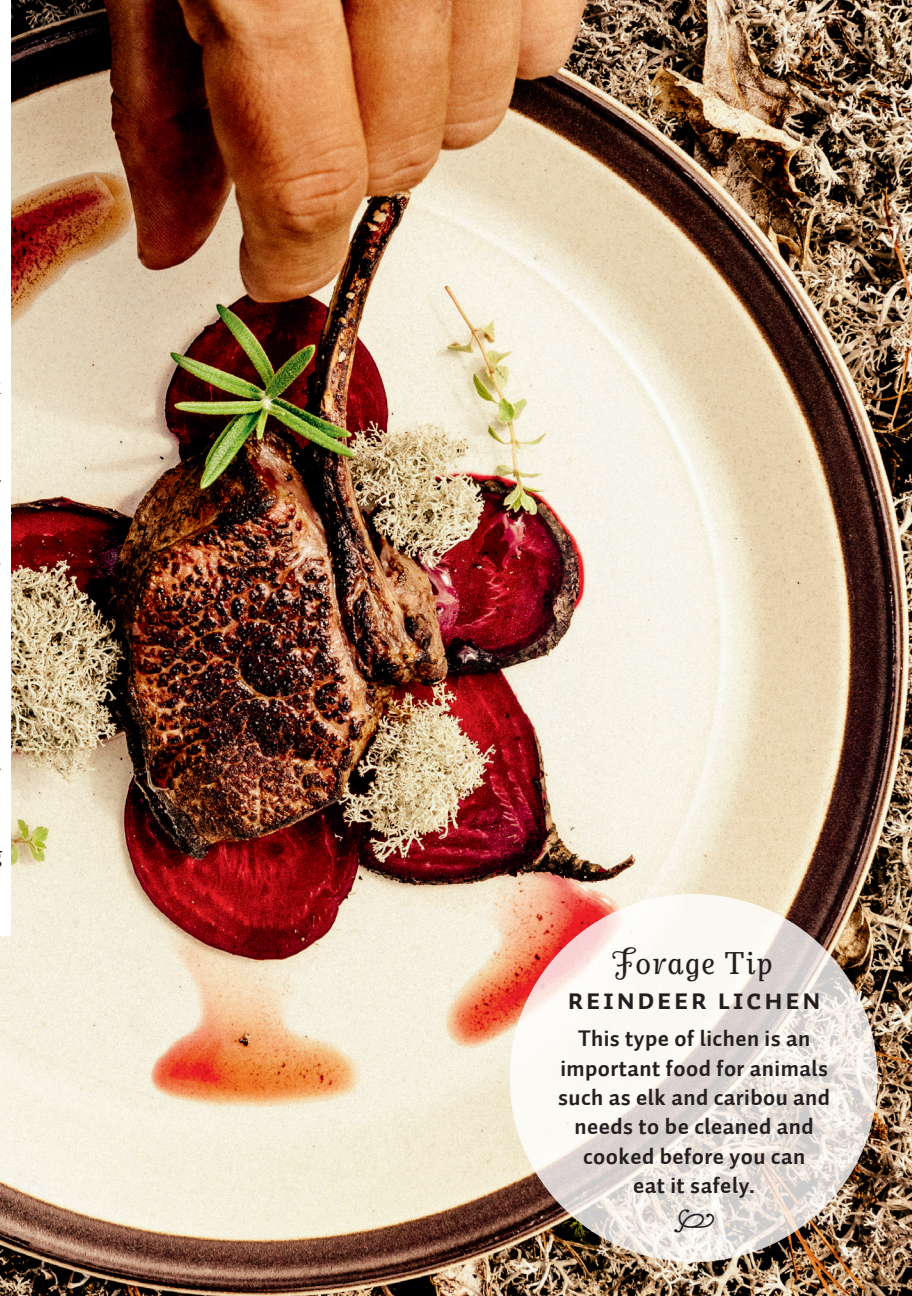
✦ Beware of look-alikes, and if you’re not 100 per cent certain you can positively ID a plant or fungus, don’t pick it.

✦ Use several good field guides—not just one. “But also connect with organizations such as environmental groups, mycological societies, and clubs that forage for mushrooms,” says Forbes. Take workshops and go with experts.

