

The Local Wild Food Challenge: Translating a Chef's Passion for Wild Food into a Sustainable Event

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On October 20, 2018, the day before the Local Wild Food Challenge (LWFC), Chef Bill Manson headed out to the Farm Institute at the eastern end of Martha's Vineyard, an island south of Cape Cod, on the northeast coast of the United States (Exhibit 1). The Farm Institute at the Katama farm, dedicated to sustainable agriculture and farm education, was once again the location for the culinary adventure competition Manson founded ten years earlier. The LWFC was a unique event with only one requirement - the competing dishes had to include at least one wild ingredient.

As Manson passed the little harbor towns and farmland, he admired the beautiful fall views of the island that had now become his second home. In the October off-season, the island was less busy now, the bustling summer days and big tourist crowds long gone. As Manson reached the farm he watched as a group of volunteers slowly transformed the the grass field in front of him into an event venue. Over the years Manson had seen participation grow from 50 visitors to 500. Still, he wondered, would enough competing participants register, and would visitors show up for the competitions? Would they feel included in the wild food community he had helped to build? Would it inspire them to see the real opportunities of wild foods, like he did?

Local Wild Food Challenge

The LWFC began as a small community event in 2008 in Eastbourne, New Zealand. It had come a long way since the early days and had grown to become a global network of communities holding yearly events in four different countries: Finland, New Zealand, Italy, and the United States. Manson's original idea was to get foragers, hunters, and fishers together for a friendly and relaxed contest to celebrate the knowledge of the land, and the skills and talents of local people. He had a vision to recognize and applaud local culinary talent.

In 2008, Manson had not known the first event would be the start a series of festivals with a focus on local wild food. Nine years on since the first LWFC, the goal was still to celebrate community and, at the same time, generate awareness of natural resources and the local environment. The LWFC's mission posted on its website, was to "promote understanding, appreciation and sustainability" of local resources grounded in the belief that "the deeper you

venture into your environment the more motivation you have to protect it” (<http://www.localwildfoodchallenge.com/about/>).

The LWFC was fun and accessible, with registration inclusive and free of charge. Everyone was invited to participate - from home cooks to professional chefs - regardless of age and skill level. Previous LWFC events had attracted between 25 and 65 competing professional and home cook chefs. Through their active participation in the event the competing participants played a leading role in facilitating the experience, simultaneously being both producers (e.g., preparing the food themselves, exchanging knowledge with visitors) and consumers of the event (e.g., learning new food preparation techniques skills). Moreover, Manson encouraged what he referred to as “multi-generational awareness” where young and old could get out into their local natural environment to source wild ingredients through hunting, fishing, foraging, bartering, or gathering, and learn about natural ingredients not commonly found in commercial stores. While children had not initially been a target audience in the early days, they had now become an integral part of the LWFC. Many of them returned as young adults and entered the competition on their own. In 2013, the LWFC at Martha’s Vineyard introduced a competition category for children to enter and participate.

In 2018, the LWFC community was known for its camaraderie and community ethos. Manson saw himself as a convener of a community, rather than a formal event organizer. Some participants travelled across the world to volunteer and compete. LWFC was also known for its strong educational focus. As Manson saw it, wild food education had an essential role and this was very much at the heart of every food challenge, in any event location. Over the last decade, Manson had sought to educate participants around “what is available, what is possible” with wild foods. At LWFC visitors were encouraged to interact with participating chefs and there was always a wide range of educational demo sessions and workshops (Exhibit 2). For example, there were fish filleting demonstrations (how to not waste your catch, how to fillet the fish), artisans demonstrating traditional cooking techniques, or the use of uncommon ingredients (e.g., racoon meat, worms), and “hunter-to-punter” demonstrations (e.g., showing the natural chain of deer meat in front of spectators). Manson hoped that participants would realise that wild foods, often ignored or thrown away, had the potential to be a decent, healthy, and viable food source.

About Bill Manson and the Founding Family

Manson, a New Zealander, had spent the last ten years dividing his time between Martha’s Vineyard (MV) and his native home in Eastbourne, New Zealand. The outdoors had always been important to Manson, and throughout his career as a chef he had sought out opportunities to combine his two passions, food and nature. An avid surfer, he had many friends who also enjoyed hunting, fishing, and gathering wild foods. The idea of the LWFC came to him after he and his wife had lived and worked in the French Alps running an adventure tourism and food venture. Learning about the local, and regional, foods and the lengths to which the locals would go to source and forage natural ingredients, inspired Manson. The effort, physicality, and interaction it took to find and source food ingredients were very rewarding to him. Upon return to Eastbourne, the idea of a local food competition started to take off.

