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Bamboozled

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: After 5 years of establishment, this Phyllostachys vivax bamboo is producing shoots for the kitchen. (Photo courtesy of Alex Féthière)

Many have been fooled about the uses of bamboo. Its applications are nowhere near as limited as industry would have us believe.

Sure, it can produce all kinds of consumer products once requiring wood or plastic. It also makes a fabric that's functionally indistinguishable from polyester (oh goody!), which in most cases is no better for the environment than synthetics.

That was clear to me after watching Michelangelo Antonioni's "Sette canne, un vestito (Seven reeds, one suit)" (1949), which describes how rayon was made in Torviscosa, an Italian town built by Mussolini. It was built on swampland that was drained and planted with *Arundo donax*, a fibrous cane plant like bamboo.

The video footage in this short documentary is chillingly chemical-industrial. No wonder Italian futurist F.T. Marinetti wrote, in his "Poem of Torre Viscosa" that the "goddess of Geometry" devours the cane and extracts the cellulose with calcium bisulfite.

Point being, I didn't plant bamboo five years ago to run it through a factory, chemical vats, furnaces, etc., to claim perversely that I was saving the ecology or expanding industrial development. I planted it to build with, and eat.

Most bamboos are edible, with the correct processing. Notwithstanding panda associations, people have been eating bamboo for 2,500 years. Palatability varies, with several species being preferable for the table.

After attending a permaculture event in Bellingham, I was jazzed about *Phyllostachys vivax*, a particularly enormous and strong bamboo that is well-suited for both workshop and table. The presenter didn't talk about any of its culinary aspects, but showed some amazing structures and techniques he'd developed with it.

I knew that bamboo is used in China to make the scaffolds workers use for building construction. Travel writer Claudia Looi claims that today, bamboo scaffolds can only be used on buildings six stories or smaller.

I'll never be building past six stories (ha ha), so I chose the building material I could eat, along with its supposedly tastier relative *Phyllostachys rubromarginata*. I bought them from someplace in Seattle in 2017, planted them on a sandy hillside and waited. Bamboo nurseries have told me you shouldn't harvest shoots for food until the plant has established for five years.

I had generously applied composted chicken manure and my own biodiverse compost to both plants in March, but otherwise had done little for them save set up automatic drip watering.

I've mentioned before that Michael Dolan of Burnt Ridge Nursery in Onalaska schooled me on bamboo maintenance. On a tour of the nursery in 2018, he told a group of visitors that in our Western Washington climate, bamboo will not be "invasive" unless it's watered during the summer. Bamboo will survive our Mediterranean summer, but not spread — and I've found this to be true on sandy soils.

After a couple years of watering my bamboos through the summer, they started spreading. I need them to run to prevent erosion. This year I watched them for shoots to eat.

The *P. vivax* not only produced several shoots, but a number of them were up to 4 feet away from the main cluster. I headed out with pruners to cut a few from the main cluster.

I've loved bamboo in Chinese food since I was a kid. At some point the metallic taste imparted by the cans put me off, as with water chestnuts. This flavor sensation had been a long time coming!

Of a 22-inch length of *P. vivax*, only the bottom 3 inches had to be steamed; it was too woody to eat fresh. I nibbled the rest raw as I prepped it: vegetal, grassy, only a tinge of bitterness with a wonderful juicy crunch.

By the time I finished this column, I'd decided to brine it for lacto-fermentation with a bit of burdock root. I couldn't bring myself to steam it, it was too vibrant uncooked. Guess who's getting spoiled for a bigger crop next year?

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