✦ Practise sustainable harvesting. Some species are more susceptible to overharvesting than others. And even if a plant seems abundant on your own property, it may not be abundant elsewhere. Ask experts about how much of a species you should be taking.

✦ Even with a sure ID, if you haven’t eaten a particular wild plant before, try a small sample first.

✦ For more information, wildfoods.ca includes a beginner’s guide to foraging, and Ontario Nature has several guides to harvesting wild edibles available online.



Forage Tip

REINDEER LICHEN

This type of lichen is an important food for animals such as elk and caribou and needs to be cleaned and cooked before you can eat it safely.



Derek wants to produce a cookbook, to share what he’s been discovering. No surprise, he plans to call it *No Lemons*.

starting to wander around the back of the cottage and finding stuff like wild mint and wild chives growing there.”

Soon he was inviting friends to sample his experiments. “Some of the stuff was burnt, some of it didn’t taste good, but that was okay. It was just this little test kitchen. I was using food as creative expression.”

He’s still wandering around behind the cottage—today, foraging for some “reindeer moss,” a.k.a. lichen, which carpets the ground here. “We’re at the grocery store, Aisle 15,” he jokes, pinching off a small clump. Turning that clump into something delectable takes effort. Derek has to painstakingly clean it, using tweezers and scissors, dividing it into bits as he goes. Before serving, he dips them in a solution of maple syrup and water and deep-fries them. “Reindeer moss is a reminder of what can be food,” he says. “First Nations peoples ate it in times of scarcity. The maple syrup turns it into a cool treat.”

Connections like that matter to him, because his own heritage is part Oneida, through his maternal grandmother. “My mom was part of the Sixties Scoop, so a lot of her culture was removed from her. It’s taken me the better part of my early adulthood to even start understanding what it means to be indigenous in the context of being Canadian.”

His route, unsurprisingly, has been through food: researching traditional techniques, recipes, and food sources and spinning elements into his own cooking. For instance, after reading about an old Mi’kmaq technique for catching grasshoppers and crickets—by digging a pit in a field of grass or hay, then setting the field on fire to “herd” the insects into the pit (and roasting them in the process)—he created a dish to tell that story: asparagus half-charred over a campfire, sprinkled with ground roasted grasshoppers mixed with sea salt, and served on a bed of hay. The starting point for his cornmeal-battered dandelion-flower “croustons” was a recipe in a 1977 cookbook devoted to the wild foods of “American Indians.” But his riff uses them to top a dandelion-greens salad dressed with honey and white-pine vinegar that he calls “Journey of the Bee.”

The dandelion leaves and flowers come from Liz Foers’ farm (as do the other micro-greens, herbs, and flowers that Derek uses). “I’m also working with her son, Graeme, who makes maple syrup and keeps bees,” Derek explains. “So the honey I used came from bees that fed on dandelions in the same area as the ones in the salad. It’s an entire ecosystem in one dish. Incorporating local elements that way, putting my spin on them, is the perfect hybrid for me—a very Canadian dish.” »

“I CALL IT foraging FOR DINNER”

Dinner is on a stretch of flat, pink-swirled granite, on a tiny island a 40-minute boat ride from the cottage. “My father goes crazy when I use cottage pots and pans on the fire,” Derek says, as two cast iron frying pans are well on their way to blackening in the campfire he’s set. His parents (now divorced) were into camping as well as cottaging when he was young, always towing a boat behind their station wagon. “Derek started driving the boat when he was four, standing at the wheel with me beside him,” D’Arcy says. “And, as he got a little older, he had lots of time to fool around with things like bannock on sticks, learning to control foods on a fire.”

The late-day breeze carries the scent of fish frying in butter, but it’s no simple shore dinner, it’s another ecosystem on a plate: “Pickerel in the Shallows” (see recipe, opposite). Derek places the still-sizzling fillets—sautéed with lemon thyme—on a bed of creamy sunchoke purée. (Also known as Jerusalem artichokes, sunchokes grow wild throughout Canada.) He adds cattail “hearts,” (the tender inner stalk), nasturtium leaves (which look like miniature lily pads), and a few sorrel leaves (for more lemony flavour) to the sunchoke shallows. Madeleine opens a bottle of orange wine, which is made from white-wine grapes fermented with their skins on. Orange is the new white in her world, and she thinks it has an “earthier, more savoury quality” that will stand up well to the meaty pickerel and sweet, nutty sunchoke. It’s all outrageously delicious.

