

# Those curious and delicious seaweeds: a fascinating voyage from biology to gastronomy

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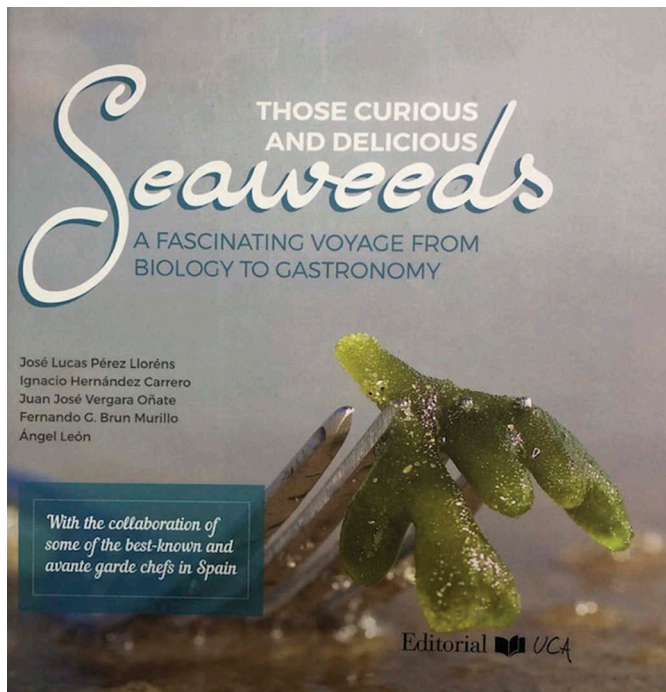


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## BOOK REVIEW



**Those curious and delicious seaweeds: a fascinating voyage from biology to gastronomy.** José Lucas Peréz Lloréns, Ignacio Hernández Carrero, Jaun José Vergara Oñate, Fernando G. Brun Murillo & Ángel Leon. 2018. 356 pp. UCA Press, University of Cadiz Publications Services, Spain. \$92.71. [ISBN: 978-84-9828-666-3. English translation by Alicia de Benito Harland; Spanish version ISBN number, 978-84-9828-567-3].

Long before our earliest ancestors became toolmakers and hunters, they were, by necessity, accomplished foragers. The evolution of bipedalism brought with it the ability to travel longer distances in search of food. Families and groups of primitive *Homo sapiens* would encounter coastal regions with an abundance of shellfish and seaweeds (Erlandson & Moss 2015). Availability and abundance of sustenance is a key architect of socialism and community, and today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have *Those curious and delicious seaweeds*, a book to be appreciated and shared! This ‘fascinating voyage from biology to gastronomy’, as per the subtitle, is deliciously intermingled with facts, fantasy, and amazing detail around the gastronomic applications of seaweeds. The story encompasses a couple of million years of history and evolution of the abundant marine flora growing in ‘Poseidon’s mixed garden’ (p. XVII). This Global Award-winning collaboration by researchers and many of Spain’s top chefs, together representing almost 50 Michelin stars, received the title ‘Best in the World’ in the category of Health and Nutrition at the Gourmand World Cookbooks awards in 2017. This

exemplifies the broad range of expertise and amazing creativity of the authors.

*Those curious and delicious seaweeds* was recognised as the best scientific dissemination work of 2016 within the XX<sup>th</sup> Spanish National University Publishing Awards. The book has now been shortlisted in the Translation category for the Best in the World 2019 Gourmand Awards, an event inspired by the Olympics. Objectives of the Gourmand Awards include, as quoted from the organisation’s website, are to ‘Honor those who cook with words; give an overview of World Food and Drink Culture in all its rich diversity and trends, and to find quality sources for the public, professionals and the media.’ The authors certainly excelled at cooking with words, in a most compelling way.

From beautiful illustrations of seaweed reproduction to fascinating snapshots of the history of seaweeds and their dietary uses around the world, this book has it well covered. A quotation from the novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (Jules Verne 1868), taken from an excerpt the authors included, describes the profuse complexity one encounters in an undersea forest:

I kept accidentally confusing the two kingdoms, mistaking zoo-phytes for water plants, animals for vegetables. And who hasn’t made the same blunder? Flora and fauna are so closely associated in the underwater world!

Perhaps this is why many people today feel a primordial affinity with the marine environment, an ancient familiarity buried deep within the subconscious. Seaweeds can rightfully claim a place as a fundamental food, as they co-evolved with animals, including, eventually, humans. *Those curious and delicious seaweeds* takes the reader through a procession of facts and anecdotes with a refreshing focus on creativity and the provision of science-based information. The historical evolution of seaweeds and their diverse uses around the world is a backdrop to this story extending from ‘biology to gastronomy.’ Why we eat it, when we eat it, and how we eat it are covered in fine detail, both in general, and with regard to specific seaweeds. From the vast sea garden around Spain, 20 species are each thoroughly described, including *Chondrus crispus*, *Palmaria palmata*, *Himanthalia elongata*, *Laminaria* spp., and *Caulerpa lentillifera*.

A chapter on sense perception, i.e. sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing, and the concept of flavour and mouthfeel, leads up to an introduction to phyco-gastronomy, described as ‘the art of preparing and enjoying meals where seaweeds have become an important ingredient.’ The title of chapter 9, ‘Seaweeds in *haute cuisine*’, highlights the ingredients and preparation of gastronomic works of art by first class master chefs.

It is difficult to find any constructive criticism, for this very readable 356-page collaboration appeals to not only the phycologists among us, but also to historians, biologists, and the growing ranks of food aficionados. Perhaps the statement referring to the evolution of the oxygen-producing blue-

green algae as taking place a mere 3500 million years ago could be contested, in favour of a much earlier timeline as reported by other researchers, but really, a moot point in the whole scheme of things. I personally enjoyed the clarity presented by the science, and the consolidation of global, social and cultural aspects around seaweeds. This is so much more than a book of recipes. While the growing appetite for dietary seaweeds will not always be *haute cuisine*, there is a sense that this versatile, ‘curious and delicious’ and naturally nutritious food is perfectly poised to become more a part of the standard Western diet. If Pérez-Lloréns and co-authors continue this journey, it certainly won’t take long.

In the last decade, a number of fascinating and informative books dealing with the gastronomic versatility of seaweeds have been published. These are, in part, much like *Those curious and delicious seaweeds*, an acknowledgement by the authors of the health and wellness benefits of dietary seaweeds, their versatility, and of a desire to educate the uninitiated. Books such as Prannie Rhatigan’s (2009) *Irish Seaweed Kitchen*, Mouritsen’s (2013) *Seaweeds – edible, available, and sustainable*, and *The Coastal Chef* – edited by Claudine Tinellis (2014), are further endorsements of the growing enthusiasm and interest in gastronomic applications of seaweeds. The impetus for producing these beautifully detailed and comprehensive publications stems from the profound belief that seaweeds are an ancient and fundamental food. These fine recipe compilations effectively re-introduce us to

a seemingly perpetual adventure in seaweed gastronomy. Ultimately, with thousands of edible seaweeds yet to explore, it seems the poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen (1934–2016) had it right in *Suzanne*, when he sang, ‘There are heroes in the Seaweed’. Pérez-Lloréns *et al.* show us where, why, and how to utilise them.

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