Manson took great pride in the wild food community he had helped to create. He enjoyed the relationships with local community groups, volunteers, competing participants and visitors. To him, everyone played a lead role to co-create this unique gastronomic experience. Manson believed that when competing participants prepared and assembled the dishes on the day of the event, other participants, volunteers, and visitors had the opportunity to learn something new and had access to the wild food expertise and knowledge of locals. It was important to Manson that the LWFC was user-friendly and that visitors were empowered to try wild food foraging and cooking themselves. Manson also felt a personal responsibility to help educate attendees about respecting and protecting natural local resources. For him, both the protection and use of wild foods went “hand in hand,” and allowed himself and others to “get back and keep using wild resources while having generations beyond use it as well.”

With his wife Sarah, Manson had overseen many of the LWFC event responsibilities such as administration, design, and operations (volunteer coordination, the venue, and sponsorship agreements). They operated LWFC events using their own finances and relied on their own personal networks. Manson’s longtime friend and fellow wild food enthusiast Jim Thompson helped with marketing and publicity and created video content of the events. Each LWFC yielded a small profit that was put back into support for the next event. In the last few years, as the demand for the event had grown, Manson had tried to step back from the event set up, and sponsorship work. He actively worked to hand over some of the event planning responsibilities to local partners and community members to ensure the long-term future viability of the LWFC.

The Martha Vineyard's Event

The event followed a typical LWFC format. Like other LWFC events it was held in a rural location, away from suburbs and busy city centers. Registration for the event was through the LWFC website or on the day of the event with an entry form provided at the venue. The event started at 11am and continued to 6pm, with food entries judged between 12-3pm. The event had a casual program that included concurrent live interactive wild food demonstrations, food sampling tables, workshops, food trucks, a bar with beer and wine, and live music (Exhibit 3). The competition was intentionally “open to everyone,” including chefs from local restaurants, caterers, home cooks, hunter-gatherers, fishers and children (Exhibit 4). All dishes entered had to be pre-prepared, and there were prep-tables, and equipment such as ovens and grills to finish off the dishes. Once dishes were ready, they were taken to the judging table for scoring (Exhibit 5).

A panel of judges tasted and scored the dishes based on four categories. In addition to local ingredients, taste and presentation, points were assigned for the degree of effort the contestant had given to sourcing the wild ingredients and to dish preparation. The judging and scoring system were therefore intentionally designed to create a level playing field for home cooks, and professional chefs. Competing participants were encouraged to write a 100-200 word story that detailed how they had gathered and prepared their dishes. This gave the judges insight into the sourcing of the ingredients, and the challenges the participants might have faced. Everyone was encouraged to have fun, and to connect with each other across their

community to source a wide variety of wild and local ingredients. After dishes were judged, they were taken to the tasting table for visitors to try (Exhibit 6).

Volunteer activities at the event included helping at the registration table, showing competing participants the cooking facilities, taking ready dishes to the judges and managing the tasting table. All volunteers were given a black LWFC t-shirt or shirt to wear. The prize categories included a grand prize, runner up, and a third place, but also awarded categories such as best effort, wildest ingredient, best water, best forest and land, best use of local ingredients, best dessert, children's grand prize, children's runner up, and children's best effort. Each prize category was accompanied with a gift from one of the many local sponsors (Exhibit 6).

Promotion of the event included the LWFC website, posters, and flyers in highly visited local areas, social media posts on the LWFC Facebook page (Exhibit 7) and Instagram account, sponsorship agreements, and local media exposure prior to and after the event (Exhibit 8). The LWFC also relied heavily on word-of-mouth. Post-event activities included posting photos, or video material and sharing specific updates on the winners on social media channels. LWFC also had a YouTube channel to share short videos related to the event (Exhibit 9).

Attendees' Motivations and Experiences

The LWFC attracted a broad range of attendees, either entering to compete or spectating. Attendees included professional chefs, home cooks, foragers, hunter-gatherers, fishers, restaurateurs, locals, tourists, and children. Manson always tried to ensure that as many people were represented and celebrated as possible. In 2017, to find out more about visitors, Manson partnered with researchers from a Canadian university. The researchers interviewed 24 visitors and six competing participants at Martha's Vineyard and found that visitors had prior knowledge, experience of, and interest in wild foods and 50% of the interviewed visitors had attended one or more LWFC events. Some foraged occasionally, and others had more extensive experience. The main reason for attending the event was their personal connection to Manson or to a volunteer. Other reasons included trying new and different kinds of food, learning about wild foods, supporting the local community, and a general interest in local foods. Some visitors were less attracted to the wild food focus and were mainly motivated by the idea of "getting outside" and having "something fun to do." Many of the competing participants had continued to forage and prepare wild foods throughout the year for their own consumption. Attendees' motivations for gathering, preparing, and consuming wild foods included self-sufficiency, desire to know their food source, perceived health and environmental benefits, and the personal satisfaction and empowerment of "cooking something you have caught yourself." A few also expressed motivation to be less reliant on mass-produced foods and mainstream food systems.

