

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Alexis Nikole Nelson

JVN: Curious people, how are you, darling? I'm Jonathan Van Ness and welcome to getting curious. Oh my God. Was that so fun? It was a new intro. Oh my God. I freaked out. I did it. I went for it. OK. You guys love it. OK. I have been curious about, well...honestly, so much of the source of my curiosity is what I find on my FYP and explore pages. And one person that I found in the last few years on my TikTok—who I have become obsessed with and love and I'm so excited to get to talk to her—is Black Forager, honey. She's at Alexis Nicole on TikTok. She is like for me, she's my queen of foraging. Like I didn't really understand or really like know about foraging. I wasn't really like getting curious about foraging and then I wasn't really getting curious about foraging. But then I find Black Forager and I have been very curious ever since. Now also in that time, I kind of got into like gardening. Y'all know I got into my garden and I, and I found there was just such joy in like growing food, um eating the food that I grow. But then there's this like, interesting gorgeousness with foraging as well. But I didn't really know as much about that. And as I followed Alexis' TikTok, I have just become way more curious about foraging. Like, can I forage? Like, do I need to go out and start like, foraging for stuff? It all really came to a head with this, like pine cone syrup that she made, um, that I am obsessed with where I was like, I think I need to start doing this. Uh but also the history because I'm really curious about the way that Alexis packages history and, and talks about a history on her page. Like I'm very inspired by it. I love it. I love how she tells stories. Uh but really I'm asking and curious about today: is foraging for me? Um so honey, she's here. Let's get to our conversation. Alexis Nicole Nelson is an American Forager and cook. You probably know her on TikTok as Alexis Nicole. I'm so excited and on Instagram as Black Forager where she posts videos of her foraging finds, cooking techniques, and historical research. I was minding my own business and found her uh making these mushrooms then turning them into these like chicken finger, chicken nuggets. And I've been obsessed ever since. Oh and also her historical research in 2022 she won the inaugural James Beard Award for best social media account, James beard, beard, beard, baird beard?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Beard.

JVN: Beard! Alexis, how are you?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: I am so happy to be here. I'm well, I'm a live, alert, awake, enthusiastic.

JVN: Um also your berets are so gorgeous and also we'll just say—because all pets are welcome on this podcast—we are a podcast loving place and your dog's excited. We're excited, or your neighbor's dog is excited and it doesn't matter because we love the dog and we're just embracing.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: That's Colonel Mustard and he does not know how big or how loud he is.

JVN: Colonel Mustard. Cute name alert. Is he a small dog?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: He's actually a huge dog. He is 120 pounds of, I'm scared of everything.

JVN: It's so interesting. Our biggest, we have three dogs and our biggest dog is weirdly, our most scarest, like she is really scared of everything. But she's the only dog that is not

afraid of the vacuum. Like the other two dogs are so terrified of the vacuum and for some reason, Rose, it doesn't move a hair on her head. She does not care, but that is just what her truth is. Um but also...

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: That like makes her a dog superhero. That's amazing.

JVN: I know. We all have our strengths but also, oh my God. My ADHD no, I'm going, I can do, I want to ask you about how you became a forger or do I want to talk about foraging more broadly? I think I, I think I had that plan for later. But I think I need to know now. How did you, so you were just minding your own business and you're like, I want to start foraging? Like, how did, how did you be coming...

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Yeah, I'm just wandering through the woods.

JVN: How did you become like a TikTok star of foraging?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Oh my gosh. Well, as a lot of us do with many things, I immediately point a finger at my mother and I'm like you did this to me. So when I was probably four or five years old, I was out with my mother. She's working in her garden. I suspect that she was trying to keep me from being underfoot because four and five year olds famously do not have the motor skills to be good at gardening. And that's ok. We all have our strengths. We all have our strengths and that is just not the strength of a four or a five year old. So she sent me across the yard and it was like, you see that grass that looks different than all of the other grass, which I had never taken the time to notice before, but suddenly it was like she removed a blindfold from my eyes and I did see the grass that looked different from all of the other grass. She's like, "Go run over there, break off a handful and give it a whiff." I follow her instructions because my mother has never steered me wrong. And this overwhelming set of garlic and onions just fills up my nostrils. And I'm like, um, excuse me, what did you just send me to go get? She's like, oh, those are just, those are just onion grass. Those are yard onions. We're gonna chop them up and add them to our dinner that your dad's gonna make for us later. And I was like, stop the clock. Who was gonna tell me that there's just food hiding everywhere. I thought we had to go to the grocery store and my mom was like, what? No, there are tons of things out here that you can eat. You can eat dandelions too. And that moment set me on my trajectory.

