



Gourmets Eating meets the Weed Wars

Most of Friends of Five Creeks' work goes into fighting invasives, and we do get tired of the war. Could we eat our way into controlling invasive weeds? Probably not – but why not have fun trying?

In the Bay Area, one of our most familiar invasives is fennel -- licorice-gone-wild, with its anise scent, thready fronds, and bright yellow umbrellas of flowers maturing to abundant, tasty seed. Even when it towers over your head and forms impenetrable thickets, it's hard to hate fennel. Birds like the seeds, bees love the flowers, and our big yellow-and-black anise swallowtail butterflies, whose larvae thrive on the greens, probably are more numerous today than before Europeans brought the weed from Mediterranean lands.

Although our feral fennel lacks a crunchy bulb, it remains edible. Folks use the fronds for steaming, dips, or garnish; the youngest stems for flavoring stocks or soups, and the seeds as anise – *but be SURE you are not gathering similar-looking seeds of poison hemlock!*

Safer, and very easy, is using fennel's golden pollen as a spice. It's a traditional Tuscan delicacy. Licorice is just one note in the complex flavor – some people detect hints of curry or saffron, others sage and rosemary. It's delicious in rice; as a dry rub on fish, chicken, or pork; in salads and vegetables; and in sweets like cookies and apple or blackberry pie.

You can buy fennel pollen on line – Pollen Ranch, for example (www.pollenranch.com) harvests at the Mare Island Shoreline Heritage Preserve near Vallejo, helping combat the invasive there.

But it's easy and more fun to forage for your own! Just snip off the yellow umbrellas when they turn bright gold, with stamens showing. You'll see the gold dust start to fall. Heap the flower heads on a cookie sheet, waxed paper, or any flat, dry surface. Shake if you want to use the pollen right away, or let it fall and dry for a week or more. Your room will smell wonderful!

Drying for long-term preservation can be tricky: try leaving the pollen in the sun, or in a warm oven after you turn the heat off. But it's hassle-free to enjoy as a local seasonal delicacy. And just think, all those golden grains will not become seed spreading the fennel invasion!

Here are a few recipes just to start you out – I'd love to hear what others invent!



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Fennel Pollen Shortbread

- 1 cup white and 1 cup whole-wheat flour (or all whole wheat or any combination you like)
- 1 cup (8 oz) unsalted butter, preferably frozen
- ½ cup brown sugar (or raw sugar)
- 1 tsp. salt
- 2 tsp. to 1 tbsp. fennel pollen (experiment – a lot depends how dry and fine it is)

Mix dry ingredients in a bowl. Grate in frozen butter, mix with a pastry cutter or forks, or pulse with a food processor to form a crumbly dough. Press this about 1/3 inch thick into round or square pans. (I like cheap old aluminum pie pans; you can easily press out the baked shortbreads.) Score deeply where you want to break into separate pieces and prick with a fork. Bake at 350 for about 20 minutes; shortbreads will be light golden-brown. Cool completely and then cut with a thin knife.

Any shortbread recipe, with varied ways of mixing and baking, would do. This one is just easy. The result is buttery, crumbly, and not too sweet. If some crumble, use them in a crumb topping or pie crust.

Rice with Tomatoes and Fennel Pollen

Basically, add from 1 tsp. to ½ tbsp. fennel pollen to any recipe for risotto or rice with vegetables. A simple one is to sautee a chopped onion plus celery, parsley, chopped bell pepper . or what-have-you in a little olive oil. Add the rice, salt, pepper, and fennel pollen and sautee briefly. Cover and steam the lot , using pureed yellow or orange tomatoes for all or part of the liquid. A friend recommended sprinkling pollen onto cooked rice – I haven't tried this, but it works for salads and salad dressings, so why not?

I used this rice in dolmas made with wild grape leaves, but the crossover is short – grape leaves toughen about the time fennel begins to bloom. You want tender, young grape leaves about the size of your palm. It probably would be best to pick and preserve the leaves in spring. The Internet has instructions with good illustrations on blanching grape leaves, preserving them in brine or frozen rolls, and folding the little packages for braising.

Fennel -Pollen Rubs

Add fennel pollen to any mixture of herbs and spices you'd use as a rub on grilled, roasted, or sautéed chicken, fish, lamb, or pork. Fennel pollen also is good on roasted garlic potatoes. Pork is traditional in Tuscany, but I like the others at least as much. Start with 1 tsp. and increase if you like it.

For fish, I like just the fennel pollen with salt, pepper, and lime or lemon juice. For others, you might want to mix the pollen with aromatic herbes de Provence (some combination of thyme, sage, lavender, oregano, savory, marjoram, and the like), or a spicier mixture involving cumin, paprika, and chili powder. This is limited only by your imagination – try in Moroccan or curry spice mixes.

Tomato Bread Pudding with Fennel Pollen

Fennel pollen probably would be good in any meat or vegetable loaf, but if you get lots of tomatoes and some stale bread in midsummer, try this old-fashioned recipe:

About four cups stale bread crumbs or cubes (whole wheat or sourdough are fine)

About the same amount of thick tomato puree (cook down your tomatoes in a heavy pot, then puree)

½ cup brown sugar (old recipes use a cup, but this is very sweet)

1 tsp. salt

Pepper to taste – use hot sauce or a little cayenne for a touch of fire

2 tsp. fennel pollen or more– try a little at first

½ to 1 stick unsalted butter, melted (old recipes use more than most folks like today; pretty sure oil would work for vegans)

Add melted butter to bread and spices to tomatoes; then mix all together in a greased loaf pan. Bake at 350 degrees in a greased loaf pan until set and the edges start to brown. Serve warm.

More weed eating?

We could try munching our way through other invasives: New Zealand spinach and crisp, salty Salsola on the Bay shore, for example. And every Himalayan blackberry you pick for jelly and pies is one that won't start a new thicket!

After all, there is no such thing as a “bad” plant --invasives are the ones that, brought to a new area, often without the pests that curbed them at home, spread wildly and take over the habitat the other plants and animals need. Our Monterey pines, willows, even lupine are pests in other parts of the world, for example.

Got any great weed recipes? Let us know (www.fivecreeks.org).