

Brave new Earth

What is it like to stay in a silent retreat? Eve Tedja travels to the west of Bali for a gadget-free experience and discovers what New Earth Cooking is all about.



The mighty Mount Batukaru as seen from the retreat

“Eating is an agricultural act,” wrote American author, Wendell Berry, in his remarkable essay titled *The Pleasures of Eating*. The statement, made in the early 1990s, rings true today, given how the farm-to-table movement has influenced the way we think and consume our food. It reminds us that there is a close connection between farming and the food that we put on our plate three times a day. Industrialisation cut off a lot of our direct ties with nature, especially for those who live in urban areas. But the recent revival of foraging is raising awareness about the origins of our food, particularly in Bali where nature is always near and closely entwined with tradition. After all, Balinese who live in rural areas still forage in their backyards, surrounding river banks or nearby forests.

The village of Mongan in the Tabanan regency, west of Bali, is one example. Its location under Mount Batukaru endows the region’s soil with rich minerals. Water sources are abundant, and plants grow verdant. To reach the Bali Silent Retreat, I pass through terraced green rice fields, smiling back at farmers on their bicycles along the way. The road gets narrower and uneven, a telltale sign that you are going to find something special at

the end. Indeed, the looming view of the majestic mountain accompanies my drive all the way until I arrive at the retreat. It is with relief that I find it nestled within nature. The solar-powered complex is made of several wooden houses, separated with well-designed pathways, rice fields, and gardens.

The secret garden

“Please refrain from talking and using your gadget inside. If you need to use it, you can come here anytime to do so,” says the receptionist before handing me a bulging bag which contains a bed sheet, towel and flask. After explaining the do’s and don’ts, she takes me to my room and explains the facilities in a hushed voice. Living off the grid is real at this place – a fact that my twitchy, wired brain immediately registers when I arrive at my room and discover that there is no plug in sight. My bedside solar desk lamp on the reading table is still being charged by the sun on the porch. A bed with white mosquito netting, a chair, a simple toilet and shower are all there is to accompany me for the next two days. Immediately after setting up my own bed in true ashram-style living, I follow the path to the garden and the adjoining forest. The special thing about Bali Silent Retreat is that

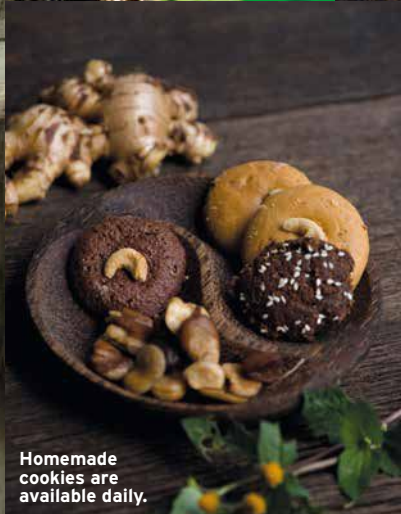


Ibu Yuna during her daily foraging

The nourishing salad for lunch



A corner at the Lodge



Homemade cookies are available daily.



Sangtu and his treasure, the Elephant Foot Yam



Freshly picked produce from the retreat's garden

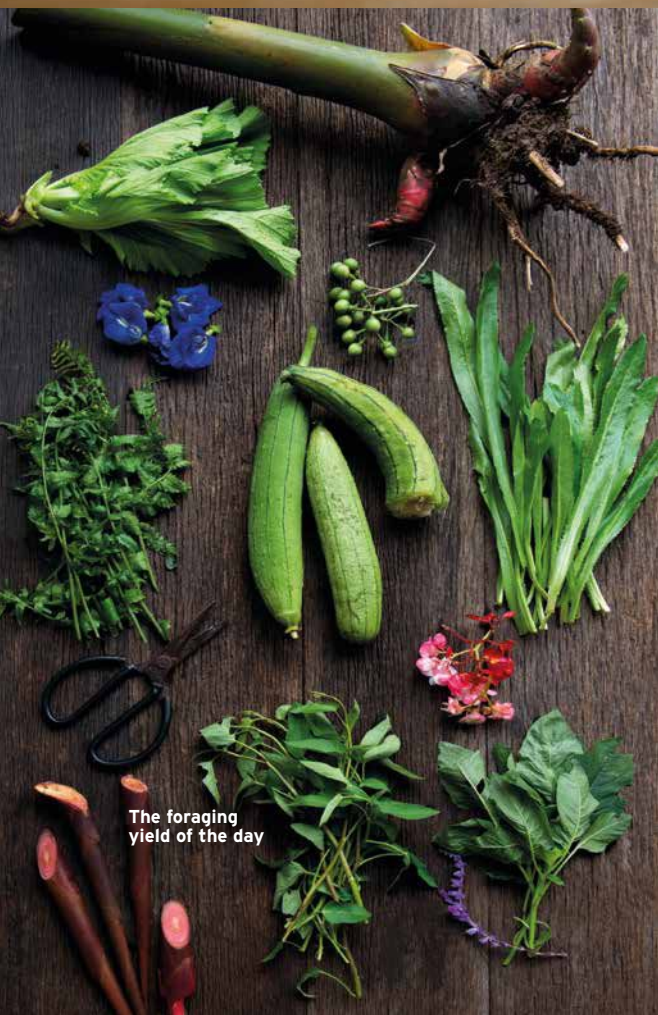
it allows its guests to create their own schedule.

