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# *edible* JERSEY

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Celebrating Local Foods of the Garden State, Season by Season

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## EATING (AND DRINKING) IN NEW BRUNSWICK

NEWARK CIDER • HERITAGE VINEYARDS • WELCH'S GRAPE JUICE  
2015 WINERY GUIDE • FOOD AS MEDICINE





The image shows three metal tins filled with various dried herbs and flowers, arranged on a wooden surface. The top tin contains green leaves and small yellow and purple flowers. The middle tin contains green leaves, purple and yellow flowers, and a large purple flower head. The bottom tin contains a mix of dried roots, stems, and leaves in shades of brown and yellow. The text 'FOOD AS MEDICINE' is overlaid on the left side of the image.

# FOOD AS MEDICINE

In New Jersey and elsewhere,  
patients are learning to look beyond  
the medicine cabinet

BY EMILY SUZUKI □ PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHELLE MONTGOMERY



**A**s a child, I was led to explore where food came from and how it made me feel. I grew up eating from my grandparents' garden, and at 13 I declared I was vegan. My first job was in a health food store, where I would stack beautiful vegetables; turn over bottles of tinctures, salves and oils; smell the earthy aroma of herbs; and take deep breaths.

My father, a traditional Japanese shiatsu therapist, taught me that health is not just the absence of sickness. Rather, it is a balance of many things. He explained to me that there are entire traditions of healing devoted to knowledge of food- and plant-based medicine. I began to see that the line between plants and medicine was blurred, and that in many places, that line was never drawn in the first place.

The idea that food and plants have medicinal properties is far older than human civilization. Hippocrates finally put it down on paper some 2,400 years ago, writing, "Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food."

Yet in the United States, this concept was lost almost entirely during the last century. Herbalism and plant-based medicinal knowledge were forced underground as our country's health care system became defined by scientific research and manufactured pharmaceuticals. Despite the deep body of knowledge that has existed for millennia in traditional cultures around the world, plant medicines were shunned—and often denigrated as dangerous or ineffective.

Lately, however, food and plants have reentered the discourse as more people reexamine what it means to be truly healthy. Plant-based medicine is increasingly finding its way into supermarkets, doctor's offices, farms and homes. Here in New Jersey, several pioneers of plant-, herb- and food-based medicine have dedicated themselves to reacquainting people with an idea understood by Hippocrates and hundreds of millions of other humans throughout history.

#### Mindful Living

Many people realize that the way they feel is inextricably linked to the quality and quantity of food they eat. Dr. Ron Weiss, founder of Ethos Health in Long Valley, discovered this connection early on in his career as a medical doctor. When his father was unex-

pectedly diagnosed with end-stage pancreatic cancer, he was given one to three months to live. "Being a young, idealistic doctor who thought he could save the world, this was a difficult pill for me to swallow," Weiss says. He began to search for treatments outside the conventional medical paradigm in which he had been trained.

Weiss came across the work and teachings of Michio Kushi, the leading proponent of the macrobiotic diet, a plant-based, whole foods diet with origins in Japan. To Weiss, who studied botany and once dreamed of being a farmer, Kushi's ideas were immediately intriguing. "Food was so familiar to me," Weiss says. "Healing through food just made sense."

While eating a diet consisting of plants and whole foods, Weiss's father lived for another year and a half. And according to Weiss, his father felt healthier during most of that time than he had his entire adult life.

Weiss has continued to integrate whole, unrefined plant foods into the care he provides. He has long envisioned a model of care that helps to transform the lives of his patients. In 2012, he and his wife purchased the 342-acre farm that now houses Ethos Health and Ethos Farm. Patients at Ethos sign up for a program he has dubbed "A Year of Mindful Living," and become members of the farm's CSA. Throughout the year, patients meet with Weiss for medical evaluations, participate in group workshops and cooking classes with Ethos

chefs and farmers, and find the support they need to delve into sustainable life changes.

Weiss's vision connects his patients with the food they are eating, which he believes is the most expedient, powerful and natural medicine for treating many chronic illnesses. The program starts with a "30-Day Challenge," a detoxifying plant-based food plan that cuts out meat, dairy and processed foods. Blood work is done on day one and again on day 30. Weiss finds that the changes are often so stark it looks like the results came from two different people. He believes that, at the end of the 30 days, most people have cut their lifetime risk of heart attack or stroke in half.

"Becoming healthy through eating food is not about a diet, it's about living a different way," Weiss says. "A year of



**"Healing through food just made sense."**

—Dr. Ron Weiss

mindful living can then be translated into a lifetime. At the core of being mindful of the way you live, is food.”

