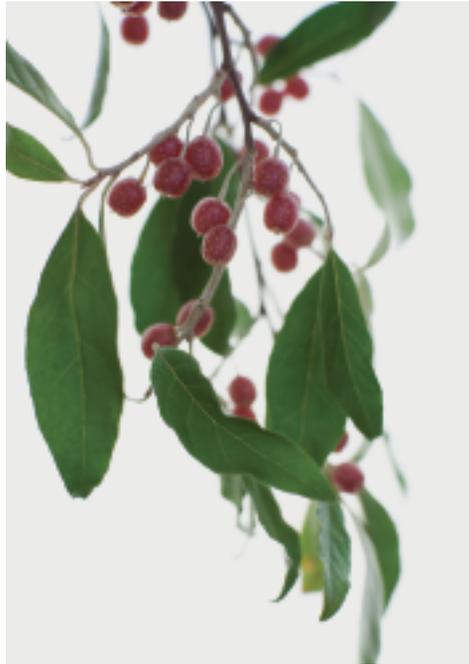


# An Autumn of Abundance

by Clare Leschin-Hoar



When Matt Jennings, chef and owner of La Laitere in Providence, started exploring ways to use a tart wild berry known as autumn olive at his Wayland Square restaurant, he was soon smitten. He discovered that the small red berries were terrific raw in salads; they paired beautifully with blue cheeses and heartier, creamy aged cheeses like Gruyere or Vacherin Fribourgeois; and they were fantastic infused in vodka. His wife and pastry-chef, Kate, liked them too, and used the deep red autumn olives in everything from tarts to housemade autumn berry jelly.

In fact, the couple found there was more to like about the plant than just its fruit. There was the silvery hue to its leaves, and the way it can pleasantly remind you of holly, and it was a cinch to grow. So when they began landscaping the backyard of their Providence home, Jennings decided to plant a few cuttings against the back fence. Had he done that here in Massachusetts, he would have been breaking the law.

Autumn olive is listed as an invasive species by the state, and since 2006, it's illegal to sell it or transplant it. Luckily, what won't make you an outlaw is foraging the tiny ruby berries for consumption.

"Ecologists would be thrilled if people would pick and eat

as many as they could, as long as they don't spread them around," says Russ Cohen, wild foods expert.

Take one of Cohen's classes on foraging for wild edibles, and at some point during the program, he'll likely open a container stuffed full with fruit leather he makes from autumn olives. The sticky, red treat is tart enough to make your mouth water, but sweet enough for kids to clamor for second helpings. And, according to a USDA study, autumn olive can be up to 18 times higher in lycopene than tomatoes. Tasty and good for you. Cool. Unfortunately, there's that pesky invasiveness trait to the plant.

Originally from Asia, autumn olive, *Elaeagnus umbellata*, was first cultivated in the United States in the 1830s. It's now found growing from Maine to Alabama, and is occasionally confused with its cousin, Russian olive (which also sports edible, but less delicious, yellow berries). But it wasn't until the 1930s and '40s that common use for autumn olive exploded. It was often selected for planting in areas that were polluted or had poor soil conditions because it flourished easily. The MassHighway Department deliberately planted it along highways throughout the state, and naturalists loved it because it provided sanctuaries for small birds like warblers and sparrows. But the plant has a tendency to

shoot up quickly and take over nearby areas, depriving other plants of sunlight and growing space.

“My earliest record of it was in 1877, where it was grown at the botanical garden at Harvard University. It has aesthetic qualities, so I can understand why it would be planted for that reason,” says Jennifer Forman-Orth, an invasive species expert with the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources.

## THE TIME IS RIPE

Like its name implies, autumn olives are ready for picking in the fall. Depending on the growing season, the fruit can be ready by the end of September or early October, and can often be foraged through the end of November, though there is some debate over when the berries are the tastiest. Many say the best time to pick them is just before the first frost, while others swear the best tasting berries occur just after the frost. Weather throughout the growing season affects the berries as well. Last year’s dry conditions meant a poor year for the fruit, but Cohen says this season looks very promising, and he’s willing to share a few foraging tips.

“Make sure the berries are on the plant long enough to be fully ripe. And the flavor can vary from bush to bush. A bush that is astringent and puckery isn’t going to get better after a frost, so taste while you pick,” says Cohen. “I’ve also found, in general, the larger the berries, rounder the berries and more red, the better tasting they are, and the less labor there is in gathering them.”

It’s not just naturalists and wild foods fans who are excited about autumn olives. This fall, you’ll be able to spot it on the menu at some of Boston’s best restaurants, appearing in everything from delicious chilled cocktails to roasted venison dishes.

## PUCKER-UP, IT’S ON THE PLATE

Beacon Hill Bistro’s executive chef, Jason Bond, first introduces autumn olive to his customers in spring, by being creative with their blossoms. The tiny white flowers are sweet and perfumed like honeysuckle, he says, and are perfect for infusing vodka. “Or, in the spring, I’ll have a 5-inch sprig with 20 blossoms on it, with a huge aroma. I’ll make a light tempura, batter and dip it, and we’ll actually serve the flower,” he says.

