I think I write the way I do because of a vitamin deficiency.  I don't eat any vegetables. I just eat meat and potatoes.
I think I’m trying to make up in my songwriting what I lack in vitamins.
- John Prine

If he didn’t already know what a Spring Tonic is, John Prine was the kind of person who would have been disappointed to learn it isn’t an alcoholic drink. But I bet he knew. With roots in Western Kentucky, he was country to the bone.

A Spring Tonic is a mix of wild plant parts traditionally gathered at the end of winter in many rural parts of America. Back in the day, folk  survived winter on something of a John Prine-style diet of rations that had dwindled to the likes of flour, bacon, potatoes and sugar. After months indoors on a white, greasy diet, the first hunt of the year for green, vitamin-rich plants was an awakening for the mind, body and belly.

I don’t know that John Prine went foraging for wild plants in his spare time, but even if he didn’t long for chlorophyll, he acknowledged vegetables as a path to salvation. His advice to “plant a little garden, eat a lot of peaches, and try to find Jesus on your own” remains a three-line anthem to generations of back-to-the-landers, hippy and redneck alike.

Here in our first post-Prine spring we are largely stuck at home, or close to it, and there may not be a better time to forage the neighborhood for your own local spring tonic. I’m going to tell you how to serve it in the form of a gathered plant pesto. If you told him it was Weed Pesto, as I call it, the man with the twinkle in his songs might have used it.

Every region will have its own list of edible, nutritious, ideally palatable spring greens. And there are some plants that are available nearly everywhere, like dandelion, lambsquarters, chickweed, purslane, dock, sorrel, cattails, nettles, watercress, asparagus and fiddlehead ferns. Even Johnny jump ups, also called violas, are edible, with a fresh, minty taste. Each of these plants will have its own specifics for harvesting and cooking. Nettles, which have a fragrant, almost fishy taste, require scissors and a bag, and perhaps gloves, and should always be eaten cooked or blended unless you have the tongue of a bear. Dandelions, which are bitter as a good IPA beer, can be eaten raw or cooked; every single inch, from root to flower. Ditto for chickweed, which tastes a bit like parsley and licorice.

Many of the same principles for collecting wild plants also apply in your backyard. And some plants like dandelions are literally found everywhere, from lawn to field to forest. Every would-be forager must assess the grounds at their disposal and strategize accordingly.

**Foraging**

The mentality involved in foraging is one to which any food shopper can relate. We go to the supermarket in search of one grocery item, but it’s sold out and we have to improvise, and come home with another.

But the food we gather has not been vetted for edibility like grocery store food. Before you put anything in your mouth, find a trusted reference on the edible plants of your area. Search any piece of land that is legally available and clean of pesticides and other chemical and yellow animal fluids. Success or not, the very act of exploring vacant lots, creekside habitat, random woodlands and other spots will be a reward in itself. Always do your harvesting away from any trail, and don’t ever wipe out a location, so the patch can recover.  And if you are lucky enough to have a backyard, explore every square inch.

Expect bitterness, the flavor of both medicine and poison, in every bite. But if you’ve done your research properly, the bitterness should all be medicinal. Or at the very least, nutritional; wild plants tend to be more nutrient-dense than their domestic counterparts.

The easiest way to enjoy these plants might be in a saute pan, a handful of spring greens at a time, with salt, onions and olive oil. If you have a decent blender, this pesto recipe is thick with flavor, fat and chlorophyll. Toss it onto hot noodles. Scramble it into eggs or migas. Or just eat it off the spoon; it packs whole body power, like a vegetarian blender pemmican.

I like to think that if I had served Mr. Prine a plate of noodles tossed in this harsh, bitter, utterly captivating paste, he’d have taken a bite or two. For research purposes.

**Weed Pesto**

Pesto is one of the tastier ways to consume any green plant, especially those with strong flavors. It can incorporate essentially anything green, though some leaves, and combinations of leaves, will taste better than others. It will pretty much always taste good. If not good enough, add more nuts, garlic, oil and cheese.

Our pesto will be a base of dandelion, since they are literally everywhere. In today’s version I add nettles, as they are prolific right now where I live, and make a thick, aromatic pesto.  But you could substitute any number of wild greens or weeds, like lambsquarter, watercress or chickweed, or a mixture of whatever you think will go well together. If these flavors are too strong, you could also substitute parsley or basil in place of some of the wild stuff.

8 Servings

2 tablespoons chopped garlic
1 teaspoon salt
1 cup olive oil
1/2 cup almonds (or pine nuts)
½ cup grated parmesan or romano cheese
Zest of a lemon, and 2 tablespoons of juice
4 cup chopped dandelion greens, loosely packed, spotlessly clean

5 three-inch nettle tips (or other greens)

Add the garlic, salt, oil, almonds, cheese, lemon juice and zest to the blender and turn them into a thin, homogenous (and delicious) solution.  Carefully add the greens to the pesto, a few at a time, until they too are part of the smooth, green paste.

Serve your weed pesto tossed on piping hot noodles, which will cook the garlic just a tad. I like to stir in some sauteed greens too, for an extra reminder of why we are here.

Refrigerate the leftovers.