The cattails were sustainably foraged in Ontario, but not by Derek; they came jarred (from Forbes Wild Foods in Toronto), and the nasturtiums and sorrel came from his farming friend Liz Foers. With a full-time job, a biweekly pop-up restaurant to run, and ongoing recipe R&D, he doesn’t have the time yet to forage for everything he needs. Or the knowledge, he admits. “I don’t know what I don’t know.” And with countless unpalatable—or, worse, poisonous—look-alikes lurking in the woods, “for now, I definitely rely on my suppliers.”

Still, he hunts fiddleheads and wild ramps for himself in the spring, picks gooseberries and currants behind the cottage in summer, and is already anticipating the ripe berries from all that juniper come fall. “I’m thinking about making a sauce to pair with roasted venison.” And he’s just returned from elsewhere in cottage country, where he foraged for mushrooms under a friend’s father’s guidance. “Everywhere I go, it’s, like, ‘Can I eat it?’ ‘Can I eat it?’ ‘Can I eat it?’” 🍄

Award-winning writer (and Cottage Life’s founding editor) Ann Vanderhoof wrote about Albert Crowder in our May ’17 issue.

Pickerel in the Shallows

Native Ontario pickerel (a.k.a. walleye) and cattails aren’t next-door neighbours, but Derek has them meet in this dish, following his philosophy that “stuff that’s together in an ecosystem tastes really good together.”

4 tbsp butter (divided)

Handful of fresh lemon thyme

1½ lbs scaled, skin-on pickerel fillets, cut into 3"-4" pieces

¼ cup white wine

12-16 cattail hearts, 3"-4" long

(see Tip, p. 76)

Sunchoke Purée (see recipe, p. 92)

1 tsp white-pine vinegar

or white-wine vinegar (divided)

Flaky sea salt, to taste

Small handful sorrel and nasturtium leaves, and onion flowers and/or garlic scapes, for garnish (optional)

1. Heat a large cast iron frying pan over a campfire (or on a barbecue), and melt a generous chunk of butter to cover the bottom of the pan. Add the lemon thyme, and stir for 5 minutes.
2. Add the pickerel, skin side down, and fry for 5-7 minutes, spooning butter over the pieces of fish as they cook. When they’re golden-brown on the bottom, flip, adding more of the butter and a healthy splash of wine. Cook 2-3 minutes longer, until the second side is also golden brown. Move frying pan to the edge of the fire to stay warm.
3. Heat a smaller cast iron frying pan over the fire. Melt more butter, and sauté the cattail hearts until the edges are golden and they are heated through, about 3 minutes.
4. To serve, spread a circle of warm Sunchoke Purée on each plate, top with 2-3 pieces of pickerel and a few cattail hearts. Sprinkle the fish with ¼ tsp of vinegar per plate and sea salt to taste. Garnish with the leaves, flowers, and garlic scapes (if using). SERVES 4.

More RECIPES on p. 92

FANTASTIC FEASTS

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Half-Torched Heirloom Tomato Salad

This salad showcases one of the joys of summer: locally grown, sun-ripened field tomatoes. No chef's blowtorch on hand? Derek just borrows one from the cottage workshop.

4 medium-sized, vine-on red or yellow heirloom tomatoes
1-2 tsp white-wine vinegar
1-2 tsp walnut oil
Flaky sea salt, to taste
Handful of fresh basil flowers (or small basil leaves, or both)

1. Holding the blowtorch about 4" away, slowly char half of each tomato from top to bottom until the skin is blistered and blackened. (Or roast on the barbecue.)
2. Set each tomato in the centre of a plate, drizzle with a splash of white-wine vinegar and an equal amount of walnut oil, and sprinkle with sea salt. Garnish with basil. **SERVES 4.**

Birched Perch

Here, Derek pairs bittersweet birch syrup with sweet-tasting perch. The syrup is also excellent as a marinade for other fish, duck, and pork; or brushed on root vegetables before roasting.

