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The Seaweed Lady of Vancouver Island

Featuring an Ocean Garden Tour and Interview with Diane Bernard on the Beach at Sooke Harbour House, Whiffin Spit, Vancouver Island, Canada.

By Steve Giordano and Lynn Rosen



Diane Bernard, the Seaweed Lady of Vancouver Island, drags a giant Bull Kelp, the fastest growing plant on the planet.

(Courtesy of Sooke Harbour House)

Diane Bernard, a tall, good-looking lanky blonde with an exceedingly wry sense of humor and a deep sense of coastal lore laced with oceanic botanical knowledge, has earned her moniker well. She's known as The Seaweed Lady.

Bernard lives and hand-harvests her weeds on the outer coast of Vancouver Island, BC, and supplies them to high-end, first-class, five-star chefs and spas in the Pacific Northwest, the Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island.



Diane Bernard and Sinclair Philip, co-owner of Sooke Harbour House, harvesting fresh local seaweeds.

(Courtesy of Sooke Harbour House)

We were privileged to take a morning beach tour with her out in front of The Sooke Harbour House along Whiffin Spit in early spring before her seaweed garden was actually in its prime. Nevertheless, she had planned a menu for us for the night before with the chef at Sooke Harbour House, a five-star, art-filled, stunning 28-room B&B with a worldwide reputation for serving fresh seafood and local produce. Sooke Harbour House has been owned and run by her good friends, Frederique and Sinclair Philip, since they bought the property in 1979. The world-renowned Philips have mentored and supported her efforts to bring fresh and local fare to both the spa and dining tables of the Pacific Northwest.

We set out in our gumboots and didn't have to wade far to find the garden about which she is so passionate.



Quimper Park, a Regional Heritage Site and Whiffin Spit are just a short walk out in front of the Sooke Harbour House B&B. (Steve Giordano)

Q. Did every one of the nine courses we ate last night at dinner have seaweed?

DB. Yes, that's how it's supposed to work. Except for the cheese and the chocolate courses.

Q. What restaurants do you supply in the area?

DB. I Supply The Aerie in Malahat on Vancouver Island, Kingfisher in the Courtenay area, the Bearfoot Bistro in Whistler, Sooke Harbour House in Sooke, Wildfire Bakery in Victoria, The Empress and the Ocean Pointe Resort in Victoria, The Four Seasons in Whistler. They are also my clients for their spas. C Restaurant in Vancouver, Tojos. We usually start harvesting for the chefs at the end of April. But we'll see what we can find this morning. I also give tours. I work with a couple of tour agencies. This morning I'm going to give you a mini version.



2.5km-long Whiffin Spit
(Steve Giordano)

(We clambered down over the rocky shoals to the low-tide beach, covered in debris and detritus and waded into the shallow low waters as Diane began her adventurous journey into the wilds of the sea.)

DB. You're looking at the wildest garden on the west coast. Period. This is as wild, as exotic and diverse as any temperate rain forest that we have. Like any garden, it has a growing period and its purpose is to reproduce. And it has a down season like any garden, it reproduces and it sloughs off. Given this volatile coastline – and believe you me, this is a very volatile high-energy zone – it's very beautiful. The water crashes over the spit in the winter. Given that volatile nature, that sloughing off ends up on the shore. What you see on this shore is actually the compost pile. That's finished, spent, and perfect for fertilizer and I don't harvest that.

I would never judge your vegetable or flower garden by the look, smell or texture of your compost pile. Let's step over the compost pile and into the garden.



Diane points out her vast harvesting fields.
(Steve Giordano)

(That's where the gumboots come into play. Gotta have 'em or you can't wade into her garden.)

DB. The textures, smells and tastes of seaweed are all very different. People say – You mean I can like seaweed again?! They know it's supposed to be good for you, but why is that smell and nature of seaweed so off-putting to most people? We usually walk out about 5-800 feet into the low tide area that I use as my classroom. We explore all the way out and around this point.

Q. Do you have any harvesting restrictions?

DB. I'm a commercially licensed harvester. I work with both the province and the feds and I'm licensed to harvest between here (Sooke Harbour) and Jordan River and on to Port Renfrew.

Q. What about the public? Can the public harvest without a license?

DB. If it's for your own personal use, it's not a problem. Part of my tour is to show people how to harvest. It's a wild resource. It belongs to everyone. Once you're into a commercial enterprise, selling to chefs and spas, you need a license. Thankfully in Canada, you have to harvest by hand. It's not allowed to mechanically harvest as in the

US. That really keeps it a fantastic resource here and we're keen about keeping it at its best.



Diane discovers seaweed specimens. (Steve Giordano)

Q. What's this? It looks like a boa!

DB. This is a local seaweed here... Alaria. It's beautiful seaweed. Look at that color. Freshness, texture and the shine. Most people, when you talk about seaweed, they sorta go well - how does it smell? It smells wonderful. When it's fresh, it smells great... just like fish. If you've got a seaweed product - inner beauty to eat and outer beauty to wear. If you're dealing with a quasi-fishy smell, you've got something that's part of the compost pile.



