

These snails, Rabins says, will be used for an escargot he is planning for another one of his ventures -- monthly foraged-food dinners that he serves to groups of up to about 30 and include an ambitious six courses that are probably as close as you can get to actually eating the city of San Francisco.

In jeans and hoodies, we look more like urban hipsters than foragers. But I guess that's a good thing, because we are wandering the paths of one of the city's gardens (which will remain nameless).

We've slipped past the groups of toddlers wobbling on the front lawn and the vacationing families dutifully reading all the informational signs. We head to the winding, dirt paths, farther from the crowds, passing the occasional photographer hunched over a tripod.

Rabins looks like your average young Mission District guy -- which he is. He lives in the hip 'hood, has a film degree, shaggy brown hair and a bit of a beard. He has learned foraging from books and other people who know what they are doing, and a bit of trial and error. He doesn't own a car, so he takes the bus around the city or bums rides from other aspiring foragers.

Of course, if you're in a city garden like the one we're in, you're not suppose to actually take anything out. But we're not taking plants -- just the snails hiding in their midst, and the snails, Rabins says are pests. So, I guess we're doing the garden a favor.

Rabins has shown me the kind of plant we're looking for, although he doesn't know it by name, he just knows the snails prefer them. The plants grow in clumps and sport long, flat green leaves. Some have tall spears that shoot from the middle, armed with clusters of light purple flowers. We run our hands through the leaves, parting them to see further inside.

I get a quick burst of excitement when I point out my first snail to Rabins, who plucks it from its green berth, making a slight sucking sound as it is pulled free. He opens his backpack and drops it in a plastic container that looks like it was probably intended for take-out soup. Just one snail, and I'm hooked. It feels incredibly rewarding and also a bit risky.

Rabins used to find huge swaths of Miner's lettuce in an area called the [Presidio](#), which is both a neighborhood and a park and is technically a National Historic Landmark, with architecture dating back to the Spanish forts.

An article about Rabins in a local paper mentioned his foraging ventures there, and the Presidio establishment decided to nip his picking in the bud. I guess they were afraid hordes of San Franciscans would descend on the area like a pack of starved goats and eat all the vegetation.

But certainly there are some legal hazards when you're in urban areas. Just ask "[Wildman](#)" [Steve Brill](#). He's probably the country's most well known forager who has been leading foraging trips in the New York area since 1982.

Brill got his big break in 1986, when the New York City parks commissioner planted undercover agents on one of his tours in Central Park. When Brill popped a dandelion in his mouth, he was handcuffed and arrested. The incident [made national, and even international, news](#) and the city was forced to not only drop the charges but then hire him to lead foraging tours through the parks department.

Brill spent four years as a parks naturalist before he went back to freelancing. Now he leads tours for all kinds of groups -- schools, birthday parties, garden clubs, and anyone else interested in learning what you can find to eat in New York City and its environs.

It turns out there is a lot. Brill tells me some of it: wild watercress, mulberries, wild persimmons, raspberries, Juneberries, various species of bramble, parsnips, burdock root, wild carrot, giant puffballs, chicken mushrooms, honey mushrooms, white oak acorns, black walnuts, lambs quarters, and even kelp if you venture out to the shores of the Long Island Sound, which is where I grew up.

Getting the Goods for Free

That's the beauty of foraging. It's like getting a new lens on life. All of a sudden, you can see things -- food -- where there wasn't any before. The weed you might be stepping over on the sidewalk with out even noticing -- that's [purslane](#), and its stems and leaves are great in salad or you can cook it up. It's packed with iron, beta carotene, Vitamin C and other healthy stuff. It's also a secret source of omega-3 fatty acids. Forget fish pills, just look beneath your feet.

Foraging has its benefits for sure and beats the supermarket in many ways.

"It's a lot more fun, it's less expensive, the food tastes better, and there are more nutrients," Brill said. "It is also a good way of getting in touch with your planet, especially if you have kids who love learning about nature."

Urban foraging has become a nice complement to the "freegans," who popularized Dumpster diving and have reminded us that one person's trash is another's dinner.

"Freeganism (a conjunction of 'free' and 'vegan') is the philosophy that participation in our capitalist economy makes a person complicit in the exploitative practices that are used to create consumer goods," [Becca Tucker wrote](#) about her exploits living off what her fellow New Yorkers had tossed.

