If you want to know what Finnish food tastes like, you should go to the forest,” says Finland's most famous wild herbs and plants advocate, Sami Tallberg. The flavours of the Finnish forest are strongly on display, even in the top restaurants of Helsinki.

Finnish food is what grows in the woods. What you prepare from it is a whole different matter," says Finland’s most famous wild foods chef Sami Tallberg. The man himself has a steadfast vision of what Finnish food means to him.

“I cook as many dishes as possible from wild plants. It’s astounding how many good plants can be found for your kitchen, just in your own garden, the Helsinki beach bedrock and even in parks. You don’t have to go looking for everything in the forest. Although, it’s a nice aspect of Helsinki, that you can take the local bus to a nature reserve in the Nuuksio primeval forest to forage for mushrooms and berries,” Tallberg says.

FAME THROUGH WILD HERBS
Sami Tallberg got his wild food calling in the beginning of the 2000s, while working at the Rivington Grill, in London. The restaurant had its own royal supplier, specialised in wild herbs and plants, named Miles Irving, who taught Tallberg about the treasures of flavour which nature has to offer, starting in your own back yard. Tallberg moved back to Helsinki in 2008, to become the chef at the Carelia restaurant.

“It was natural to continue the hobby that I had started in London. On my days off, I would go exploring for edible plants in the forests. There were so many of them that I started working on a wild herbs cookbook,” says Tallberg.

Tallberg was at it at just the right time. The "Wild Herbs Cookbook," published in 2011, became a bestseller, and Tallberg became an immensely popular speaker and performer at food events around the country. Currently, Tallberg has no regular restaurant of his own. Instead, he travels, speaking on the usage of wild herbs and plants in cooking. You can find Tallberg – nearly anywhere in the world – cooking in star kitchens... In the best restaurants of Helsinki, you can enjoy a varied meal of the bounty of the Finnish forest.

Greetings from the forest
Porcini mushrooms, birch sap, nettle leaves... In the best restaurants of Helsinki, you can enjoy a varied meal of the bounty of the Finnish forest.

1. Chef & Sommelier
THE 25-seat Chef & Sommelier, which is hardly larger than a living room is the cooking location of chef Sasu Laukkanen, who collects most of the ingredients from the forest himself. The restaurant also has its own garden and gardener, who keeps the kitchen stocked with root vegetables, salads and herbs. "Why should we eat Chilean strawberries, when Finnish nature offers everything that a chef needs? We eat the food when it’s at its best in Finland, and then store the rest for the long winter. In this way, the customer can get inside the deepest being of Finnish food in a completely different way," says Laukkanen. Chef & Sommelier’s food has also made an impression on the Michelin inspectors. Proof that they have been impressed is provided by the red sticker of the star club, just next to the door.

Chef & Sommelier
Huvilakatu 28
tel. +358 400 959 440
www.chefetsommelier.fi

Visit Finland, Riitta Weijola
and in pop-up restaurants. Tallberg’s pioneering work and his infectious enthusiasm can be seen and tasted today, in many restaurants all around Helsinki.

**2. Juuri**

THE Spanish have their tapas and the Juuri restaurant has sapas, a small and delicious dish made of Finnish ingredients for sharing. The Juuri sapas have become a phenomenon in Helsinki. The reason for the media attention is the founder and chef, Sasu Laukkonen’s passionate attitude toward the bounty of the Finnish forests.

“When we opened in 2010, we only wanted to use organic ingredients, and for our local patrons, that was pretty annoying. After the first year, we realised that we couldn’t limit ourselves to only organic, but rather, that we had to offer food made with ingredients straight from the woods. Organic food isn’t wild, but is grown by people. It was a good decision, because that is when cooking actually became interesting. We have a short summer in Finland, and during it, there are plenty of sun hours per day even in Helsinki. There is an intense aroma in everything which nature produces. It is both a great challenge and an opportunity for a chef,” says Laukkonen.

Laukkonen makes no attempt to explain what Finnish food is today. “For someone, it’s pizza, meatballs for another, pickled herring for some else. Food culture is always a mixture of proprietary and foreign influences. To me, it’s what the forest and waters in Finland produce. I’m happy when the customer tells me that they have tasted being in Finland, not elsewhere,” says Laukkonen.

**SMALL, BUT INTERNATIONAL**

The tiny Chef & Sommelier, in Helsinki’s Eira neighbourhood is precisely the restaurant presented in international magazine pieces, which is characteristic of the food offered in Helsinki. The reason for the media attention is Sasu Laukkonen’s passionate attitude toward the bounty of the Finnish forests.

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**“Wild food is familiar to us Finns. Food obtained from the forest and the lakes has been used since time immemorial.”**
3. Ask
THE small and intimate Ask in the Kruununhaka neighbourhood of Helsinki has risen to the very top of restaurant rankings, one step at a time. The Michelin star, received in 2014, accelerated the rise. Ask’s owners, Filip and Linda Langhoff amassed their skills over ten years, in the best restaurants in Oslo, before their return to Helsinki to realise their dream of owning a restaurant. It became a tribute to local Nordic food, without unnecessary stylistic pigeonholing. The Langhoffs define local food loosely to extend to the Nordic countries. Their main point is the cleanliness, freshness and natural flavours of food. Ask is a small, less than 30-seat restaurant, so it can best take advantage of the supply of small producers. “In our kitchen, everything is organic or wild,” says Filip Langhoff.

Vironkatu 8, tel. +358 40 581 8100, www.restaurantask.com

4. Olo
RESTAURANT Olo moved to a prime location in Helsinki in 2013, just next to the Kauppatori market square. It’s fitting for a restaurant which food critics consider the best in Finland. Olo is chef Pekka Terävä’s creation, but now, the maestro has moved backstage, to operate his various food productions. Olo’s kitchen is the sole domain of the gifted Jari Vesivalo. Vesivalo is known as an uncompromising friend of local food who painstakingly finds the best small-scale producers, fishermen and hunters. Vegetables and wild fish play an increasingly large part in Olo’s kitchen. For meat, Vesivalo favours game, according to the season. “Throughout the years, I have got deeper into what I can get out of freshly harvested parsnip, for example. Finnish nature offers an unlimited supply of interesting flavours. The most significant part is to use them to make natural flavours, and to present them beautifully,” says Vesivalo.

Pohjoisesplanadi 5, tel. +358 10 320 6250, www.olo-restaurant.fi

5. Spis
DECAYED stone walls, simple wooden tables, 18 seats. Sometimes less is more. The Spis restaurant, founded in 2012 by Jani Kinnanen and Antero Aarnivuo, complete with its spartan decor, was selected to be the Restaurant of the Year, 2015 in Finland. Its rise to the position was a natural extension of chef Aarnivuo’s modern food, created from the food produced by small and ambitious producers, which naturally fits in with the definition of the new Nordic kitchen. In focus at Spis are seasonal vegetables, which are taken full advantage of by the skilled technicians in the kitchen. The fish is wild and the meat is always organic.

Kasarmikatu 28, tel. +358 45 305 1211, www.spis.fi