

From the wild to your plate

Subscription boxes, pop-ups and forest walks are ensuring that wild, foraged foods are preserved and accessible

Shirin Mehrotra

As the monsoon arrives in Himachal Pradesh, the women of Gunehr village near Bir Billing trek up to the forest to collect *chambu*. The snake leaf, named so for its leaves that look like a snake's hood, grows wild at a height of 2,500m, and is the traditional food of the Gaddi community. It is boiled, chopped and kneaded into a dough with spices to make *chamode*—steamed, doughy balls that are eaten with a spoonful of ghee.

"*Chambu* is a prized foraged green, so much so that the women hide it when carrying back to protect it from evil eye," says Anoop Chugh, who runs Gunehr Sound Museum, where he documents the soundscapes of the village, its people and the surrounding forests.

As an extension of his museum experience The Forest Within, a listening session that he launched in 2025, Chugh takes his guests on foraging walks accompanied by locals, introducing them to wild foods like *lingdu* (fiddlehead fern), *akhre* or wild berries and *dhuda* or wild fig. The walk is often followed by meals cooked by the women, which include the greens, and dishes like *siddu* (steamed dumpling), *babru* (deep-fried bread made with fermented dough) and *chamode*.

MONSOON BOUNTY

The wild and uncultivated food traditions of India are as diverse as the country's topography, many of them rooted in indigenous cultures. Monsoon is usually when these foods are in abundance, and bringing them to the forefront means working closely with the communities. A case in point is Rajkot-based OOO Farms, launched by Shailesh Aawate and Shikha Kansagara in the tribal forest regions of Maharashtra. The farmer-led movement has been hosting its annual Wild Food Festival in Mumbai since 2017 to create awareness about the wild vegetables and foods found in the Sahyadri region.

In the rest of the country too, organisations, brands, chefs and individuals are collaborating with local communities and farmers to preserve and promote wild edibles through walks, curated experiences and packaged products.

Goa-based Ayurveda practitioner and agroforestry consultant Maryanne Lobo has been hosting foraging walks in north Goa during the monsoon since 2020, introducing the participants to wild foods that are deeply entwined with the Goan life and tradition. In her walks, she talks about the greens eaten during the seasonal fishing ban, such as pumpkin and taro leaves, *golchi bhaji* or purslane, mango grove fern, *brahmi* and *almi* (a type of



(clockwise, from top) The Rooting for Tubers festival by Spudnik Farms; a wild greens platter at Mei-Ramew Cafe; and the Ladakh Basket team.

mushroom).

For Lobo, eating wild foods is an act of healthcare: "They boost immunity and cleanse the blood, but they must be eaten in small quantities and only once or twice a year. When I take chefs on walks, I tell them you cannot have wild foods on your

table throughout the season."

In Mumbai's Aarey Forest, home to over 10,000 indigenous people, Waghuba Heritage Foundation has been organising traditional ecological knowledge workshops since 2020.

Founder Sanjiv Valsan, a photographer

and a conservationist, collaborates with the Adivasi community on a 7-hour workshop that includes hikes, foraging, tribal art, natural farming knowledge and a meal. The workshops are Valsan's way of filling the knowledge gap that exists in the formal education system with regard to nature-based solutions, ecological problems and climate change.

In Telangana's Zaheerabad, the 40-year-old Deccan Development Society has been hosting the Uncultivated Greens Festival for seven years, showcasing leafy greens (amaranth, spinach, purslane and jute, among others) that grow wild within the periphery of a traditional farm.

SIMPLE RECIPES

Hosted in August, the festival consists of farm tours, meeting local farmers and meals with millets and greens. The recipes are simple—greens cooked with onion, ginger, garlic, spices and often lentils. Those living in and around Zaheerabad can also order vegetables directly from the farmers every week and

HOW TO BUY/SIGN UP

GUNEHR SOUND MUSEUM,
GUNEHR, HIMACHAL PRADESH
What: Listening sessions, foraging walks, local meals
Price: ₹1,500 per person (4 hours)
Connect via Instagram @notinbir

WAGHUBA HERITAGE FOUNDATION,
AAREY FOREST, MUMBAI
What: Forest walk, foraging, local meal
Price: ₹4,500 per person (8-9 people; 7 hours)
Connect -91-9892212133

SPUDNIK FARMS,
BENGALURU
What: Weekly vegetable box
Price: ₹3,700 (four weeks; 7kg per box)
Order via website spudnik-farms.com

MEI-RAREW CAFES,
MEGHALAYA
What: Traditional Khasi/Bhoi meal
Price: Approx ₹500 per person
Connect via website nesfas.in

PLANT WALKS GOA
What: Monsoon forest walks, refreshments.
Price: ₹2,000 per person
Where: Goa
When: August-September (every year)
Connect -91-9423474706

LADAKH BASKET
What: Sun-dried seabuckthorn berries, Himalayan chives and caraway
Price: ₹100-750
Order via website ladakhbasket.com

the basket includes seasonal uncultivated greens.