JVN: Wait, so we're eating dandelions?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Oh, we are eating dandelions. I mean, if Whole Foods can charge you \$10 for a packet of dandelion leaves, you can absolutely go out into your front yard and just eat your own dandies for free.

JVN: Okay a penny saved is a penny earned. And it's just something that I'm really finding the more that I get older. And so that is cool. So you, so you've been foraging and like, I had a wildflower phase when I was like four or five and where I used to like make my mom pull over to like, let me pick the wildflowers. Like I just thought wildflowers were great. But food is honestly really the gift that keeps on giving and is like a little cooler. So you've just been foraging for that long.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Like, it's been almost 30 years now.

JVN: I think this is the most important question that I have when it comes to foraging. How do we make sure we won't die? Like I just, you know, I do come from the middle of America.

We got those mushrooms and my stuff. My step-sister is an aggressive shroom hunter like in the woods. Like she likes those like midwestern chantrals or whatever. And she has done the wrong kind. Not once but twice. And her and her husband were giving just like full emergency. They didn't fully emergency room, but they were just like shitting their lives away for a whole night and they still love each other and they still...

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Love is so strong.

JVN: Yeah, they still are attracted to each other after those two instances. And just from hearing about it, I was like, and I have like a strong stomach but I was like, and you relax with that. So, but yeah, how do we make sure that we're safe?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Oh, my gosh. Excellent question also, so glad that they are okay. I am 100% sure. I know exactly what mushroom they picked by accident. And those are Jack O'Lanterns and they'll get you.

JVN: It is that!

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: They'll get you and they're cool because they glow in the dark. They look like them. They're cool because they glow in the dark. Hence the name Jack O' Lanterns, but they're not cool because um they will uh make you poop more than you thought you were capable of pooping.

JVN: So because you've been foraging since you were a kid and I feel like just from following your TT like you are foraging all over, like you forage, like, like when you travel, like you'd be you're foraging. So like if America was like, well, like the like, like, like our continent, like how do like the thing, the foods change based off of like where you are? Like is like the southwest really good for like this type of thing. But the northeast honey, they got those type of things, but right in the middle, they got these types of things. Like I want to know about that.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Every part of the country kind of has specialties that you won't find in other places. Because of course, everywhere you're going to have things like your dandelions. But I was just in California and let me tell you it is cactus fruit season in the Southwest right now. I'm talking prickly pears. I'm talking barrel cactus fruit. I was having the time of my life. I made friends in Beverly Hills foraging prickly pears because there was a woman who also comes and gets her prickly pears from that garden. We chatted, we kicked. It was amazing. I started tearing up because I remembered that foraging really does help build community. And so it, it just depends here where I am in the Midwest, uh we have these trees called Paw Paws. As you may have seen...

JVN: I saw! I learned about these on your fucking page!

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Yes! And they're so cool. They're like a banana mango. They can become humongous and they're just very particular to certain parts of the country

JVN: Off the top of your head... I love that. I'm giving you so much that's not on the prep. I'm keeping you on your fucking toes.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: I love that! I'm putting my improv bones to use.

JVN: Could you tell me your top, either one or three things per area? Like, like what are your top three things from like per area that you like really love? Like I've never heard of licorice fern before. I'm just wondering if there's like other and it doesn't have to be per area if I'm

just, I mean, I'm like, I'm really like holding this bar up here. So do you just like, you know, it could be like one thing per region or three.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Oh my gosh. No, I can, I can give you a couple things per region in the Pacific Northwest where absolutely licorice fern is at the top of the list for me. One, it's a fern that climbs trees. I love that for her. They just climb up the little mossy sides of large old trees and I don't know, it's giving mystical, it's giving magical. It's giving fairy princess.

