

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/feasting-wild-review-to-taste-the-untamed-11598308801>

BOOKS | BOOKSHELF

# 'Feasting Wild' Review: To Taste the Untamed

A bracing travelogue by a culinary forager seeking rare, undomesticated, unadulterated foods in the rapidly disappearing wild.



Forest mushrooms encountered during the author's travels.

PHOTO: GINA RAE LA CERVA

*By Rien Fertel*

Aug. 24, 2020 6:40 pm ET

Gina Rae La Cervia wishes we all ate a little wilder. Wild like humans ate for 99% of their history: hunting and gathering undomesticated and uncultivated foods. Wild like Henry David Thoreau preferred his fruits: native berries plucked from the bush, bittersweet white-oak acorns nibbled on a “bleak November walk.” Oranges, bananas, pineapples and other farmed “table fruits,” Thoreau said, “do not feed the imagination as these wild fruits do.”

In the early 19th century, back when Thoreau foraged for wild flavors, half the North American diet still came from the wild—venison, game fowl, seafood. Today, Ms. La Cervia writes, seafood remains the only widely consumed wild food,

though the rapid rise of aquaculture is making the future of wild-caught fish, shrimp and oysters increasingly uncertain.

In “Feasting Wild,” she sets out to “taste the untamed,” to experience the feeling that comes with consuming “the least processed foods, the most unadulterated, which haven’t been overbred, monocultured, and passed through innumerable unseen hands.” In doing so, she not only writes an intense and illuminating travelogue, she offers a corrective to the patriarchal white gaze promoted by globetrotting eaters like Anthony Bourdain and Andrew Zimmern. Though she feasts on wild foods that most of us would not dare poke with a 10-foot fork, Ms. La Cerva combines environmental history with feminist memoir to craft a narrative more in tune with recent works by Robin Wall Kimmerer, Helen Macdonald and Elizabeth Rush than any episode of “Bizarre Foods.”

We first follow the author to Copenhagen, where she forages for wild plants among the tombs at Assistens Cemetery. Despite the risks—the inadvertent ingestion of lead and other heavy metals—urban foraging remains part of the Danish identity. Foraging tourists take note: near Kierkegaard’s grave grows ramson, a wild onion related to the North American allium commonly called ramps, while the yellow-blooming antidepressant known as St. John’s wort prefers the final resting spot of Niels Bohr.

Ms. La Cerva hopscotches to Poland’s Białowieża Forest, one of the few remaining primeval forests that once blanketed Europe, to nosh on wild boar (“like pork but earthier”) and a superabundance of mushrooms (more than 4,000 species grow here). Polish women, like the author’s great-grandmother Esther, could once identify the gustatory and medicinal properties of this fungal feast: hoof brackets to cure toothaches, Judas’s ear for infections of the ear and eye, stinkhorns as aphrodisiacs. But like the old-growth forests, knowledge of “wildcrafting”—of gathering both wild food and this folk pharmacopeia—has all but disappeared.

Eating wild food is an “act of nostalgia,” she writes, “for both the natural abundance and the material poverty of the past.” This especially resonates for the author during a stay in the Democratic Republic of Congo to report on the trade in “bushmeat,” a catchall term for any wildlife species hunted for human consumption, including forest elephants, gorillas, turtles, pangolins (scaly

