

**KARLOS BACA** is introducing wild ingredients and native cuisine to guests at Colorado's Dunton Hot Springs.

**JEN MURPHY** joins the chef and discovers foraging for your food is as hard as it sounds — but far more delicious than you'd ever imagine

PHOTOGRAPHY  
BY ERIN KUNKEL

# into the Edible Wild



**HAUTE CUISINE**  
High in Colorado's San Juan Mountains, chef Karlos Baca forages for native ingredients that connect his seasonal menu to the landscape, such as stuffed squash with wild asparagus.



# The first time I met

Karlos Baca, I was convinced he had a sixth sense. Dawn had just broken, and a soft pink glow had begun to cascade through the clusters of spruce and aspens high in Colorado's San Juan Mountains. Baca, the 40-year-old executive chef at Dunton Hot Springs, a ghost town-turned-destination resort, had invited me along on one of his regular foraging excursions. My feet sank

into the spongy ground as Baca scrambled uphill with the nimbleness of a mountain goat. We each carried a basket. His was half-full with bunches of wild mint, clover and parsley. Mine was empty.

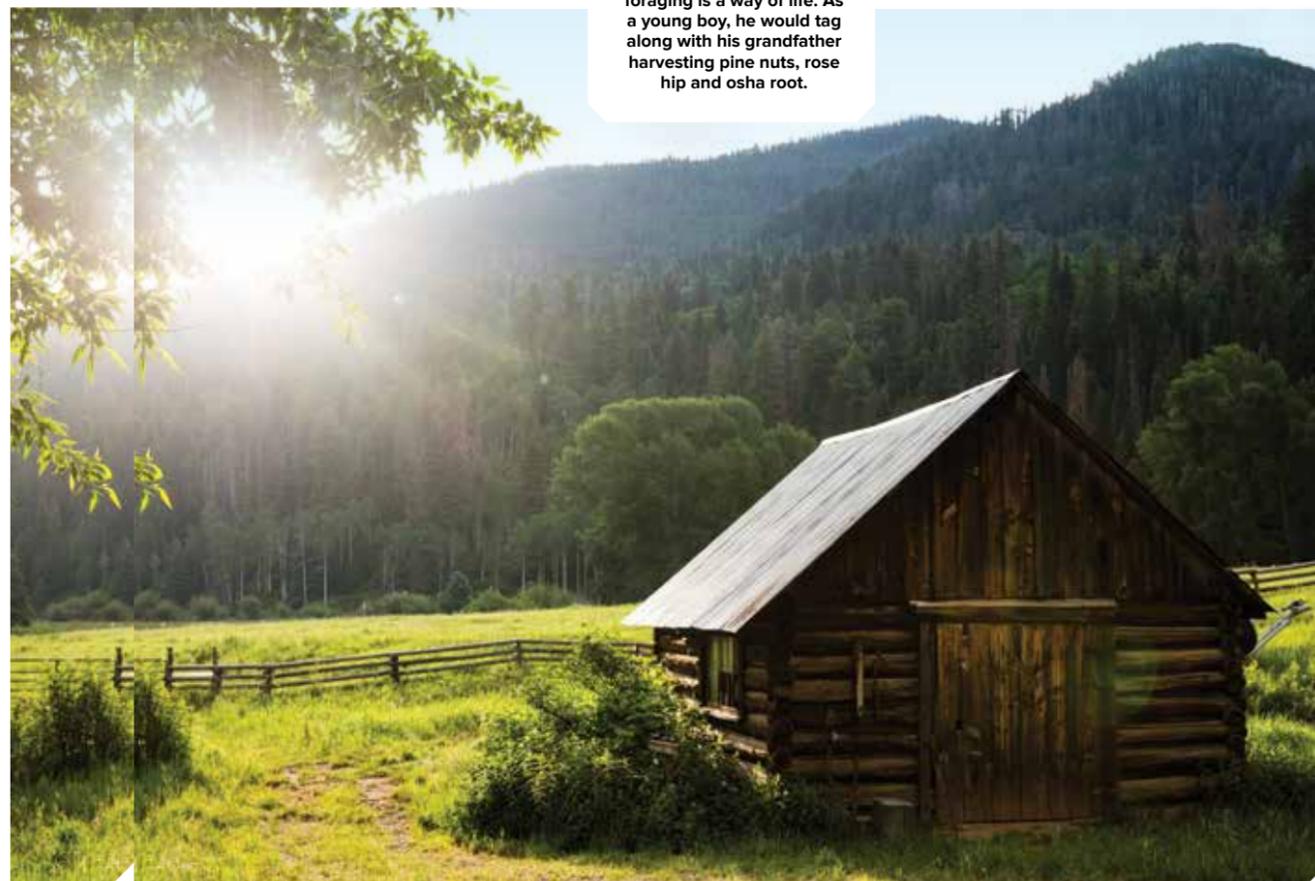
"I have a map in my head from the San Juans to Tucson with mental marks noting patches of wild spinaches and hiding spots of chanterelles. And you've just passed a patch of wild spinach," he teases. I squat, and stare blankly at the forest floor. Baca, meanwhile, crouches a few feet from me, takes tiny scissors from his pocket, and snips strawberry blossoms, which my eyes never registered.