JVN: Is it purple?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: It is not purple, but there are these cute little fern fronds that just bloom right out of the moss and they're just like, Hi, hello. I'm here. It's nice to see you...

JVN: And how do you prepare them?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Oh, my gosh. Their roots have that licorice flavor. So you can use the roots to flavor dishes and even just chewing on them while you're on a hike, they taste so sweet, fresh off, fresh off the tree. Last year when I was in Oregon and I was going on a little hikearoonery on my own, I just had a little piece like hanging out of my mouth like a farmer does with a little piece of wheat feeling all good about myself.

JVN: Yes! Is it purple licorice tasting or red licorice tasting?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: It is purple licorice tasting which I know is not everybody's jam, not everybody's down with anise.

JVN: No but people really swear by it! People like it a lot.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: I love it! And it like fools your tongue into thinking you're eating something really sweet even when there's no sugar present. And I just think it's trickery should be awarded. It's a magician.

JVN: Yeah, it doesn't fool me. It don't fool me. But for the people who it does, I do think...I was over here. I was like, oh my God. A red cherry licorice flavored root. I'm in, you lost me and that's okay.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: You're like, "You got me!" And then you're like, "Oh not Twizzlers licorice and I am back out," and that's so okay.

JVN: I didn't know but you know what? I used to not like tomatoes and then I learned to like them and then I uh yeah, so I think that we do, I think that we do pick up like new tastes. Like...

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: I agree.

JVN: And I still don't like pickles. But every once in a while I look at a pickle like, and I'm like, maybe, you know.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: We gotta get you some more fun pickles. I feel like everyone's so in their cucumber pickle mindset. But you can pickle so many things and you can pickle things in so many ways. I mean, once you get into Indian cuisine, you can get into some of those like dry brined pickles. I love a mango pickle, but that's not even what we're talking about.

JVN: Ok, I do, I do, I do need to stay open. I need to stay open. Okay, what else? What else are like your things from like Southwest MVP?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Um, in the Southwest, I think that their MVP would definitely be, um, oh, this is gonna be so tough. I think I'm going to give it to barrel cactus fruit. They're really tart. I like making almost kind of like a lemonade beverage with them. They're real tasty. Like who needs lemons when you can just go and drink a couple barrel cactus fruit?

JVN: So it's kind of citrusy?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: A little citrusy. Yeah, they're really, they add a nice brightness to any dish that you add them to. I will say though, much like okra, they can also add an element of slipperiness to a dish, which if you're making a stew: amazing. But that is a thing you have to keep in mind. They also candy like a dream.

JVN: So, like a candied barrel fruit. Like little, just like a little chewy thing?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Like a little chewy snack. Yeah!

JVN: That's cute. I live in Austin, Texas. Is there like, what's our Texas stuff? Like? What are we about?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Oh my gosh, Texas has its own persimmon species. Quite literally the scientific name is *Diospyros texana*. It is the Texas persimmon. And not only...

JVN: And what do we eat that with?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Oh my gosh. You eat them on their own because they taste like candy straight off the tree. I love American persimmons. We have, we have a persimmon species up here in the midwest too. But it is not you guys'; Texas's persimmons also in a very stylish sort of way are jet black when they're ripe. And I just think that that is, I think it's cool. I think it's sexy. We love a little black dress moment.

JVN: Yes.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: And I am infinitely jealous whenever your persimmon season rolls around.

JVN: What else do we have here that's cool.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Oh my gosh. Well, if you're talking about things that you can be foraging right now, I got some intel from one of my Austin friends that your redbud trees are flowering right now. They're beautiful. There are these adorable little pink flowers all over the trees, you eat them and they're lemony. They're just like a pop of sour sweet goodness and a little pink flower. People make jelly from them, traditionally; red bud jelly. And it's amazing.

JVN: That's cool. What about Great Lakes?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Ooooo, ok, so if we're getting into the Great Lakes region, um, you will have Paw Paws around some of the lower Great Lakes. So if you're kicking it near Lake Erie, Ontario, you're still going to be in the Paw Paw neck of the woods, here in the lower Midwest. But getting up towards some of the Great Lakes heading towards the upper Midwest, you have these really cute things called like bunch berries. And it's like, it looks like

a little corsage on the forest floor with a little ring of leaves around it and just a bunch of cute little berries at the center and I'm obsessed with them.

