

Seaweed and eat it



Tony Coulson

MANOR's food editor gets a taste of the seashore in East Devon with **Tony Coulson**, founder of Ebb Tides. Photos by *Kyle Baker*.

Trudging across the shingle shoreline of the Jurassic Coast as the tide reaches its lowest, Tony Coulson and I wade through a cold, fast-flowing stream and clamber up onto the rocks. The East Devon coast isn't a bad office – armed with a rucksack and a pair of scissors, Tony has a special licence to hand-harvest edible seaweeds, which he markets as seaweed blends to grind into recipes.

Tony, who previously worked as a psychotherapist and has always been a keen fly fisherman, has lived in Sidmouth for almost 20 years and knows this coast intimately. Facing out to sea, we spot three visible coloured bands of seaweeds as we walk into the intertidal zone on the rocky shore: first the bright green sea lettuce, then red seaweeds such as dulse at the midshore, then at the low spring tides, the brown kelps are exposed.

Standing on the exposed rocks, looking out to the wide expanse of sea, with the red Jurassic cliffs behind, we see no other sign of human activity. "This seascape hasn't changed, and to me, it feels very primitive out here," says Tony, with his back to the town and

the tourists at the other end of the beach. "Seaweeds are primitive plants, too, they haven't changed for thousands of years. At times, it's almost a religious feeling that I get when I'm cutting the seaweed – I feel huge gratitude."

It's definitely a calm, relaxing environment to work in, although of course there are risks, ranging from being stung by a weaver fish to getting stranded and cut off as the tide comes in, so it's important to not lose track of time. "It's therapeutic just being next to the ocean – special ions are released and it's known to be good for your health and wellbeing," explains Tony.

"Thousands of years ago, when people lived in caves along this coast, shellfish and seaweed would have been their staple diet. Now, many people are going back to the simple things – you can't get food less processed than this," says Tony, as he begins to nibble at some sea lettuce, one of the vibrant green seaweeds. "I could just snack on this all day – it has all the minerals and vitamins your body requires and it's full of fibre." Perhaps that's why this sea-sourced delicacy has once again

become such a trendy superfood: it's rich in vitamins, especially B vitamins, and minerals like calcium, iron and magnesium, plus Omega-3 fatty acids, and it's a wholesome alternative to salt.

Ebb Tides is a real hunter-gatherer business model – it's natural, sustainable, and Tony is at the whim of the weather and the tides. He harvests six species of seaweeds by hand by cutting the fronds with scissors halfway down, so they regenerate quickly – some kelps can grow one metre in a day. On the beach, Tony weighs the seaweed he collects and logs the amount (perhaps 10kg of kelp on one foraging trip), species and location as part of his licence agreement with Natural England along a seven-mile stretch of coastline.

At home in his kitchen, he washes and dries the seaweed in small batches and sells it in grinders that can be put on the dining table. "I'm trying to keep away from exotic strange names," says Tony, whose mix of sea lettuce and laver is called 'sea salad'; there's also a smoky, rich, spicy dulse grinder, and bladderwrack and forest kelp are mixed for the earthier kelp grinder.

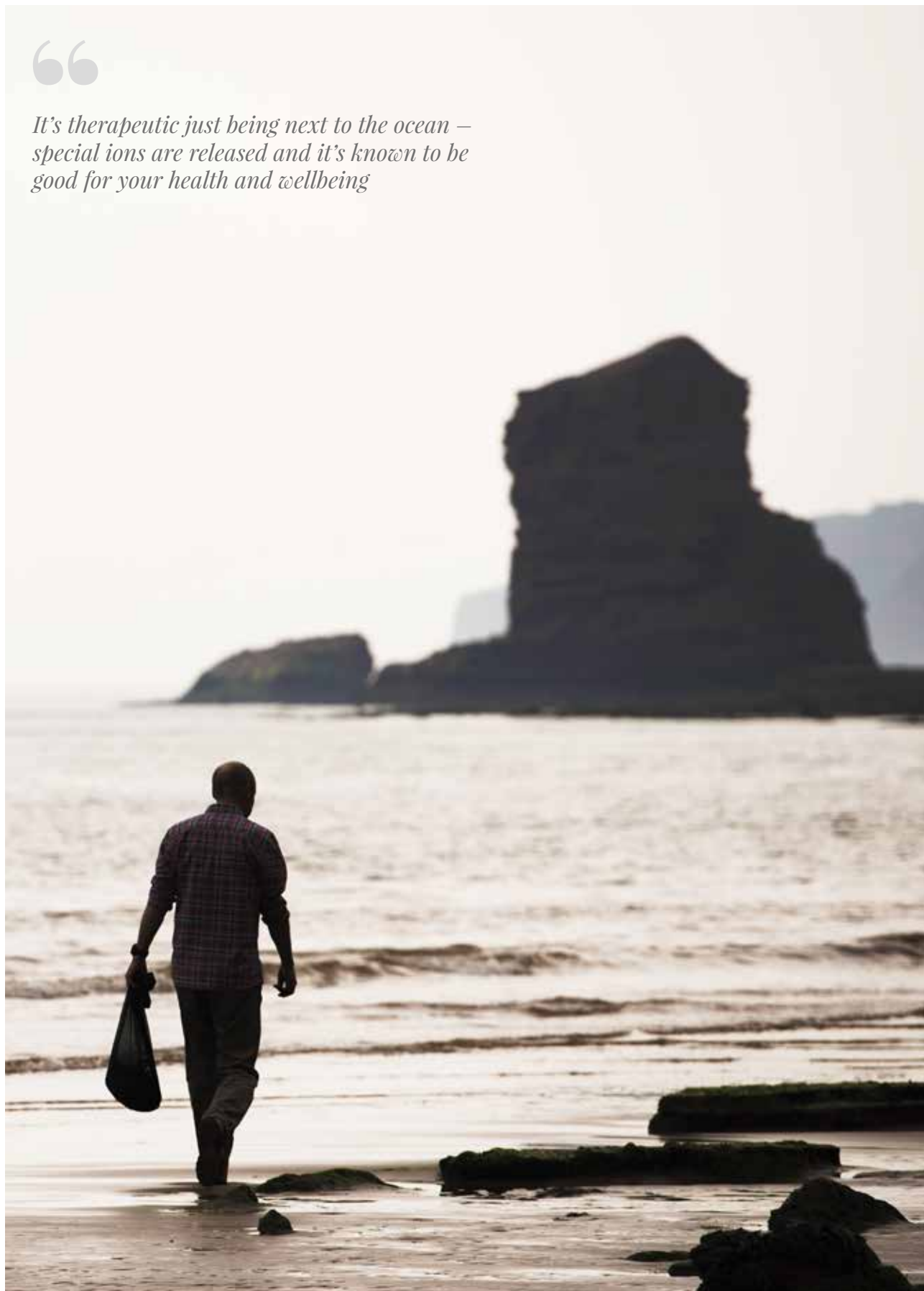
Aside from the four basic taste sensations (salty, sweet, sour and bitter), there's a fifth one, umami. This Japanese word means 'beautiful savoury taste' and can be found