Diane holds up one of the most prolific seaweeds in the area – Alaria. Edible, spa-friendly and beautiful.

(Steve Giordano)



Close-up of Alaria.
(Steve Giordano)



Chef Edward Tuson in his Sooke Harbour House kitchen working with a freshly harvested variety of one of the most prolific seaweeds on the Vancouver Island outer coast – Alaria. (Courtesy of Sooke Harbour House)



One of the many varieties of seaweed dishes from the five-star Sooke Harbour House kitchen. (Courtesy of Sooke Harbour House)

Q. Is it edible?

DB. You ate this last night. Alaria. Have a bite. This is a huge garden. It's diverse, exotic, all that stuff. But it's different from land plants in some very big ways. One of them – seaweeds don't have a root system like land plants.

Q. How do they grow?

(We get a botanical lesson along with our nibbling and fresh breakfast seaweeds.)

DB. That's their magic. This is part of the reproductive system here. Here's the base of the seaweed. They have a holdfast that is designed to cling and they cling to rocks and logs. They grow on each other and they cling. They have an unbelievable glue system. They don't take their nutrients up through the soil. They're designed to rise up in a water column as quickly as possible, get their nutrients as quickly as possible, and then they must collapse. They have a high-energy tidal zone to deal with where they are smashed, knocked, pulled, ripped. Like a tree – if they were stiff and firm, then you can imagine what the waves would do to them. They're designed to be pliable. They don't have a stem – it's a stipe. And they don't have a leaf – it's a frond. Not a root system – it's a holdfast. You have nutrients taken in differently.



Close-up of the seaweed holdfast cling system.



Close up of bright red seaweed used for exfoliant in spa products. (Steve Giordano photos)

They're the healthiest plant on the planet. They have huge amounts of A, E, C all the Bs including B12. One of the single most important sources of B12, period. Seaweed has E, K, all the trace minerals. Zinc, Iron, protein, complete fiber. It's got no fat. It's the perfect food. It's disgustingly rich with vitamins. Seaweeds take in fabulous stuff from the ocean and nutrients, but they don't differentiate the good from the bad. So you want to be aware of where you harvest.

I harvest out from marinas. You want to be aware of where your seaweed comes from.

If you take care of your coastlines, you're going to have absolutely first quality seaweed harvesting.

Q. Can the public purchase fresh seaweed commercially?

DB. There are small harvesters here on the island. You're probably the first to know. This year we're coming out with food products that people can buy through my website www.outercostseaweeds.com and also through the chefs I work with. We're starting with the chefs. I've worked with them now for three or four years. We have worked hard on developing a BC seaweed cuisine and you've had samples of that and what can be done. I'm very keen to kick it out of the health food store and dried form and into the fresh realm.



Diane chews on some fresh Alaria.

Bright green sea lettuce - where most people start their seaweed eating experience. (Steve Giordano photos)

Q. Don't the Japanese seem to know about this?

DB. The Japanese are the gurus of seaweed.

Q. How vast are the seaweed pickings here on this coast?

DB. This is a coastline with 500 different species of seaweed. The BC native coast has 700. The area I harvest in has probably about 250 varieties.

(Bernard continues to discover species as we wade.)

DB. Oh, look at this! I'm in heaven. Feel that. Fantastic. All varieties start to break down with their reproductive system. You want to talk about seaweed and sex on the beach, well here you go. This is their reproductive scene. They start to form spores. And then it's finished.

As it rises up, it changes and becomes more delicate and starts to rip. By the time it gets to the shore, they've dispersed their spores but they're pretty beaten up. There are stereotypes of seaweed. All ripped and broken. But most people only see it near the shore when it's at the end of its life cycle. Near the compost heap. Part of my company's mandate is to change the image of seaweed, educate people about them and to recognize that they're quite beautiful, exotic, nutritious and delicious.

Q. Are all the edibles cooked?

DB. No. Some are eaten cooked and some are eaten raw.

This is Irish moss... a bit bitter to taste. We work with the red seaweeds in our facial products and in sauces for the chefs.

This one is the rockweed. It clings to the rocks. It's got puffy little ends. Here on the coast, kids like to squish the puffy ends.

Q. What about seaweed's sodium content?

DB. Sodium is very much a part of seaweed, but when you work with it fresh, scientifically, when you eat it fresh, the sodium and the iodine, the minerals, the vitamins are all organically balanced in the plant. But when you dry them – you get two spikes – one in salt and another in iodine. It changes the chemistry of the seaweed. Compare a dried apple to a fresh one... same difference with seaweed.

(Bernard, in her enthusiasm, discovers another couple of treasures.)

DB. Dulse - here it is. Right on our tidal garden shelf. This one is so good. One of the stronger ones. Some people get a bit of a fish taste to it.

