

I think even humans are living in captivity,” Munchrath said. “We are bound by oceans, if not finances. We are bound by the limits of technology. We cannot really leave this Earth and most of us cannot leave our own country. How big should a cage be before the inhabitants are not considered to be captive?”

## Afterbirth, It's What's for Dinner

BY LOU BENDRICK

Eating your own afterbirth isn't unnatural—many mammals do it. But unless a Western human is really hungry (in which

case a burger will likely suffice), or trying to cover her scent from predators (a pack of hyenas in the delivery room is generally considered unlikely), the burgeoning motivation among some mothers-to-be to engage in placentophagy (“feeding on placenta”) is difficult to understand. Let's face it: it takes a lot of motivation to consume something falling under a vaguely cannibalistic taboo that looks like a bio-hazard and tastes like God-knows-what.

Today's woman, though, can avoid the ick factor by hiring a “placenta encapsulation specialist” (certified specialists follow OSHA rules) who will transform (read: cook) an afterbirth into a benign jar of capsules. Encapsulation specialists say that ingesting your hormone-rich afterbirth can give mom a happier postpartum experience by enhancing breast milk supply, increasing energy, and balancing hormones. And while this practice might not be a bona fide trend outside of the home-birthing community, public awareness about it is growing. In 2006, during an interview with *GQ* magazine, Tom Cruise joked about eating his wife's placenta and caused a media uproar. This year, *Los Angeles Times* columnist Joel Stein wrote about his wife's placental encapsulation for mainstream audiences in *Time*. (Stein, who paid \$275 for this service, observed that “placenta-eating is really just the beginning of how gross we humans are.”)

Unfortunately, the medical community seems largely to agree that there are few benefits to placenta consumption, and no compelling studies, at least in *Homo sapiens*, show that these pills do much good.

But that doesn't mean we should throw the placenta out with the birth water. Perhaps placentophagy is natural in a modern sense—one that embraces environmentalism. Eating your baby's amniotic sac is not only an exemplary form of recycling, but also about as “local” as you can get (food miles = zero). And because no creature was harmed (hey, one was even cre-

ated), vegetarians could eat this particular meat without guilt.

Pills? Pshaw! If we women are going to go deep into our roots, then let's grab on with both hands and actually eat the stuff. Of course, jump-starting this would require that one's “bag of waters” be served in a manner befitting twenty-first-century food fashion. Other than some dreary internet recipes, the pickings are currently slim when it comes to afterbirth cookery. (Many of the recipes are based on Italian dishes, which would seem like a bad choice unless you want to evoke birth trauma.)

Why not get chefs, those with brio to spare, to prepare something bedside for parents who are too tired to deal with an unwieldy organ covered with chewy membranes? But think not of that: Picture an Iron Chef-style cook-off in which poached medallions of placenta with a brown butter are placed atop crisp, beautiful seasonal vegetables, topped with a reckless dollop of amniotic foam. Or perhaps the expelled membranes could be marinated to create a flirtatious placenta ceviche with mango, avocado, zingy chile, and lime. Pair these dishes with a glass (make that two) of postlabor champagne, and suddenly burying the placenta in the backyard seems like a wasted opportunity. And who knows—a double-fudge brownie sundae sprinkled with placenta powder might, indeed, boost a mom's mood.

## Stalking the Urban Nettle

BY REBECCA LERNER

Foraging is a bit like donning X-ray glasses that reveal secret abundance, transforming abstract foliage into free, local food. Whether a tree is a hawthorn, walnut, or a chestnut becomes relevant in a deeply personal way; weeds are a joy to find, like little living presents. And, ironically, the poorest neighborhoods, rife with un-

tamed yards and vacant lots, are among the wealthiest.

In the spring, the succulent tentacles of the green purslane plant sprout in the cracks of the sidewalk, offering fatty acids for free. Sweet blackberry brambles climb chainlink fences in the summer. The spiky green balls that line autumn curbsides are hiding chestnuts, which can be roasted and pounded into a nutritious flour. And dandelions, those perpetual rebels of manicured lawns, offer their roots year-round as a caffeine-free coffee alternative for anyone willing to oven-bake and grind them.

It is, of course, one thing to know that wild food exists and another to depend on it.

“There is a fine line between dumb ass and bad ass,” my friend Will Schattel once cautioned me. As it turned out, this was a kind of prophecy for my first attempt at living exclusively on wild food for a week in the city of Portland, Oregon, in May. I had been warned by savvy herbalists that it would be a tough time to find calories, but I tried it anyway, encouraged that indigenous people had lived this way for so long in the very same place. I quit on the fifth day after nearly faint-

ing from hunger and stress. My meager diet was the baked roots of thistle and burdock, the greens of chickweed, dandelion, and stinging nettle, and tea made from pine needles, cleavers, and wild chamomile. Though I wanted to avoid killing animals, I got so desperate that I even tried eating ant eggs. This was pointless—the spongy little things were smaller than Tic Tacs.

In Native American stories, Coyote is portrayed as a playful trickster who teaches in unexpected ways. When you

learn through folly, it is said that you have swallowed coyote medicine.

Indeed, my mistakes were most educational. I learned that nature is not like the grocery store. Wild edibles appear briefly and then disappear within weeks as the seasons progress. Like a squirrel, the successful forager is the one who stores acorns in advance of the winter. And most importantly, I learned that survival is a collective endeavor. Foraging is tedious work; it is far more efficient to have help than to go it alone.

When I tried the experiment again at the end of November, I had an easy time making it through all seven days, even capping the adventure with a wild food Thanksgiving feast. I had stocked my pantry with chestnuts, acorns, black wal-



nuts, dried stinging nettle, and an array of western mushrooms in advance. All I had to do was pluck hawthorn berries, pine needles, rose hips, and weeds on my street. Friends who had dried stinging nettle in the summer donated a bagful for my project. I made pancakes out of acorns and walnuts, and baked chestnut flour “hot pockets” filled with nettles and mushrooms. Going without sugar and salt did not make for the most palatable experience, but it certainly was nutritious, and I did not go hungry.



When a fly enters a chamber in David Bowen's fly drawing device, sensors detect its movement and convey the information to a microcontroller, which activates a drawing arm. The result is a sketch based on the fly's movements in real time. Once a fly is no longer detected, the drawing is complete; the paper unscrolls and a new drawing begins with a new fly.