### Treating the Person, not the Disease

David Winston, one of the leaders of the herbal medicine movement in the United States, has been working to educate people about herbs and plants since the 1970s. Based in Broadway in Warren County, Winston is a self-taught herbalist and the founder of Herbalist & Alchemist, an herbal company that supplies tinctures and extracts for his clinical practice and retail stores.

Winston also founded David Winston’s Center for Herbal Studies, a two-year herb-studies program that trains students from all over the world to become clinical herbalists. Many of his students are medical professionals looking to expand their knowledge base, including nurses, physicians and naturopaths, who then incorporate medicinal plants and herbs into their practice.

Winston says that one of the hardest things to teach his students is to stop thinking about disease and start thinking about people. He quotes



Hippocrates on a less famous maxim: “It is more important to know what person the disease has than what disease the person has.”

“We live in a culture that has been marinated in the idea that *this* drug is good for *this* disease,” Winston says. He believes that applying this Westernized approach to herbs reduces their potential. Winston sees true herbalism as a way to improve the overall well-being of a person, rather than as a method to treat disease.

Winston explains that the benefits of herbalism include preventing chronic and acute disease, and that there are conditions where Western medicine and herbalism work incredibly well together. “There is good research showing that the right herbs can be used with chemotherapy, pain relievers and asthma medicine and that they increase the efficacy of the drugs and reduce adverse effects.”

Many of those who turn to herbal medicine do so because they worry about the side effects of pharmaceutical drugs. Winston points out that many food herbs, such as garlic or parsley, can be taken on

a regular basis and are unlikely to cause any adverse effects. However, he cautions, certain medicinal herbs are stronger, and using these safely requires knowledge of how they work and interact with other foods, herbs and drugs.

Winston believes that herbs themselves are not foundational to one’s health—rather they must be factored in with diet, sleep, exercise, lifestyle and other aspects that a clinical herbalist looks at in order to treat the person. “When using herbalism, there is always a complex formula for treatment, because you are always working with complex people.”

### People’s Medicine

Lindsay Napolitano and Johann Rinkens of Fields Without Fences, a certified organic vegetable farm in Frenchtown, offer one of New Jersey’s first medicinal-herb CSAs. The couple, who are married, acquired their land from a family member in 2011. They soon realized that little would survive in the neglected and compacted soil they had acquired, but as they looked around, they saw elderberry trees thriving. Elderberry is a medicinal plant with many uses, scientifically established benefits and a rich folklore. “For us it symbolized the potential for healing,” Napolitano says.

Some four years later, Napolitano and Rinkens now have an abundance of medicinal plants growing on their ten-acre farm, many of which supply their new 30-member CSA.

At the beginning of spring, summer, fall and winter, each member receives a share full of tinctures, salves, balms, and signature blended teas made from herbs and plants.

Napolitano and Rinkens select each ingredient to complement the shifting seasons. Products such as elderberry syrup can prepare and strengthen the immune system for the transition from fall to winter, which is typically cold season. Nettle or dandelion tincture can alleviate allergies and cleanse the body in the spring, and a summer salve made with plantain and chickweed soothes bug bites and bee stings.

Napolitano, a student at the aforementioned David Winston’s Center for Herbal Studies, and Rinkens, a graduate of Rutgers University, Cook College, have both studied with a number of prominent herbalism teachers, including Rosemary Gladstar and David Crow.

In today’s DIY culture, many feel empowered to learn, create and take their health into their own hands. As people move away from the pharmaceutical mentality of popping a pill and expecting instant results, Napolitano says education is a crucial aspect to the success of community herbalism. “What makes plant and herbal medicine so powerful is that it truly is a people’s medicine. You can grow it and you can make it and you don’t need to have an intermediary.”