Overall, attendees were very satisfied with their experience, and many remarked on the commitment of the organizers, the friendly atmosphere, and the community building that took place. However, attendees noted it was not an event to simply attend for an hour or so. It was necessary to stay for the duration of the event to experience it fully. For example, sampling of dishes did not start until later in the day, and if visitors came early or left early, they missed

some of the key attractions. Visitors and competing participants who had previously attended a LWFC shared how their awareness of local wild food had increased with each attendance. Return attendees also shared that they appreciated learning about the local community and the skills of local people. First-time attendees noted the experience had opened their eyes to different kinds of food, and to the accessibility of wild foods.

Next steps for the Local Wild Food Challenge

As Manson parked his car at the Farm Institute and stepped out to help the volunteers finalise the set up for the next day, he was reminded of his long-standing ambition for a global movement of LWFC events. He lived and breathed this dream. With continued growth he knew he needed to revisit his current event planning approach to ensure events like this one at Martha's Vineyard were financially sustainable as they matured and that attendees continued to have a positive experience. In the research carried out by the Canadian university, attendees had commented that it would be helpful to have more event advertising, a more detailed schedule indicating when activities were taking place, improved wayfinding on site, better signage for the prepared dishes, and more activities and educational content overall both prior, during and after the event. Next year, in 2019, the event was to return to Martha's Vineyard and once again was tentatively scheduled for the end of October. Manson vowed to make some changes in the event planning process and the organization of the educational content of the event, while staying close to his values around sustainability and inclusivity.

Exhibit 1: Map of Martha's Vineyard



Source: <https://www.oysterguide.com/new-discoveries/beach-points-and-moonshoals/>

Exhibit 2: Demonstrations



Exhibit 3: Program and food sampling, and interactive activities (e.g., making apple juice)



Exhibit 4: Children participating



Exhibit 5: Plated dishes and judging



Exhibit 6: Visitors tasting competing participants' dishes & prize table



Exhibit 7: Facebook Images/Posts 2017, LWFC, Martha's Vineyard: Posts from Wild Food Challenge Facebook Page

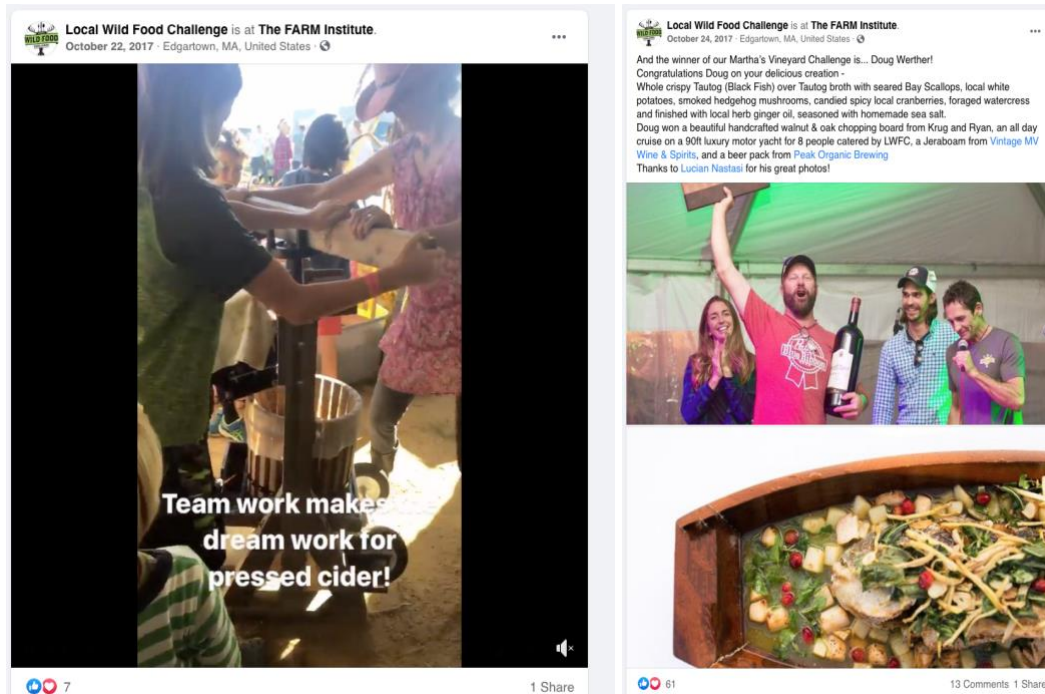


Exhibit 8: Post-event News Article 2017, LWFC, Martha's Vineyard

https://www.mvtimes.com/2017/10/23/care-little-bbq-racoon/?fbclid=IwAR3ppKDayIFp_nGqOj5VvAH8bVXPs3eu7z-lkH7DHVj_giBA1bovBdVeP7c

Exhibit 9: Videos posted on YouTube Channel

Local Wild Food Challenge Taster <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1z13MfckC6Q>

Local Wild Food Challenge Martha's Vineyard 2016 - The winners

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7brp9hGD8Qg>