in ingredients like mushrooms, tomatoes and kelps in particular. "Umami gives an extra depth of flavour and adds mystique to a dish," says Tony, who worked closely with Woolacombe-based chef Noel Corston to make Ebb Tides' seaweed blends. Noel is a big advocate for including the umami element in cookery, and seaweed is a great source of it: "So many food trends go back to nature – what tastes good and grows naturally normally outsells processed foods in the long-term," says Noel. "It's great to have hand-harvested seaweed sourced locally here in Devon on a commercial scale. From a culinary point of view, it's a natural healthy salt, and you get this umami hit, which is great for bringing meaty flavours out in veg and fish. Umami is what wraps up all the other flavours, and when it's not there, that's when you realise something's wrong about a dish."

All UK seaweeds are edible and versatile. They can be added as a garnish or condiment, or used as an ingredient in their own right. The main harvest is throughout the summer months until the end of September, when low tides allow, although some species can be harvested all year round. Tony comments that "the dulses and sea lettuce look quite advanced for this time of the year, so we're

“

It's therapeutic just being next to the ocean – special ions are released and it's known to be good for your health and wellbeing



Tony Coulson launched Ebb Tides in 2016 with three main seaweed blends: sea salad, dulse and kelp

having a good season”, although he does sometimes buy some sustainably hand-harvested seaweed in from Ireland because he just can't keep up with the demand himself. With more than 400 species in the UK alone, seaweeds are protected plants, so it shouldn't be a free for all, but next time you're on the beach, have a little taste. Just make sure you don't rip it off the rocks, always be aware of the tide, wear sturdy footwear, and don't turn your back on the sea in case bigger waves start coming in.

Tony is always on the hunt for little coves and secluded spots to forage, often at the crack of dawn, but he is ultimately limited by the tide when he's on foot: “I'm looking at getting a boat to access some of the more remote spots – that way I could get into places where I know there is seaweed but I've not yet been able to get to.” Most founders of foodie start-ups would be quite stressed as their business begins to take off with increasing demand. Not Tony – he's enjoying the slow pace of his new working life, in tune with the ebb and flow of the tides and the natural environment that surrounds him. **M**

ebbtides.co.uk

HOW TO EAT SEAWEED

Tony is always experimenting with new recipes: “I'm trying to simplify it because people often get caught up with complex Japanese recipes. It doesn't have to be difficult, I want to demystify it.” Crunch it into salads, on omelettes and frittatas, even grind it onto baked beans on toast. Add seaweed to smoothies or ice creams, eat dulse with beefburgers, or serve fish with sea lettuce, and use it to make stocks or as extra seasoning. Kelp can be added to curries: soak it and cook it, then blitz it up; it makes an incredible madras, according to Tony. Dulse can be a veggie bacon substitute; he fries it up for five seconds once it has dried a little – delicious!

In Japan, dashi stock is a staple made by drying kelp, soaking it for an hour then boiling it for half an hour. Add fish flakes (smoked trout or mackerel, for example) and noodles, and that's the basis of Japanese diets.

Tony suggests seaweed can be a substitute for your salt grinder – it's a natural salty seasoning. He also recommends making a seaweed butter as a simple way to incorporate the goodness of seaweeds into your life: “Place the softened butter in the bowl of your food mixer and add 16g of dried seaweed. Mix at low speed until the butter is an even colour and the seaweed is incorporated. Wrap the butter in greaseproof paper and leave to set in the fridge.”