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Seaweed: The Next Big Thing

By Elizabeth Nickson in Sooke, B.C.



Diane Bernard meets us in the very early morning, in the parking lot of Whiffin Spit, in Sooke on the rugged west coast of Vancouver Island. It is rainy and dark, and hemmed in by forest on one side and the wildest of wild oceans on the other.

Today, however, as it has been all summer, the morning is bright, sunny and warm, and the beach, at the lowest of low tides, stretches in front of us in an entire spectrum of acid green and purple, browns and reds. Above us sits Sooke Harbour House, consistently at or near the top of most official magazine "Best Small Hotels in the World" lists. But below the hotels lies Bernard's seaweed beach, flat and wide. Or part of it; the Seaweed Lady, as she is known, harvests a 15-kilometre stretch of shoreline west of Sooke, near Jordan River. Bernard, 51, is a woman of substance who has in mid-life changed from activist, bureaucrat and local politician to entrepreneur, seaweed enthusiast and messianic wild forager.

And why not? Seaweed is the coming thing. The hot new ingredient in everything from toothpaste to nutritional supplements to spa products to food. It's a product that is under going a renaissance.

Which is why, the day before I meet Bernard, I spend an hour at the aerie Resort's Wellness Center, lying naked under sheets of slimy wet bull kelp, after having my entire body scrubbed by Rockweed Exfoliant. Rockweed, explains Bernard, "is a funky little plant, and the product I've made is 90% fresh seaweed, blended with ocean mud.

We work with the fruit of the weed, which we pop and out comes a gel-like fucoid. It is the marine version of aloe vera gel- very clean, no smell. Scientific literature is finding very healthy properties in rockweed fucoid. Researchers are suggesting there are both anti-tumour properties, as well as anti-inflammatory properties. It heals irritated skin, even burns. It's exciting. There is very strong language from the research community around the healing properties of seaweed. Twenty years ago, it was merely hopeful. Around the late '80's, the language became much more direct effect."

I think I may have had one too many treatments in my life. Someone says "aromatherapy," and I make polite noises and back out of the conversation. I only get a massage when I have actual pain and I never ever have facials or spa treatments. This seems irrational and contrarian, because hey, pleasure is pleasure, and one should take it where one finds it, so sometimes I go back and try again. And this time, I'm actually enjoying being touched by strangers and I think it might be the seaweeds.

After the rockweed scrub, I am covered in Alaria, a local seaweed Bernard mixes with B.C. glacial clay.

"This clay will match any exotic French green clay, " insists Bernard.

"We have amazing wild resources. What we tend to do in Canada is dig, cut it, chop it, catch it and ship it out in the rawest form possible. So here's our chance to take a look at these wild resources in a new perspective. I have some spas, who say to me, "We only use Dead Sea Salt'. Well, we have what I call sweet Saskatchewan salt, which for heaven's sake, we throw on the roads. We must rethink, work on having a higher value perspective.

"I soak B.C. marine salt in four different kinds of seaweed," Bernard says. And why not? Our coastlines are clean; our diversity is fabulous. Good for you to eat. Good for you to wear."

After the wrap, sheets of kelp are laid on my skin from head to toe and I am wrapped in a blanket. It is an entirely new feeling, a kind of lush cooling on the skin. Bernard says seaweed cools the system, so that blood circulates faster, working internally to warm the skin. "You sweat a little, and the seaweed doesn't dry and tighten for hours the way most muds do."

My photographer and I order vats of the next and final step of Bernard's spa treatment: the lotion, Laminaria.

"Aromatherapists told me to pull back from marine smells and textures at the end of the treatment," Bernard says. So this is 25% Laminaria, which the Japanese consider a very important seaweed, both culturally and historically. Laminaria, releases a gel called manitol, which science thinks offers hope for diabetics. It has a very high vitamin content, the highest vegetable B12 content, which is excellent news for vegetarians."

When I meet Bernard the next morning, I feel refreshed and pacified, as if I'd spent the day at the beach and I was 10 years old again.

Bernard's family is from the Magdalene Islands off the Gaspé Peninsula, where grandmothers stuffed mattresses with seaweed, fisherman wrapped lobsters in seaweed and they threw it in every cooking pot. Enthusiastic about seaweed's potential for years, she worked first in local politics, with environmental issues as her dominant campaign there. She ultimately landed a job as regional director of the Sooke Electoral Area. About three years ago, fed up with life as a local politician, in partnership with the innovative and locally adored owners, Frederique and Sinclair Philip of Sooke Harbour House, she threw caution to the wind and started to experiment.

"When I went into restaurants, the chefs would say to me, "what's this goo coming off the seaweed? Euggghhhh! And I said, 'Look guys, super sophisticated Japanese women have been putting this on their faces for years! How come we're using industrially dried seaweed coming from the North Atlantic?"

Bernard began to push seaweed into the most forward-looking operations. With the spa director of the Aerie Resort, she found ways to bring seaweed into Thalasso therapy sessions, and formulated lotions and serums, body wraps and soaks, exfoliants and masks that directly transmit the slippery, intensely moisturizing effects of the seaweed into the body.

Through her company, Outer Coast Seaweeds, Bernard's money is very definitely, where her mouth is. She developed an entire line of spa products.

"Medical research indicates that seaweeds are beneficial in reducing inflammation and blood pressure, for skin irritations and burns, as a toxin eliminator," she says.

Sea water, say scientists, has practically the same chemical makeup as human plasma, so the body easily absorbs the water rich with nutrients from indigenous plants or plant matter. The applications are multiplous. A nurse on one of her tours said that they were starting to use laminaria as a diaphragm.

"Seaweed is not magic. It can't turn back the hands of time," she insists, a sensible moderate Canadian to the core. Tell that to the thousands of customers who religiously buy Estee Lauder's Creme de la Mer at \$300 a pop.

Out of the back of Bernard's truck comes a large family of painted and decorated rubber boots and walking sticks, and we find our sizes and pull them on. Her seaweed tours have become famous. Tourists and locals alike find themselves, at the crack of dawn, happily sliding across the beach on seemingly endless beds of squishiness, laughing like kids, and forcing themselves to eat every slimy bit of weed Diane waves into their faces.

There are 250 varieties of seaweed on the West Coast of Canada, and all of them are edible, says Bernard, except Desmerestis, which will upset your stomach. In fact, says Bernard, natives still use seaweeds as a staple of their cuisine, and early settlers did too. But for the whites, seaweed was only eaten when you were starving. As soon as you could afford to, you ate something, anything, else.

Shame, really, according to Bernard. Since she and the 30 formidable West Coast chefs she works with started her experiment, they have found eight kinds of seaweed to cook with. They have found ways to make seaweed pesto, pastes, linguini, oil, houmous, salads, broth, gelatins, and to replace olives in martinis. Wild foraging on the coast has become an almost cult activity, no longer a salve to starvation, more a tribute to the extraordinary place people find themselves. Almost everyone, once here a few years, begin to whisper about, for instance the morel season, and one day off they go into the woods, returning looking annoyingly satisfied with themselves and closemouthed about precisely where they've been.

Obediently, we crunch away at everything that Bernard hands to us to eat. It's not bad, not bad at all. Raw seaweeds have flavours as distinct as their various shapes, textures and colours, ranging from nutty to sweet. Obediently again, we slide it over our faces and arms. Slippery, slimy, nice. Converted.