JVN: Um and then, uh and then what about like East coast?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: So of course, on the East coast, you have your wild blueberries, you have your cranberries. Wintergreen is very abundant. Some people are like, oh, the gum flavor, yes, that's where it comes from is from wintergreen plants. I know! And the berries really do taste like wintergreen gum. A little sweet, a little minty, a little air of mystery. I love it for them.

JVN: Yes! Stays gorge. Now question: any international shout outs? Like we did it in a lot of America but like and also like I didn't ask about Hawaii like anything like just like any like special honorable mentions. Like if you ever see this, try it, you got to try it.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Oh my gosh so you mentioned Hawaii. So here in the uh the lower 48 we have a plant called Black Nightshade. It gets a whole lot of hate because people always assume that it is poisonous nightshade. It's not, it's like a sweeter cherry tomato. I'm obsessed with them. Hawaii has its own species. I'm probably going to butcher the Hawaiian name. I believe it's Popolo. Um there might be an extra poll in there, please like actually write to me and correct me if I'm wrong because I actually really do want to have this knowledge just stored away in my brain for the future. And their black nightshade berries are a little bit bigger. There's also like the historical practice of eating the greens from them too, which I don't see a lot of people doing here in the States with black nightshade. And I just think that that's really cool. I think the fact that it can also exist in and around volcanic areas, amazing, so cool. Black nightshade though also is found in parts of Africa, also found in parts of Europe. Um she's everywhere, she's a very cosmopolitan girly. The members of the uh Solanum Nigrum Complex, the group of black night shades. I love them. They're one of my favorite plants. When it volunteers in my yard, I'm so happy.

JVN: Where all have you gotten to do like Australia? Like Asia? Where all have you gotten to forage yet?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Oh, my gosh. So I was just foraging in Japan in the Japanese countryside right outside of Yamanaka Onsen this past fall. And that was amazing. First of all, very obsessed with the literal Japanese translations of so many of the different foods. Also just love that there is still a pretty strong culture of foraging in a lot of the smaller towns and the countryside areas in Japan. Like when those spring greens are coming up in the spring, it's a big to-do, to go up there with your friends and harvest some devil's club like it's, it makes me so happy and I got to try some plants that I had never gotten to before. There was like a native species of raspberry and my friend was just like, yeah, there's not even like really a specific name for this. My mentor was just like, "Oh yeah, no, that's just a berry. You can also eat." And I'm like, oh to know so many edible things that you're just like. Oh yeah, that's just like another one, whatever.

JVN: That is so cool. So you've done Japan...

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: I've done Japan. I foraged in Finland a couple of years ago during chanterelle and billberry season. So I'm just skipping through the woods with my basket and just loading up on chanterelle; billberries are their version of blueberries and they are delicious. And Finland also has a really strong like, it's part of their national identity is

going out with your family in the summer and the fall and foraging and knowing the plants that you can eat in your area. And I love that for them. I need to make it to Australia. Like I, but I know I'll essentially be starting over knowledge wise just because the plants there are so different. A bunch of our native species I know are invasive there; prickly pears are one of them. So I'd, I'd also go and help with that. I'd be like, let me take all of these guys that weren't supposed to eat this. I got it. I'll eat this. I got it. I got it.

JVN: I bet Australia has a bunch of really cool stuff.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Oh, I can only, I can only imagine it. Is it like tippy top of the foraging bucket list for me.

JVN: Is there like a ultimate Pokemon card that you've never found? Like you're like, like the ultimate foraging thing that you really want to find, but you've never found it yet.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Oooo. Hm. Ultimate Pokemon card in foraging. There—in the Pacific Ocean—is a type of edible seaweed that is iridescent blue in the light. And of course, its name is escaping me right now and I feel like I've berated everyone with too many scientific names, but I'm like, I'm going to find it. There was a spot, there was a sighting of it just outside of Malibu and I was just in California, but it was so cold that I was like, I can't get in the water. I will surely perish. I did not bring my wellies all the way out here. So you get to stay a mystery for another however long shiny blue seaweed.