Foraging, I learn, is like the picture games where you detect what's out of place. "See how that pine needle bed is one-quarter inch higher," says Baca. "That's a clue that something is hiding underneath." I finally think I recognize something edible: wild nettles. As I reach forward to snatch up a handful, Baca grabs my wrist. "Those are stinging nettles," he warns. "Touch those and your hand will burn all day." Humbled, I acknowledge that if I were left to survive alone in the forest, I'd be a goner.

A foraging excursion with Baca is a reminder of how out of touch we've become not just with our food but with our relationship to the land. In the past few



**NATURAL SELECTION**  
Karlos Baca, executive chef at Dunton Hot Springs, grew up on the Southern Ute Indian Reservation, where foraging is a way of life. As a young boy, he would tag along with his grandfather harvesting pine nuts, rose hip and osha root.



years, foraging has emerged as a buzzword; something urban hipsters do for fun and that trendy restaurants tout on their menus. For Baca, who grew up on the Southern Ute Indian Reservation two hours away from Dunton, foraging is a way of life. The forest was his version of Whole Foods. As a young boy, Baca would tag along with his grandfather harvesting pine nuts, rose hips and osha root. He recalls butchering his first deer at age 5.

Today, it's somewhat ironic that Baca works at a luxury hotel set on the land his people knew as their birthright. "There's a dichotomy between where I come from — my roots — and the excess I find myself surrounded by at times as a chef. But this is my church," he says, sweeping his hand across the misty valley. "This land is sacred to my people."

Although he dons chef whites and is classically trained in both French and Japanese cooking traditions, Baca tells me more than once throughout my visit that he does not consider himself a chef. He'd be content spending his days roaming the mountains in search of turkey tail mushrooms and yarrow flowers. After three hours of trailing the forest whisperer, my basket is still empty — but I understand his obsession. There is a Zen-like quality to foraging, a focus akin to what I feel in yoga. Being alone in nature is an escape from the incessant noise and distraction of daily life.

But the kitchen gives Baca a stage, which in turn gives him the opportunity to give his people a voice through food. A truly great chef nourishes both the body and mind, and the more time I spend with Baca, the more I realize he is a powerful educator as well as a talented cook.

Five years ago, Baca founded Taste of Native Cuisine, an organization that brings together indigenous chefs to provide wild harvested and hunted foods to tribes in the Four Corners region of the U.S. Food is part of his identity, an identity stripped away when European settlers displaced his people. When Baca joined the kitchen at Dunton Hot Springs in 2014, it gave him the opportunity to share his heritage with a larger audience. Located more than an hour away from the nearest town, Dunton's 12 rough-hewn wood cabins, single glamping tent, and neighboring tented River Camp epitomize understated luxury. And the remote location attracts a worldly clientele looking to get off the grid without having to sacrifice comfort.

The term foraging may conjure images of nuts and berries, but Baca's cooking at Dunton reflects the worldliness of its guests. Wild and indigenous ingredients are married to global flavors to create dishes like seared sea bass with maitake



**LOCAL FLAVOR**  
The term foraging may conjure images of nuts and berries, but Baca's cooking at Dunton reflects the worldliness of his guests: lavender and espresso ganaches, blackberry upside-down cake and stinging nettle soup.



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mushrooms, Bhutanese rice and dashi broth, and huckleberry-glazed bison ribs. Food builds conversations, Baca tells me. "It's a natural segue to tough topics like GMOs or the history of my people." Baca isn't shy about correcting guests who use terms like American Indian or Native American. "I was not born in India," he reminds them. "And my people existed before America existed so I'm not native to America."

One of the first things Baca did when he arrived at Dunton was inform the owners that the tepee on the property was painted in the colors of his tribe's Sun Dance. "People don't intend to be disrespectful," he says. "It's ignorance. Hollywood has dictated our story for so long that people don't know any better." Baca and other indigenous chefs like Sean Sherman and Nephi Craig are helping set the story straight through their cooking.

Guests at Dunton can go fly-fishing, ride horses or relax in the property's natural hot springs. But after a few meals, many guests start asking about the unfamiliar ingredients, such as pickled cholla cactus, which Baca uses as a garnish on flatbreads. This in turn, leads to guests wanting to join Baca on his morning harvests. He happily obliges, free of charge, as long as guests can keep up.

In the kitchen, Baca turns the young fir tips we'd found into an au jus for pork chops. The nettles are blended into a clover green-colored soup. Baca has blanched away their sting, but has sneakily hidden crispy serrano ham at the bottom of each Mason jar to give the soup a savory punch. Not once does he reach for a spoon to taste his creations. "Everything I've ever tasted is filed away in my head," he says. I come to realize, this ability to instinctively know the flavors of foods and the whereabouts of the forest's bounty isn't a sixth sense. Baca simply pays attention. Mindfulness is his most important teaching. ☀

**GET THE RECIPES**

Try some of chef Karlos Baca's dishes, inspired by the Southwest's native ingredients, at [doradomagazine.com/karlosbaca](http://doradomagazine.com/karlosbaca).