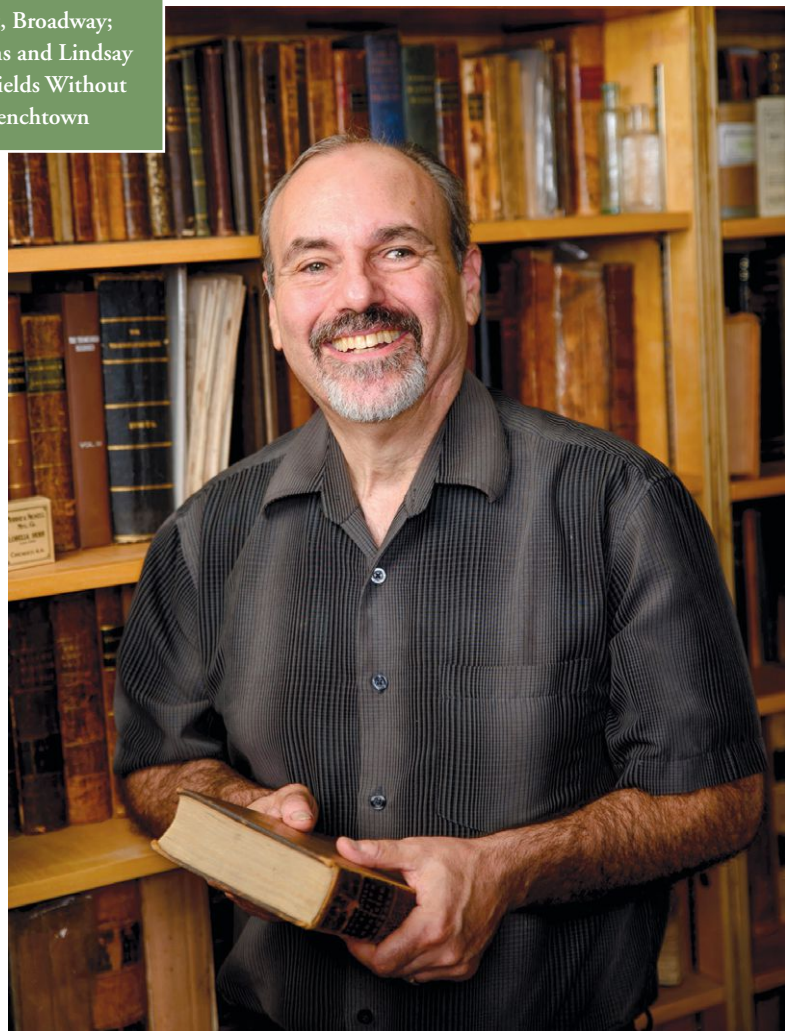
### Opening the Dialogue

Dan Farella, who also goes by the name Dan De Lion, is a self-taught forager, herbalist and educator. His new last name is inspired by the plant, considered by many a weed. He explains that dandelion is





Clockwise, from top left:  
Ron Weiss, Ethos Health, Long  
Valley; Dan Farella, Return  
to Nature, New Brunswick;  
David Winston, Herbalist  
& Alchemist, Broadway;  
Johann Rinkens and Lindsay  
Napolitano, Fields Without  
Fences, Frenchtown







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—David Winston

persistent, often making its way even through concrete, and is a reminder that solutions can often be found in the problems. Based in New Brunswick with a business named Return to Nature, De Lion travels throughout the region leading fermentation classes, workshops on medicinal plants and foraging, guided wild plant walks, and children’s classes; tools that he hopes will empower children and adults to view their health and environment as interdependent.

“It’s really important to open the dialogue about what our role in nature is,” De Lion says. “Right now there’s a ‘leave no trace’ paradigm, and maybe that’s a good first step, so we don’t cause more damage, but human beings are essentially meant to be caretakers. There’s a way of making the ecosystem better than it was, not just leaving it like a museum. People don’t get a deep relationship with objects in a museum. If you don’t care about the ecosystem, then you won’t care to preserve or understand it.”

Wild edible and medicinal plants that grow right in our backyards are often perceived as weeds or invasive. To this, De Lion quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson, “A weed is a plant whose virtues are yet to be discovered.”

On his blog, De Lion posted notes from a plant walk during which he harvested wild rose hips from the invasive multiflora rosebush, which can be found in almost every New Jersey forest. High in vitamin C, the bright red berries can be dried and added to tea, jams or desserts. De Lion explains that eating weeds and invasive plants is a way to combat their proliferation as well as gain health benefits. He challenges his students to notice the energy they expend on trying to rid their yard of weeds, and to ask, “Is there a way to interact with the ecosystem regeneratively?”

### Sustainable Practice of Medicine

Today, herbal and plant medicine is integrated into the mainstream health care available in many countries, including China, India, Germany and France. In the United States, in 2007, about 38% of adults and 12% of children were using some form of traditional medicine, according to published reports.

Despite the growing popularity of certain herbs and plant medicines, David Winston believes American society has a long way to go toward understanding optimal health. “As wonderful as Western medicine is, it is also the most expensive medicine in the world,” he points out. “We spend more per capita than any country in the world, yet the results we get are not better. I believe that well-practiced herbal medicine could be one piece of the answer to creating a sustainable practice of medicine in this country.”

These days, there are many opportunities to immerse oneself in programs such as A Year of Mindful Living, procure medicinal herbs, or take a class to learn how to fill your pantry with preserved, fermented and foraged foods.

Or, as Napolitano reminds me, “All you have to do is cook and you can steward information in the form of chicken soup. Because that soup has onion, garlic and thyme, all of which are wonderfully antimicrobial and immune-system-tonifying plants and herbs.” 🍄