JVN: Iridescent blue seaweed. Cool. Also just for our American listeners, uh, what about truffles? Like, like, are those like, historically found in, like Italy or something that people, like, come to the restaurant and they're like, oh, do you want this fresh shaver and truffle for like \$800? It's is there American truffles?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: There are American Truffles. I'm so excited that you asked me about this, Jonathan. There is an Appalachian truffle that literally was only discovered and described within like the last decade or so.

JVN: Is it the same as an Italian one like that? Same flavor?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: It has that same flavor profile, that same kind of super savory hyper umami fills up your nose. Um but they grow in like Appalachia. I was just texting one of my foraging friends, uh Jeremy who owns the restaurant Larder in Cleveland and he was like, look at all of these midwestern truffles that I just found!

JVN: And then you dig them up the same way as the pigs in Italy or whatever?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: You dig them up the same way. Yeah. They're hanging out underground. Yeah. Yeah.

JVN: And how are they made again?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: We have a couple truffle species!

JVN: Well, like, how do you know that like off the top of your head like how truffle? Like what is that. Is that? What, what, what are these little balls?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: They're just like, this is gonna sound absolutely disgusting. This is going to turn at least three people off from truffles forever. But they're just little fungus balls. They're just like before that little fungus orb really forms its spores, so it can keep

spreading, it's just like a hunk of super tasty smelling protein hanging out under the ground and they tend to associate with different tree species. So they have like a bestie that they're always growing alongside of. And you have to just know those trees to be looking out for. Some people have truffle dogs. I know someone here in the Midwest who just went all the way to Italy to adopt a truffle dog to try and you know, get into this Midwestern truffle game.

JVN: Yes! So, so truffles are because we did an episode about Mycology in like *Pride of '22* for our like *Pride in Nature* series and we learned about like...

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Yes! Because fungi are queer and I love them.

JVN: So gay. Like gay as fuck.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Yes.

JVN: Is there like...where does someone start with foraging? Like if you're like in a city or something like what like what's just some things if you're like, ok, I'm really into this. I want to try it out in my own life. Like, where would they start? Like, what's like some easy things most people could find?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: My two easy recommendations for anyone are get a guidebook that is as specific to your area as you can find. Sometimes it'll have to be a regional one. There's a series of books called *The Regional Foraging Series* for each of the sections of the US. Excellent jumping-off point. Sometimes you're really lucky and a conservation society has made a book for your area. My family in Martha's Vineyard, there's a *Martha's Vineyard Foraging Guide* that the conservation society publishes each year. So as specific as you can get and then um join a foraging Facebook group for your area. Not only will you get to make some friends who might be a little more experienced than you, might be willing to take you out with them, but just seeing the posts in real time, will start giving you an idea of what's actually in season in your area. It takes so much of the guesswork out of it and also it builds community. So those would be my two big recommendations for anyone who's just dipping their toes and just getting started.

JVN: So one thing that you do Alexis on your social that I just, I love because it's intersectional and it's like, it's, you're so good at um information as well as like storytelling. So you, you share so much about the history of, of enslavement of Indigenous Americans and the ways that these communities were systematically separated from their connection to food and land. I got to interview Doctor Britney Jock years ago um on *Getting Curious* about the ways that like the government disrupted, like um food for Native American people and like the ways that they were like separated. Um but maybe a lot of people, I mean, that was a long time ago. I could always learn more but what is that Indigenous history of foraging and what have you found in your research? And um yeah, how, what have you found in your research?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: I mean, Indigenous people here in North America have and continue to really be like the thought leaders on foraging and how to treat and how to best gather these plants that are native to the States, to Canada, to Mexico. And it really, it's always really heartbreaking looking back and seeing that the United States government was just like, well, if we take food away, nothing gets people under control faster than taking away their sources of food. Whether that was through the extreme like mass killings of bison across the middle of the country during the 1800s, or whether that is closing off swaths of