Of course, when I think of Dumpster diving, I think first of the folks whose association with garbage isn't a philosophical arrangement, but a necessity. Having the skills to get by on the streets when you're homeless or jobless or both is quite a feat.

But over the years, as our society has grown more and more attached to "more," we've created a consumer culture where most of the stuff we kick to the curb is totally usable -- from TVs to shoes to muffins. So why not live off the bounty of discards?

The same is true for food that's growing in our midst. While I imagine that finding still-edible cheesecake in a Dumpster behind a bakery feels like an incredible score -- probably even topping my glee at finding my first snail -- foraging offers food that is super-fresh and nutritious. And well, clean -- that is, if you're foraging in the right places (like not beside highways and railroads, Brill warns).

Even in our most populated urban environments such as New York City or Los Angeles, as people hurry to Whole Foods or Safeway, they're passing by food as they go -- things that can fill their plate for free.

Thankfully, more and more people are seeing the beauty of foraging.

"Urban foraging in the United States is more a choice than a necessity," [Reuters reported](#). "Most foragers see both the health and environmental benefits to eating a more natural diet."

Of course in a tight economy, where clipping coupons has fallen back into practice for many, the free aspect doesn't hurt either. And lots of people are also experiencing a cultural shift when it comes to their food.

The backlash to fast food and processed food has grown as people are embracing not just organic, but locally-grown food. And increasingly, people have a desire to not just understand where their food comes from, but to actively participate in that food system.

Growing Community

Where I live on the West Coast, the trees are heavy with fruit, so much of which goes to waste, even while people in the city go hungry. Thankfully, several groups have stepped up to help with this problem.

Across the bay from San Francisco is the group [Forage Oakland](#), pioneered by Asiya Wadud. The effort creates maps of Oakland's fruit trees to share and has helped to form a food network among neighbors. Wadud explains on Forage Oakland's Web site that their mission is much larger than just helping you access those ripe plums on the other side of the fence:

Imagine gathering several friends for morning, midday, evening or weekend foraged city bicycle rides through your neighborhood. Rough maps are drawn, noting the forageables that can be found at each location, and "cold calls" are made to your neighbors asking if you can sample a fruit from their backyard tree. You have the courage to introduce yourself (despite the pervasiveness and acceptance of urban anomie), and they reward your neighborliness with a sample of Santa Rosa plums, for example.

Later, when you find yourself with a surplus of Persian mulberries, you -- in turn -- deliver a small basket to said neighbor. With time, and in this fashion, a community of people who care for and know one another is built, and rather than being the exception, this could be the norm. This is not idealistic, rather it is necessary, pragmatic and creative -- especially in times when much of the world is suffering from lack of access to healthful and satisfying fresh food.

Forage Oakland is a project that works to construct a new model -- and is one of many neighborhood projects that will eventually create a network of local resources that address the need and desire for neighborhoods to be more self-sustaining in meeting their food needs.

Groups like this exists across the country -- [Fallen Fruit](#) in Los Angeles and Santa Fe, N.M.; [Urban Edibles](#) in Portland, Ore.; and [North Berkeley Harvest](#) and [SF Glean](#) around the San Francisco Bay Area. There are also tons of links on [Brill's Web site](#) to various other foragers.

Iso Rabins also includes gleaned fruit in his foraged boxes. The day we were out snail gathering (we found 10!) we made a trip across town to scavenge some plums from a woman with an overloaded tree in her backyard.

When we arrived, and she led us around to her backyard, it was like there had been a plum storm. Many still hung overhead, but lots had fallen to the ground, were squished into the patio or had been sampled by birds, rats or other lucky urbanites.

Rabins worked the picker to reach the higher branches and plucked the tree nearly bare in about 20 minutes, leaving some of the smaller, less-ripe fruit and the ones out of reach all the way at the top. Occasionally there would be a solid thump as a plum missed the picking basket and fell to the ground.

The whole thing seemed symbiotic -- just as Wadud described on her Forage Oakland Web site. We got some plums, the woman got her yard cleaned up a bit, and all the while she and Rabins chatted about his foraged-food dinners, and she offered her place to host one of his upcoming meals.

By the end of it, there were the makings for some good plum pudding and the cultivation of community, which is a different kind of cultivation than what farmers experience.