When the berries themselves are in season, Bond uses them whole as a sweet pickle with venison; pureed in a sauce, or he’ll transform them into a sorbet. For such a tiny berry, the flavor is big.

“They’re a treat because you only see them a couple of

weeks a year, and it’s something you can’t get unless you go yourself and get them. Plus, it breaks up the routine of always cranberries or always blueberries. In the real world, there’s so much out there when you go looking for it,” says Bond.

Mike Pagliarini, executive chef at Via Matta, has long been a fan, and says autumn olive is a surprising point of conversation with customers, and an excellent way to engage a table that has more than a passing interest in the menu.

“Autumn olive has a really nice tart-sweet berry flavor, and what’s unique about it is that it has a tannic structure like wines do. That means it has a little more body and character to it, and you have to temper them [when cooking with the berries].”

“I think of fall and berry fruits as great pairings with game birds and meats,” he says. But treat it tenderly, he warns. “The more you heat it, the paler it gets. If you treat it gently, it will keep more of its color.”

And at KO Prime, executive chef Jamie Bissonnette likes the pucker the berries invoke, and preserves them in simple syrup for the entire fall’s use. He’s also been known to pair it with another wild ingredient, juniper, and will combine the two into a puree.

“Last year we served venison en crouete with juniper and autumn olive, and will do something similar this fall,” he says.

As for Jennings, while the autumn olive starts he planted in his backyard have taken root, they haven’t quite overtaken his yard, and so far, his enthusiasm for the berry is intact.

“What’s cool is it’s one of those esoteric New England ingredients, and that’s what makes living and cooking in New England so much fun,” he says. ♦

*Clare Leschin-Hoar is out foraging for autumn olives and other wild nibbles this fall. Read more of her stories at: [www.leschin-hoar.com](http://www.leschin-hoar.com).*

## AUTUMN OLIVE VODKA

By Jason Bond, Executive Chef  
Beacon Hill Bistro, Boston

1. Use either the berries or flowers, depending on the time of year. Pull all off of the branch and gently wash.
2. Place the berries or flowers in a glass jar, filling 1/3 of the jar.
3. Add a couple strips of Sorrento Lemon peel (yellow only) and a good dash of sugar.
4. Fill the jar to the top with vodka or another neutral spirit.
5. Wrap tightly and store in the refrigerator for several weeks before serving.

## AUTUMN OLIVE SAUCE

By Mike Pagliarini, Executive Chef  
Via Matta, Boston

This sauce is a nice addition to roasted pork and game, and especially duck. Add the drippings from your roasted meat to the sauce and you can even swirl in a pat of butter if you'd like.

2 cups autumn olive berries  
3 Tablespoons olive oil  
Nutmeg, a few grates from a microplane  
Cinnamon, a few grates from a microplane  
Black pepper, to taste  
2 Tablespoons sugar (or more if the berries are tart)  
¼ cup red verjus (or a fruity red wine)  
2 Tablespoons balsamic vinegar  
Salt, pinch

1. Warm the berries gently in the olive oil until the skins begin to burst. Season with nutmeg, cinnamon, black pepper and sugar and continue to simmer for a few minutes.
2. Pass the entire mixture through a food mill and return the pulp to a saucepan.
3. Add the red verjus (or wine) and balsamic vinegar. Simmer until the mixture thickens enough to lightly coat the back of a spoon.
4. Taste and adjust the seasoning.

## AUTUMN OLIVE FRUIT LEATHER

By Russ Cohen  
Wild Foods Enthusiast

1. In a large pot, cover bottom with enough water to keep the fruit from scorching. This could be 1/8-inch to ¼-inch, adding more when necessary.
2. Add fruit and simmer for 20-25 minutes, until fruit softens and begins to separate the pulp from the seed.
3. Pour entire contents through a food mill. Crank the food mill to separate the seeds and pulp. (If you do not have a food mill, you can use a fine-mesh sieve. Use the back of a wooden spoon to push the pulp through.)
4. Pour the pulp into the liquid containing trays of a dehydrator and let it run overnight.

## PICKLED AUTUMN OLIVES

By Jason Bond, Executive Chef  
Beacon Hill Bistro, Boston

4½ cups sugar  
2½ cups white wine vinegar  
2 cups apple cider  
pinch salt  
½ Tablespoon clove  
½ Tablespoon allspice  
1 2-inch piece of ginger, bruised (see below)  
2 sticks cinnamon  
1 gallon of autumn olive berries, washed

1. Put all of the ingredients, except for the autumn olives in a large saucepan and bring to a boil. Simmer for five minutes.
2. Add autumn olives and cover, steep for just a few minutes. As soon as the first berries start to pop, chill the saucepan in an ice bath.
3. Store covered in the refrigerator for two weeks before using.

\*To bruise the ginger, take the side of your knife, or a big pan, or something flat, and whack it. You basically just want to break it up a bit, but not slice it.



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