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Dromoland Castle Will Wow You With Its Wild Foraging Experience



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Travel

Former editor of Robb Report, Debbi has written about luxuries from Asprey to Zegna.



Ireland's dramatically beautiful Dromoland Castle offers a unique "wild foraging" experience to its guests. [-] DROMOLAND CASTLE

It's one thing to have a magnificent picnic in County Clare, Ireland, near Dromoland Castle, where you can be wined and dined on beautiful food.

But [Dromoland Castle](#) takes it to an entirely new level. That's because the posh five-star property offers a "wild foraging" experience in which you and an expert will forage and actually pick and eat the edible – and delicious – wild roots, herbs, flowers, fruits and nuts to be enjoyed on your picnic. Isn't that fabulous?

Oonagh O'Dwyer is the pro at all of this who leads the guided tours. "I studied organic horticulture in college and I've been fascinated by wild plants my whole life," she told me in an exclusive phone interview for Forbes.com. "It's a very unique, fully immersive, wild food experience," and she only takes six to eight travelers at a time, to make the outing as personalized as possible. The response? "People love it," she remarked to me.

First of all, your tour takes place in The Burren – a global UNESCO geopark. An internet search on its website reveals this information: "The Burren National Park is located in the southeastern corner of the Burren and is approximately 1500 hectares in size. The park land was bought by the Government for nature conservation and public access. It contains examples of all the major habitats within the Burren: Limestone Pavement, Calcareous Grassland, Hazel scrub, Ash/Hazel Woodland, Turloughs, Lakes, Petrifying Springs, Cliffs and Fen."

For starters, Ms. O'Dwyer will walk with her guests down a country road. One of the first stops is to discover nettles. "I'm actually having nettle tea at the moment, she told me during our interview., "Nettle is filled with vitamins and iron. I make pesto with it, and I even make nettle beer. It opens up a whole new world and I reveal to people all the nutritional values."



Your wild foraging experience includes actually eating some of the delicious foods you find along the way. [-] OONAGH O'DWYER

Next you might stop to sample blackberries and rosehips. “Rosehips have 20 more times more Vitamin C than in oranges,” she said. Then it’s onward to discover five or six varieties of St. John’s Wort, “which is used for people who have anxiety and depression.” Then you may come upon wild thyme and oregano and mint, “and it goes on and on,” she told me. “I have an amazing ability to recall all this, I love it all so much.” Ms. O’Dwyer is also a member of the Burren Ecotourism Network.

After that, you’re off to the sea at low tide, to discover any of the 14 various types of edible seaweed that can be found. And from the rocks, “You can see the Cliffs of Moher.” She is particularly fond of nori seaweed and sea lettuce – “We eat it straight off of the rocks,” she said.

Before you know it, it's time for the picnic. "I make and bring wild foods from home," she said. Some of these yummys can include seaweed kimchee, seaweed crackers, cured mackerel in seaweed and elderflowers, wild salads, and a Hawthorn berry ketchup that she says is especially delicious (hawthorn berries and hawthorn extract have been used for centuries to treat digestive issues, particularly indigestion). Also on the menu might be blackberry jam, chutney, and pickled samphire "which has an anise-seed flavor." She added, "It's all the bounty – wild food is the source of all of our food." Your dinner might also include (on sustainable dishes, and exquisite linens, of course), sea spaghetti, and pig nuts that the Irish call "Fairy Potatoes." She said, "Kids love them – you take off the shell and there's a wild nut inside – it's amazing."

For now, Ms. O'Dwyer is leading the tours in the Burren, but there's a possibility that other walks will be scheduled actually on the Dromoland Castle property. Rates start at \$90 for a two-hour experience.

Set on 450 acres with gardens based on the same designs as the Gardens at Versailles, Dromoland Castle can trace its heritage back to the 16th century when it was home of the O'Brien family. The lineage dates back 1,000 years to Brian Boru, one of the last High Kings of Ireland. Converted to a hotel in the 1960s and fresh off a \$20 million renovation and restoration, Dromoland Castle and its 97 rooms and suites exhibit the best of its regal Irish heritage.

I spoke with the property's Managing Director, Mark Nolan. "During the last year we have really taken the opportunity of "re-setting" and looking at our whole Estate offering," he told me. "We also brought in to advise us Sir Terry Stevens who specializes on Estate development and in conjunction with the whole foraging experience we are looking at introducing the Chef's Table. It will prepare the items foraged with the foragers and will be served in the Restaurant. At the moment we are working on a maximum of six people . Another exciting development is the reinstatement of our orchard, which has just been planted with 100 apple trees with a view to producing our own Estate cider in time... the need for clear traceability of the food chain "farm to fork" has become very important to people. It is in this context that foraging has become such an interest in cooking healthily with true natural produce . Actually I have never seen so much wild garlic on both the Estate and on walks to the Burren!!"

Located in County Clare, the Castle is the gateway to the Wild Atlantic Way, a 2,500- km driving route along the rugged Irish coast. The property offers amenities and country home activities, including an 18-hole, par-72 parkland golf course that weaves around the grounds. Multigenerational families have the perfect venue at Dromoland, with tailored activities like tennis lessons, bespoke golf clinics, horse and buggy rides, archery, garden tours, falconry, bubble baths on demand, and even a genealogy expert to help trace Irish familial roots.

Lastly, Ms. O'Dwyer told me with a laugh, "I even make elderflower champagne – I really do. It's quite amazing and absolutely delicious, with about 8% alcohol."

To that I say, "*Slainte!*"