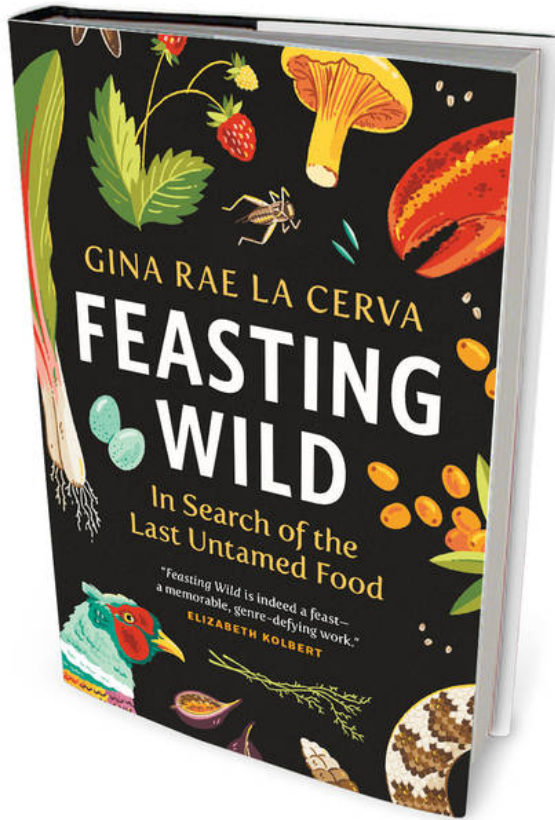


PHOTO: WSJ

---

**FEASTING WILD**

---

By Gina Rae La Cerva  
*Greystone, 317 pages, \$26.95*

---



Gina Rae La Cerva.

anteaters), rats and bonobos. Once the prime source of protein for most Congolese, wildlife conservation efforts and the proliferation of affordably farmed meats like chicken have turned bushmeat into a luxury marker for posh Kinshasa diners (the five-star Grand Hotel’s dining room offers antelope and porcupine) and immigrants willing to smuggle frozen blocks of meat abroad. At one notable wild-game restaurant, Ms. La Cerva coolly orders crocodile and tomato and spice-simmered duiker—a small sub-Saharan antelope—even though “it’s impossible to know if it was hunted legally or not.”

She writes more passionately about the women who trade in semilegal wild-meat markets. “These women deserve an entire book written just about them,” Ms. La Cerva notes. “Not only because they are long-suffering, poor, marginalized, or illiterate . . . but because these women know how to hustle.” That hustle involves circumnavigating the entrenched colonial racial order. “If a white man kills a wild animal and eats it, we call it *hunting game*,” she reflects. “If a black man kills a wild animal and eats it, we call it *bushmeat poaching*.”

The DRC allows Ms. La Cerva another glimpse into the wild life, in the form of a

Ramones-T-shirt-and-leopard-tooth-necklace-wearing, motorcycle-wheeling, antipoaching conservationist she calls the Hunter. Together, they make a pair of “lovely and tormented beasts,” she writes—wild lovers, one might say. Their affair, inevitably doomed, soon takes center stage. They separate, pine from afar through text messages and, reunited in his native Sweden, hunt a moose. This book would have been all the better had Ms. La Cerva followed her instincts to write more on the marketwomen of Kinshasa and less on the hunky Hunter.

The author’s journey ends, sans Hunter, in Borneo, home of the edible-nest swiftlet. Woven with translucent strands of swiftlet saliva, edible bird’s nests are a Chinese delicacy that can purportedly cure whatever ails you, from bad skin to a weak libido. One of the world’s most expensive foods, the swiftlet nest is now the basis of a \$5 billion industry hawking bird’s-nest gummy bears, bird’s-nest instant coffee, and black-currant-flavored, stem-cell-repairing, wrinkle-fighting, anticancer bird’s-nest cookies. Naturally, the wild swiftlet population has collapsed, by nearly 95%, due to overharvesting and the transformation of Borneo’s insect-rich rain forests into palm-oil plantations. Today, edible bird’s nests are farmed out of massive concrete nesting-house compounds instead of the limestone caves where wild swiftlets once flocked.

What’s the solution to the disappearing wild? Ms. La Cerva asks again and again. It’s too late to turn back our own culinary clocks, she acknowledges, for humanity to survive on wild asparagus and moose. Yet, she writes, it’s never too soon to begin “loving the wild back into existence”—enhancing value through consumption—a belief akin to the “eat it to save it” adage promoted by the Slow Food movement. And therein lies the conundrum we must face: By loving the wild, do we risk loving it to death?

*Mr. Fertel is the author of “The One True Barbecue.”*

<https://www.djreprints.com>.