land as parks. But then saying, oh, it's, it's a park, you can't come in here and gather on land that some of these people are ancestral, that their families have been gathering the same foods on for thousands of years, which would lead you to believe that it is possible to do it without permanently altering or disrupting some of these spaces. And so what I thankfully have been finding is that in the last decade, two decades, a lot of parks, uh a lot of uh I mean, we have Deb Holland as the Secretary of the Interior right now, have been moving towards a very Indigenous inspired and Indigenous led system of conservation. You're seeing folks like the Wagon Burners up in the Pacific Northwest leading and teaching people how to do controlled burns because they know from thousands of years of Indigenous science and experience that those are the best ways to maintain some of these spaces and to keep a lot of these edible species safe and healthy and coming back year after year. So so much of the story has been heartbreak for the last 400, 500 years and I will say it does, it does give me some hope to see the tide starting to change after so much has been done to remove Indigenous people from a lot of the food ways that they taught us. A lot of the reasons why some of my enslaved ancestors in Mississippi were able to survive is because some of that knowledge was handed off from Indigenous people to enslaved Black people on plantations.

And what's an excellent way to make the scraps that you were given as a plantation you know, I don't, I wanna say worker but worker would imply that you are getting paid. Uh the way to help with those rations is by knowing how to forage, knowing how to hunt, knowing how to trap, knowing how to fish. And that was a really big knowledge exchange between Indigenous people and Black people. Uh a lot of Black people also came here with seeds with beans tucked away to be able to plant here as well. Uh there are a lot of things like okra that have now very much made their way into American cooking and have become synonymous with different aspects of American cuisine in the Southeast. And I think that exchange of information is so beautiful. It is two groups of people, both of whom have cultures that were so steeped in ritual and knowing the land and knowing the plants and animals around you. One group being taken away from where their knowledge can be applied and put somewhere new and then a group that behaved similarly being like, oh we got you, we got you like, what do you need to know? We want to help you in the ways that we can? And I think that's fantastic. Granted, of course, immediately after emancipation, uh people were like, oh time out. Uh actually, we just decided that if you don't own the land, someone else does, you are not allowed to forage there anymore. Oopsie poopsie, and those laws spread across the United States and really put Black and Indigenous people...

JVN: So there was like anti foraging laws?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Oh absolutely. So the way that they structured it is before emancipation, in the United States trespass uh was a civil offense, you might get a small fine or a warning. Whereas after emancipation and the thing is if you go and look at a lot of these documents and meetings and town hall notes, it's people specifically saying uh, "I don't want black people to be able to gather food on my land anymore. It was totally fine when they were doing all of this labor for me, they're not doing that labor for me for free anymore. And thus it is not fine." So they turn it into a criminal offense, which also funny enough, slavery was made illegal except in the case of incarcerated peoples.

JVN: Which I learned from the 13th with Ava.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Yes.

JVN: Never knew before that documentary.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Right?! That documentary...if you haven't, if you're listening and you haven't seen it before, it's a tough watch, but it's a necessary watch. And it was a way to essentially take two groups and further suppress their ability to take care of themselves and their communities and those laws spread everywhere. Uh it became a criminal offense even in the north where slavery had already been outlawed uh for decades and those laws are still in place now. Then you have the formation of park systems, both the national parks, state parks and for a lot of those spaces, they also did not want you foraging, they wanted a more hands off type of conservation. And so suddenly, if you're not a landowner, especially if you're a person of color who's not a landowner, you're like, "Well, wait a second before I could gather food in all of these places. And now you're telling me that I can't and that I could get arrested or even worse, I could get killed by going and trying to get these same pieces of food." And so it really makes sense that a lot of that knowledge fell away from different Indigenous communities and Black communities pretty quickly over the course of about half of a century. So it's, it's wild.

JVN: We got to learn from Dr Elizabeth's Rule years ago about how about the blood quantum, which I'd never heard about before or like, I had no idea what that was but like that was the government like also trying to make like distrust and like try to like make, make it so that like Native, yeah, like make it look like Native American people and Black people. Like it's like, well, if you do have kids with a Black person, well then your kid won't be able to be in the tribe and you can't like access the benefits or like the sovereignty if you aren't a citizen of the tribe.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: If you weren't a tribal citizen. Exactly.

JVN: So it really was a way to like separate, like, divide conquer...like I can't even believe that like the it's like talk about compartmentalizing. Like, I feel like I know it's like, because I mean, I think I think they still exist.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Oh, I have friends who have fractions on their tribal citizenship cards and it's, it's wild to me. Now of course, the other side of that coin is you don't want people claiming that ancestry who don't have a place to, who do not have the cultural ties were not raised within the culture, but it also feels so scary—and I'd say post-apocalyptic except it's already happening now uh—to give the government, especially the government of 100 or so years ago who famously was awful to Indigenous people the power to be like, "Oh, well, we're just going to go ahead and determine how Indigenous you are."

