

# Wild garlic pesto

In this new regular column, Mike Short shares his passion for food and foraging in the countryside



In 1932, the Irish songwriter, Jimmy Kennedy, wrote the words to the famous children's song, *Teddy Bears' Picnic*. But what inspired his lyrics on a sleuth of bears gathering

in the woods? A nod to that most pungent of woodland plants commonly known as wild garlic, ramsons or bear's garlic perhaps? When brown bears awake from hibernation they often gather to gorge on the odorous bulbs, and it was this observation that gave the plant its Latin name *Allium ursinum* after *ursus*, meaning bear. From mid-March, great swathes of the plant carpet damp, deciduous woodlands across Northern Europe, and the ancient woodlands around Cranborne Chase are full of the stuff.

As a field-based ecologist, I've spent hundreds of woodland-hours gathering data on grey squirrels, and being a wild-food enthusiast I never miss out on a chance to fill my lunch-box with freshly plucked wild garlic leaves. They make a wonderful ingredient and, besides tasting good, they're packed full of allicin, the sulphurous compound which gives garlic and other members of the chive family their distinctive odour. Studies have shown that allicin has anti-inflammatory properties, helps inhibit fat deposition, decreases blood-pressure and serves as an anti-oxidant. As someone who tends to lay-down an additional layer of fat during the port-and-stilton, shoot-dinner days of winter, I like to think my wild garlic intake in early spring might do me some good. Although I relish eating the youngest, tender wild garlic leaves raw, in green salads, I use older leaves to make pesto. Apart from being delicious spread on hot toasted bread to make Italian-style crostini, or stirred through fresh home-



Freshly picked wild garlic leaves can be used to make a delicious pesto and may have health benefits too.

made pasta, the pesto makes a good stuffing for pheasant breasts and the garlic-infused oil helps to lubricate the meat which can dry out during cooking.

My pesto recipe can be adapted to suit taste and season. For a less aromatic version, replace the wild garlic leaves with watercress. In summer, use fresh basil leaves, but don't blanch them and double their quantity. Pesto is simple to make, so why not give it a go? If you're not sure where to find wild garlic, visit a wood where you know bluebells grow; the two plants require the same growing conditions and are frequently found together. Failing that, simply follow your nose.

## Wild garlic pesto

50g wild garlic leaves

25g pine nuts

30g parmesan/pecorino cheese (finely grated)

1 garlic clove (finely chopped)  
75-125ml of extra virgin olive oil  
Sea salt, black pepper and freshly squeezed lemon juice to taste

## Method

Blanch the leaves in boiling water for 10 seconds. Quickly refresh in ice-cold water, drain and dry with absorbent kitchen paper. Pop the leaves, pine nuts, chopped garlic and olive oil into a food processor and pulse to the desired consistency. Scrape the mixture into a bowl using a flexible rubber spatula to gather every last drop. Stir in the grated cheese, season to taste and it's ready to use. To store some, spoon the pesto into a sterilised glass jar, stir to remove pockets of air and seal the surface with a glug of extra virgin oil. It will keep in the fridge for a couple of weeks and the flavour will mellow.

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