4 scaled, skin-on perch fillets
½ cup birch syrup, plus additional for serving
4 sticks, approx. 10" long, one end whittled to a point (or wooden skewers), soaked overnight
Flaky sea salt, to taste

1. Place the perch fillets in a shallow dish, brush liberally on both sides with birch syrup, and set aside for 10 minutes to marinate.
2. Thread a fillet on each stick, and place on an oiled grill over a hot wood fire or on a barbecue (preheated to high), turning once, until the flesh is opaque, about 3-4 minutes per side.
3. Remove from fire, and drizzle with more syrup. If desired, use a blowtorch to finish crisping the skin. Sprinkle with flaky sea salt. **SERVES 4** as part of a multi-course dinner.

Sunchoke Purée

This rich, delicately flavoured accompaniment goes well with seafood, as well as pork and chicken. Knobby, brown, nutty-tasting sunchokes are a tuber of a plant in the sunflower family, so people with sunflower allergies should steer clear.

1½ lbs sunchokes
2 tbsp white vinegar
¼ cup half-and-half cream (or more, if needed)
¼ cup butter
Sea salt, to taste

1. Peel sunchokes, and cut into 1" chunks, immediately placing them in a vinegar-water solution to prevent browning.
2. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Drain sunchokes, add to pot, and cook until they pierce easily with a fork, about 20 minutes.
3. Drain, then purée (in batches, if necessary) in a food processor or blender with cream and butter. Check consistency—the purée should be light and smooth—and add more cream, if necessary. Season to taste. **SERVES 4.**

TIP The purée can be made ahead, refrigerated, and reheated before serving.

Venison with Beets & Chanterelles

If you've never tasted venison before, this dish is the place to start. Pan-seared over an open fire, the meat develops an irresistible, herby smokiness, and the earthy chanterelles and sweet caramelized beets are the perfect counterpoint.

4-6 beets
Generous handful of fresh sage, thyme, and rosemary
2 tbsp grapeseed or canola oil
4 venison rib chops (8 oz/250 g each)
2 tbsp butter
Sea salt, to taste
8 oz fresh chanterelles, cleaned
4 garlic scapes (optional)
Head of garlic, cut to expose the cloves

1. Prepare a hot wood or charcoal fire. (Or heat a gas barbecue to high.) Making two packages, wrap the beets with some of the herbs in a double layer of foil, and nestle them among the embers (or place on the grill rack over high heat).

2. Roast until tender when pierced with a knife, about 30-60 minutes, depending on your heat. Remove from the fire and set aside. (It's okay if the outsides are completely charred; you'll cut these parts off before serving.)

3. Heat a large cast iron frying pan on the fire, and add oil to cover the bottom. Once oil is hot, sprinkle venison liberally with sea salt, and place chops in the pan. Once they begin to sizzle, add a chunk of butter and the rest of the herbs.

4. Cook undisturbed until the meat develops a crust on the bottom, about 4 minutes. Flip and continue cooking until the meat is slightly firm to the touch, about 5 minutes more for rare (the internal temperature should be about 130°F). Remove chops to a platter to rest, leaving the herbs in the pan.

5. Add the chanterelles to the pan, and sauté for 3-4 minutes until soft. Meanwhile, place the garlic scapes (if using) directly on the fire and char gently.

6. To serve, peel or cut off the blackened skin from the beets and cut into quarters. Rub chops with the raw garlic head. Place a chop on each plate, and surround with beets and chanterelles. Garnish with a charred garlic scape. **SERVES 4.**

TIP While the chanterelles are cooking, place wood embers directly on top of the herbs in the pan to up the smoky factor.

Berries & Cream

Derek's take on this dessert combines seasonal berries—strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, blueberries, and saskatoon—with an herb-infused cream. He likes to garnish it with shards of maple candy, made by boiling down maple syrup until it cracks when cooled.

Handful of fresh thyme and lavender
1½-2 cups half-and-half cream
4-6 cups mixed berries

1. At least one hour before serving, place the herbs in a small bowl, and pour the cream over them. Cover and refrigerate to allow flavours to infuse.
2. When ready to serve, strain herbs from cream. Divide berries and cream among 4 bowls. **SERVES 4.** 🍷

Feel free to improvise on Derek's recipes, as he does. Amounts given are approximate.