JVN: Yeah, because it's like if you didn't qualify or whatever 100 years ago and you got outed then...

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Oh it's, it's, it's kind of terrifying and a lot of people probably have like lost ties of their ancestry just because they didn't have a family member who happened to be on the roll when the United States government decided, "Okay, we're taking the role right now right, right now." And, and that's it. It's ughhhh.

JVN: The government really is just not doing it.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Not doing it. And even now, you have communities that are primarily Black or have been historically poor in cities that in areas that were previously red lined where we have no tree canopy. So if you were say going to be getting free food from

trees in your neighborhood, uh congratulations, you don't have them. That's just simply not even an option for you. So some of, and a lot of those areas are also food deserts. So wouldn't it have been amazing if there was at least access to some free food in addition to all of the other benefits that having a diverse amount of trees in your neighborhood brings like temperature modulation—so not having to spend as much on your heating and your cooling bills—like people, people die from communities getting too hot in the summertime, especially as the world is getting hotter. So it, it continues in a way to this day and yeah, everyone, some people get really mad when reparations get mentioned. But I'm like at this point, what other than money is going to even begin to fix the problems for our Indigenous community caused by treaties being ignored. Uh for Black folks, especially the ones who were promised things like 40 acres and a mule and got nothing.

JVN: That never happened! That's another thing I really feel like most people are like, oh, well, like these people did all of this work for free and then they were promised 40 acres and a mule. But then that didn't happen because Lincoln got shot and then fucking Jackson came in and then he like rescinded all of that. So what gives? And we did give free stuff to all the people in the West who moved out west. Didn't all those people get like free land?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Just swaths of land freshly taken from Indigenous people. So apparently some people could get land. In fact, some of that 40 acres and a mule land just ended up being given back to white farmers.

JVN: And it's like, then like Yellowstone, we romanticize it and we're like, oh my God, they had it really hard. But we don't think about like, yeah, it's sometimes when I realize that we also get a lot of North Korean propaganda, but in our own way, I'm like, oh, no!

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Right when we're like, oh, Mount Rushmore was actually a sacred place beforehand. And then we just went and carved these dudes faces into it. Oopsy. Sometimes

JVN: Sometimes I just think I'm a full Westworld robot where like sometimes the thing is so bad, like it's so it's like, I can't see it. I don't hear it. I don't even, I don't see it. Like I like, I know that's like, not the right approach but like just so that you don't...

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Sometimes you just, and we're always fighting against it, feeling numb after just being overwhelmed with all of the injustices that you know, have happened and continue to happen to people here.

JVN: Alexis, is there a foraged powdered donut? Is there a way that we could forage for powdered donuts? Like, is there just like something naturally occurring powdered donuts that we could because that's what I usually do when I get this depressed.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: Um I could tell you some things to forage with which you could make a powdered donut. So, for starters, I would start with some acorn flour because while it doesn't have the gluten that you're going to get from wheat flour, you absolutely have enough starchiness to kind of like hold a loaf of something together. So I would use some acorn flour. I would definitely use a little bit of like a yeast starter of some sort to get it nice and bubbly like you would do for a sourdough. If we were going to be putting a filling in, I am biased as the child of like a born and bred New Englander, I would want some beach plum jelly at the center of my donut. I think that that just sounds uh chef's kiss. Not too sweet, not too tart. In terms of the powdered sugar on top, you would go gather some maple

sap—which I have been doing and I'm about to go cook some down right after we're done chatting—cook it down until it gets to a sugar point. You go until it suddenly starts to crystallize into sugar chunks. Run that through a food processor or a, a coffee grinder to get it to powdered sugar consistency. Dust that on top of your doughnut, serve!