Oh, did you see that! See the blue? This is one of the reds. And I have my face mask made from this. It's called Iridaea or Rainbow Seaweed. Iridaea is Latin for iridescent. We don't have to make these names up.

Laminaria, an incredible important seaweed in the Japanese culture. This makes Nori look pale. The double sugar kelp. Quite a sweet seaweed. Scientists are finding has a type of natural sugar – manitol – that has good hope for diabetics. Chefs love working with this one... good for sauces.

When it's attached by the holdfast, we don't yank it off from the anchor place and we harvest only the top areas. That protects the root system and the reproductive systems. We harvest early in the season – April/May. We start from the low tides with the gumboots. As the season progresses, and the seaweed starts to rise up higher, we move into boats for harvesting.

After September, I'm sending people down with snorkels.

(Bernard talks about Alaria, one of the most prolific species off the outer coast of Vancouver Island)

DB. You can take this, shear it off here, take broad bands, roll it up and chop it like linguini, steam it and serve it with some wild salmon. Then add the sea lettuce sauce, you've got all the vitamins, no fat, all that fiber, what more can you want? And it's delicious.

The mid-rib of Alaria is delicious for salad. It's a very sweet seaweed. Just get past the original salty taste and the other vegetable flavors come forth. The stipe has a different flavor, different texture. It's nutty, like rhubarb, sweet peas, and zucchini.

After working with the chefs after all these years we're able to say – this makes a great sauce, this makes a great base, this makes a great salad.

I'm exclusive at The Four Seasons Whistler. They came on as clients in August. Their big season is winter but I can't harvest in winter.



Staghorn Podium, dries like velvet, very rare.

Homeopathy people seek this out.

(Steve Giordano photo)

I went up there to do a training session in May for the spa just before the hotel opened. I put my seaweeds in the kitchen fridge the night before for a 45-people meeting for the next morning's spa session. I went down to get the seaweed at 6am the next morning... and they were gone. Nobody around. I went white. An Asian cleaning woman came through and said – oh – the seaweeds, they were yours? I said yes. She said – Oh, Chef

just came through. So I went to the main kitchen, introduced myself to the chef. You have my seaweed. Oh, yes. I really want to play with them. I said, NO. Not this trip.

The story went right through the hotel. The chef stole the seaweed from the spa. The message was – what’s good enough for your dining room is good enough for your spa.

Q. Can you eat all seaweeds?

DB. Yes, but. You’re gonna find some seaweed that may upset your stomach but as soon as you taste them you know.

Q. Is there anything that’s poisonous?

DB. No. I have posed that question to University scientists all over the world and I got answers from Australia, Vancouver, Africa and Ireland. Seaweeds are so clean, so sensitive that they know don’t of any adverse reaction. If anyone were to have a reaction, it would most likely be me, since I eat so much of it.

DB. My local doctor phoned me up last week. I’ve got something to show you. Look at this. On her desk are all these little packages, all in Japanese. These are diaphragms. Laminaria. You’re a medical doctor. What does this tell you? Minimal side effects that’s for sure. You’re not going to be fooling around with that sensitive part of the body. Here’s some Ulva Lactuca. It’s sea lettuce. This is the easiest one to introduce to people in terms of food. We usually start people eating seaweeds with this one.

The fastest growing plant on the planet is growing out there...it starts Dec.21st... all seaweeds start to grow on the Winter Solstice. That’s the Giant Bull Kelp. Here I found a rare one. It’s a little beaten up. It’s Staghorn Podium. Homeopathy people go crazy over this. It dries like velvet. It’s a rare seaweed. I don’t harvest this commercially. Nutraceutically it’s supposed to be very good and I have eaten it but it tastes absolutely awful. It’s spit and spew.

Q. Where are your spa products formulated?

DB. Everything in my products are grown locally. All the essential oils and ingredients that I work with are from this coastline. I don’t use anything but true outercoast northwest ingredients. That’s been the guiding filter for me. When we move into the food products, we’ll stick to the same standards.

Sinclair and Frederique Philip are the North American lead in taking wild resources, kicking it into the highest level of sophistication, and showcasing it to the world. Their whole message is so critically important...wild food.

The fastest growing plant on the planet - the giant bull kelp. It has a large hold fast. I will eat it fresh, but it gives that full gelatinous taste and some people don’t like that.

Q. How did you get started doing this?

DB. I was in local politics here on Vancouver Island. I'm an avid environmentalist and conservationist. I lost an election, and when the politics door closed, I sat down and re-grouped. I'm a coastal person. I have been working in economic development and coastal communities for ten years. We have fabulous resources and it's time to kick them into high-level sophistication and show the world.

For seaweed tour schedules and spa and food product information, visit/contact Diane Bernard at www.outercoastseaweeds.com, or at 1-877-713-7464 or 1-250-642-5328.