I decided to explore the grounds. There is a medicinal garden occupied with plants like betel leaf, cat's whiskers, soursop, aloe vera, and other medicinal herbs. The four-hectare retreat has the capacity to grow its own vegetables, as intended by the co-founders of this sanctuary, Patricia Miklautsch and Sang Ketut Rai Wibawa (or Sangtu, as he prefers to be known).

A team of dedicated gardeners assist the kitchen in providing fresh daily produce. I meet I Ketut Artawan when he is harvesting cassava for the next day's lunch. "We grow all sorts of edible herbs, vegetables, and fruits. We try our best to grow as much food for our own use as possible. It's always a work in progress



The pantry where guest can make their own herbal tea



The foraging yield of the day



Napping is optional at the cosy lounge.

here,” explains the middle-aged Balinese gardener, who often uses his knowledge about herbal medicine to cure his own ailments.

New Earth Cooking


Meanwhile in the kitchen, three ladies are preparing for lunch. The rest of the guests are away on an excursion led by Sangtu, exploring the neighbouring *subak* or water irrigation system. Lovingly called the kitchen angels, they sprinkle their magic into the pots and pans every day. “The recipes are created by our teacher, chef Simon Jongenotter. We design our menu to be different everyday but in the end, it depends on what nature gives us,” says Ibu Yuna while chopping a hill of sweet potato and ferns, the yield from her earlier forage.

Indeed, more than 50 percent of the kitchen needs are sustainably provided by the garden. Nothing is wasted because the waste is turned into compost. Permaculture principles and age-old Balinese local wisdom are practiced. Jongenotter arrived at Bali Silent Retreat in 2014 as a volunteer. His interest in the origins of food and the knowledge which he gained during his stay at the retreat – experimenting with different farming techniques as well as foraging with the knowledgeable gardeners – gave birth to New Earth Cooking. The cooking philosophy considers the long-term environmental and social implications of the food that we eat daily. “I just don’t believe that a diet of raw cacao, goji berries and chia seeds is going to restore our distorted relationship with real food. New Earth Cooking urges us all to take responsibility for the health of the entire web of life, our precious bodies included,” he states, putting emphasis on using locally grown produce and treating food sources with respect and care. He’d been a chef for 12 years before coming to Bali. The kitchen is located under the Lodge, a communal house where the vegetarian buffets are served three times a day on a long wooden table. Upstairs on the third floor, a library and lounging area are where guests eat, read, or attend lectures. While waiting for lunch to be served, I concoct my own version of herbal tea: ginger, lemongrass, mint, and soursop leaves. We are called to lunch with the hitting of the wooden *kulkul*.

Despite my omnivorous inclination, the vegetarian spread is a magnificent study of flavours. There are various freshly picked vegetables, smoked eggplant, pulled and smoked young jackfruit, BBQ beetroot burger, and the only protein-based dish in the menu: spinach and tomato duck egg rolls. Avocado and mango enhance the salad, drizzled with ginger dressing. Spicy, sweet, acidic, and savoury condiments are served alongside the dishes. I pile everything up on a wooden plate and bring it upstairs. My palate experiences different sensations. There is fresh rawness from vegetables, savoury notes from the curried jackfruit,

sweetness from the beetroot inside the sesame bread, acidity in the tomato sambal, and rich intensity from the duck egg rolls.

“Thanks to Jongenotter’s creativity and thrill in working with new plants when they come into season, our guests often comment that they can taste love from the food,” says Miklautsch. Then there is the silence in this retreat. Although there are 10 other people in the dining room, all of us eat in silence. Occasionally, we will recognise another person’s presence with a smile or a nod, but that is all until the evening.

That night, Sangtu gives us a talk about Bali’s living pharmacy, amid the crickets and stillness of a dark night. One by one, he patiently explains the benefits of the leaves, bark, and flowers on a tray: moringa, turmeric, cumin, wormwood, and so on. “Foraging is nothing new in our culture. It is only during our time that we have forgotten this wisdom. The fact remains that we don’t need to worry because nature has actually been taking care of us all along, if only we can learn to use it wisely,” says Sangtu. 

 **BALI SILENT RETREAT**
Banjar Mongan, Penatahan,
Penebel, Tabanan
balisilentretreat.com



A plateful of New Earth cooking