Subscription-based ventures allow city folks to experience the bounty of the wild in more ways than one. In 2019, Bengaluru-based Spudnik Farms, a network of community-supported farms, launched a weekly subscription of vegetable boxes in the city.

Apart from seasonal vegetables, it includes *ube* or purple yam, *koorka* or Chinese potato, *sham* or taro root, and air potato grown in Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The curiosity around tubers prompted founder and CEO Sumeet Kaur to launch the festival Rooting for Tubers in Bengaluru in 2022.

"The idea is to bring together farmers, chefs, scientists, academics and food enthusiasts to explore tubers as climate-resilient, nutritious and culturally significant foods, while creating greater appreciation for their role in our food systems. It is part of a larger initiative that includes chef residencies, cooking workshops, pop-up dinners, online conversations and

corporate engagements," says Kaur.

Forest foods are inherent to the indigenous cuisines of Meghalaya, and yet slowly disappearing from their diets. According to the recent NFHS (National Family Health Survey) report, approximately 45% of the children in the state are anaemic. In an attempt to fix this, the North East Society for Agroecology Support (NESFAS) has stepped in to work with the government and incorporated 25 wild edibles like *jabutit*, *jali*, *jamyrdoh*, *jatira*, *khliang syiar* into the state's midday meal programme. This is part of a larger project to revive, defend and promote indigenous food systems.

"Through people's biodiversity registers, we have understood that there are around 1,900 agrobiodiverse food species, both wild and cultivated, available in our landscape and that data is from just 210 out of 6,000 villages in the state," says Alethea Kordor Lyngdoh, the deputy executive director of NESFAS.

ON THE MENU

To make wild foods accessible to tourists, NESFAS opened Mei-Ramew (Khasi for mother earth) cafes back in 2013, in the villages of Nongwah, Mawstep, Khweng and Darechikgre. They are run by local women who cook and serve traditional meals, including forest foods like *jajew siej*, *jajew mau*, *jajew lawang*, *pashor* and *jamahlek* to name a few.

Meghalaya's chefs too are leading the way to bring the region's wild edibles into the mainstream. Chef Dalarympei Sabrina hosts pop-ups based on foraged foods across the country as part of her food and art-based collective, PynChe.

Her menus are experimental, but use traditional ingredients. So, one can taste a sweet pumpkin sponge cake with *sohma* (wild berries), roselle stem compote and pineapple, or a dish of freshwater prawn ceviche with *sohpie* (wild bayberry) *leche de tigre* served with a chimichurri of dandelion greens.

At an upcoming event in Goa, she plans to use bamboo, eaten both in Meghalaya and Goa, for a cross-cultural experience that merges Khasi-style bamboo cooking with Goan ingredients.

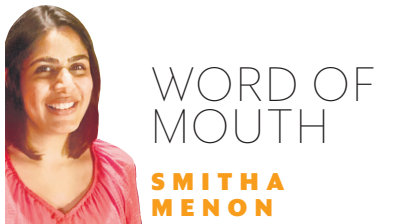
Up in the high altitudes of Ladakh, Ladakh Basket ensures the region's wild foods reach far and wide through their online shop. The wild edibles are sourced directly from farmers who forage for herbs and berries in a small window between July and August.

"We started working with around seven farmers, and now have 108 farmers on board," says Thinles Norboo, who co-founded the brand in 2020. They source the ingredients directly from the farmers and process and package them to sell on their online platform. Through their website, one can order sun-dried chives, wild caraway and seabuckthorn jam, among other things.

India's indigenous communities have lived long enough in sync with the forests to know what they offer. And now, with some support from enthusiastic individuals and organisations, they are ready to share their knowledge with the rest of the world.

Shirin Mehrotra is a Delhi-based food writer and researcher.

Queues are also the place for small talk



WORD OF MOUTH
SMITHA MENON

When pastry whiz Vinesh Johnny's ice cream parlour, LICK, opened in February last year in Bengaluru, long lines snaked across the block in Indiranagar. With queue managers, velvet ropes and hip-hop booming through speakers, the launch seemed more like the opening of a nightclub than an ice-cream store.

