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## **Celebration 2004: Seaweed contest celebrates food from the ocean**

*Marian Adams takes first-place prize*

**By CATHY BROWN**

*THE ASSOCIATED PRESS*

Rose Gerber tastes black seaweed the way some people taste wine.

"Relaxing," she says after savoring an entry in Sealaska Heritage Institute's black seaweed contest.

"That one's good for boiled fish," she declares of entry No. 2. And No. 4 is "like eating chips."

Gerber sips from a paper cup between nibbles of the dried food.

"That's another relaxing one," she says, "where you want to just sit back on the couch and just munch away."

Gerber, from Ketchikan, was one of seven people recruited to judge the black seaweed contest Friday. The contest is part of Celebration.

Roy Mitchell, a sociolinguist for Sealaska Heritage, said dried seaweed has been an important subsistence food for Southeast Alaska Natives for millennia. It's hard to know how long because its preparation would have left behind no archaeological evidence.

"It's pretty simple to process, doesn't require any specialized tools or anything," Mitchell said.

The black seaweed gathered at low tide along the beaches of Southeast Alaska is similar to nori used as a wrap in sushi, Mitchell said. The plant grows in dark green sheets, but turns black when it dries.

The first-place winner in this year's contest, 61-year-old Marian Adams, said she's been gathering the plant since she was a child. She grew up in Kake but lives in Juneau now.

Adams collects black seaweed in May and June, at very low tides, in spots she's known about for years. It clings to the rocks and grows about a foot long, she said, and you can see it glistening in the sun.



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Seaweed connoisseur: Rose Gerber, a Tlingit judge, tastes some of the black seaweed contest Friday during Celebration 2004. Gerber grew up eating black seaweed and is somewhat of a self-proclaimed connoisseur who helped judge the contest.

*David J. Sheakley /  
Juneau Empire*

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Adams tries to get enough to last the whole year.

"We have to have it. It's part of our culture and part of our food," she said. "If you don't have it, you're left high and dry and try to go buy it from somebody else that has a stash."

The seaweed has to be dried right away, or frozen if it's not a good day for drying, Adams said.

She dries hers in the sun on screens that have been fitted with sheets. She carefully picks out any shells or weeds, adds clam juice for flavoring and grinds it halfway through drying.

"Usually on a good, hot day, it'll just take a day," Adams said.

Adams' sister, Arne James, placed second. Robert George finished third. Prizes were \$500 for first place, \$250 for second and \$100 for third. Eighteen people entered the contest.

Preparation methods vary.

Julie Coburn of Kasaan, one of the judges, said she'll dry seaweed on top of the refrigerator if the weather isn't cooperating. Other people use a microwave, but Coburn doesn't think it tastes as good that way. You can also use a regular oven on low heat if necessary, but you have to take care that it doesn't burn, she said.

Other judges said they've known people to dry seaweed under a sun lamp - or even put it in a cloth bag and throw it in a clothes dryer.

Black-seaweed lovers talk about seemingly endless ways to use it - in chop suey and stir-fries, with salmon eggs or herring eggs, in stews and fish-head soup, with hamburger and pork chops, with sauteed onions, or mixed with seal oil and minced clams.

Ted Auker of Denver, Colo., spent his early years on Prince of Wales Island and remembers his mother's relatives sending down dried fish and dried seaweed after the family moved out of state.

"My mother just loved this stuff," Auker said. "She would just eat it like popcorn. She said it's Indian popcorn."