"Those lines gave me most of my grey hair," jokes Johnny. "The level of expectation that comes with waiting in line for 45 minutes for ice cream puts an unreal pressure on the team."

Akhil Iyer, of the much-loved and viral Benne chain of restaurants, shares a similar sentiment. "Shriya (his wife and co-founder) and I were white with fear when we saw the long line outside our first outlet in Bandra (Mumbai). We had no idea how we would serve so many people quickly and efficiently. But when we started chatting with people in the queue, we realised most people were just happy to try out something new in the neighbourhood."

Increasingly, restaurants across India's metros are seeing diners happy

to wait for the latest "it" food. For a country where cutting the line was standard practice and standing in queue was never normal behaviour, what's changed? Why do we suddenly love standing in lines, and what does that wait actually get us?

Personally, I can't justify spending 45 minutes queueing for a buzzy food thing, especially since my baby girl was born eight months ago. My standard operating procedure is to wait for the initial frenzy to die down, then visit. Only on rare occasions do I join out of sheer curiosity.

The more I've asked around, the more it seems the answer isn't one thing but three: diners have gotten more discerning, the wait itself has become a kind of status symbol, and almost by accident, the line has turned into one of the few places left where strangers still talk to each other.

The first part, discernment, is coupled with the fact that dining out has become a national obsession, and diners have a greater appreciation, appetite and patience for what chefs and restaurateurs do.

Saloni Dukle, a self-confessed food lover, queue-r and brand strategist at Kulfi Collective, a creative studio based in Mumbai, says that for a generation that's experienced so much of life virtually, standing in line offers Gen Z diners a chance to "go out and touch grass," instead of choosing another screen as entertainment.



People waiting outside Cafe Sacher in Vienna. ISTOCKPHOTO/FOR REPRESENTATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY

Having made several friends while queueing in Berlin, New York City and Mumbai, Dukle says most people assume Gen Z wants to stand in line purely for the spectacle of it, to capture it on social media. "Actually, we're flooded with opinions on social media. Standing in line is a way to actually form an opinion on your own."

Beyond the stamp of approval a

queue creates, or a diner's status signal in choosing something culturally relevant, the wait offers a rare chance at random socialisation. In the age of quick commerce, AI bots and home deliveries, the opportunity to interact with someone outside a tightly curated bubble—a local grocery store owner, a neighbourhood vegetable vendor—is increasingly rare.

Sneha Kapoor, founder and CEO of Plum Insights, a cultural and consumer intelligence consultancy, has spent a lot of time studying how Gen Z behaves as a consumer. "What's interesting is that Gen Z's willingness to queue isn't necessarily at odds with instant gratification," she says. "They have low tolerance for meaningless friction, but a surprisingly high tolerance for friction that creates cultural value. The wait signals that something is scarce, desirable and worth knowing about."

Kapoor is right. Gen Z and India's avid diners are more discerning than ever. My own Instagram DMs are constantly buzzing with friends, family and even strangers asking whether restaurants with the long lines and slick reels are actually worth the visit. The queue creates an image, generates curiosity and gets people through the door. But a good product is what brings a customer back.

Nowhere is that more visible than at Pomodoro Pasta and Coffee Bar in Mumbai's Bandra, where the wait has shrunk from 2 hours when it opened early last year to about an hour on a busy weekend now. "We wanted to be an all-day, 11am-11pm concept when we first opened, but quickly switched to opening only for lunch and dinner because operationally, we were running out of hand-rolled pasta and sauces," says Nousheen Rajgotwala, co-founder.

Sister-restaurateurs Afshaa and Nousheen have expanded the space

from a 25-seater to a 60-seater to accommodate demand, proof that the wait is a symptom of scarcity solving itself, not a marketing trick sustaining it.

Afshaa says they don't take the time investment in queuing lightly: "We're lucky to have that kind of trust from our community," she says, adding that a couple of their regular solo diners even went on dates after meeting in line.

It tracks with what Melinda Blau and Karen L. Fingerman describe in their book *Consequential Strangers: The Power of People Who Don't Seem to Matter... But Really Do* (2009), which examines the "weak ties" we build with people who move through our days without ever becoming close friends: the barista, the hairdresser, the regulars at the gym. These strangers, they argue, are "as vital to our well-being, growth, and day-to-day existence as family and close friends", rooting us in the world, plugging us into something larger than ourselves.

I still won't do the 45-minute wait for a food fad, but maybe it's time to shift my mindset around it. Perhaps it isn't just a performative obstacle between me and dinner. Perhaps it's 45 minutes of a city talking to itself, in real life, minus the screens and filters. Now that's a conversation I don't mind being part of.

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