JVN: My God, I love that. So how have you like, learned so much? And then how do you take your life and your experiences and what you've learned and then put that into your social media because when your social media has blown up so much in the last few years, it's like, how do you stay connected to yourself? Like, what's um what is like your fellow like, foraging community been like on there? Like uh how do you handle like the positive, the negative, just this life that you've created? How, how has it been over these last few years?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: It's definitely a tough balancing act. And my therapist, Cynthia, she gets to hear from me all the time. Therapy is amazing. I would recommend it to...

JVN: Yeah, my girl Marty.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: I would recommend it to literally everyone trying to exist in this world that we are in right now. So that's a big part of the self care puzzle while being a person who is very online. I have to constantly remind myself that everything that I do doesn't have to be content. Uh you know, I made my really fun maple syrup video. But, you know, this afternoon, me and my friends are just gonna have a fire in the backyard, cook down some sap, maybe make some s'mores and catch up and that doesn't need to be content. That's just, you know, filling your cup, that's just community, that's just, you know, a beautiful moment and reminding myself of that helps me stay pretty even keel. Also spending time outside is always good for my mental health. So the fact that that is intrinsically linked to what my job is now is huge. It, it makes so much of a difference.

JVN: You have a cookbook coming out. When does it come out? What are your favorite recipes? When can we buy it? Tell us everything?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: I do! Oh my gosh. So we are going to be waiting just a little bit longer. We're shooting for about this time, a smidge earlier than this time next year. So people can have it in their hands and start getting ready for the spring. The recipes in it that are my favorite: I'm obsessed with the acorn bacon. I love it both from a flavor standpoint and a food science standpoint. I think it's a really cooking it... it is a really great lesson in both how starches work and how sometimes you just need to trust the process.

JVN: What's the meat of the bacon? Is it like the acorn?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: It's the acorns. You take acorn starch, you maybe mix in a little liquid, smoke some salt, a tiny dash of maple syrup. I sometimes even add a little bit of powdered mushroom powder. A little powdered puffball mushroom for extra savoriness. You make a little slurry with it. You pour it into a pan, it gets hot first, it becomes like a crepe and then you cut it into slices and then you add a tiny bit of an oil of your choosing and then it just crisps up like a piece of bacon. Uh and, you can put that on your BLTs, on your breakfast bagels. It's so surprising. And of course, you know, I, I know that it is not exactly like bacon but I'm like, but it's salty and it's savory with a tiny dash of sweet. You can make it a little bit smoky. It really does serve a lot of the same purposes on a sandwich.

JVN: I still eat meat alternatives all the time. Like, even though I'm not not vegan anymore, it so tasty. Yes, I'm into it. I'm here for, I love it and we can harm reduce like, it's like I do, I'm still naughty girl. Sometimes it doesn't have to be like, always,

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: But it doesn't have to be always. We're all just making informed decisions. We're all just trying to do the best we can.

JVN: I just had the most fun time, Alexis. Like, where can people, you're the most, you do a lot of TikTok and Instagram. You're pretty like I do even Steven on both of those.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: I do. I am, I, I try to be on both frequently. I'm on TikTok at Alexis Nikole and that is Nikole with a K, thank you mom and I am on Instagram as Black Forager because when I made that like five years ago, I didn't really see anyone else who looked like me in the foraging space. So I chose Black Forager.

JVN: Do you, well, actually before we end, um let's actually go back there for a minute. So you have like, have you has like Black Forager, I love that handle. Have you as you've been become more visible in this public figure who's really like, become like the pre-eminent like foraging queen on the socials. Um is there like, have you seen more people where you feel like you have like, because I feel like you've like really been on the forefront of like making foraging like a thing on social. Do you feel like you've made the community more diverse and noticed more people like coming into the fold?

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: I mean, I, I never want to say that it was like, just me. I like to think that we, I like to think that especially the Black community was moving in this direction, uh already before I even started posting about the weird food that I was making to save money right out of college. And I will tell you the experience that spoke to that the most for me—and I'm gonna try hard not to be like a weenie and cry about it like I normally do—but I was out foraging in one of my favorite areas of town um just under a year ago and two teenage girls, both Black, uh ran up to me and they were like, “You are the plant lady. You are the reason why I know what this plant is and this plant is and this plant is,” and I got to share some of what I was foraging with them. And I was like, oh my God and imagine if they now go and share this with like their family at home or more of their friends, like having gotten to hmmm. I am just out here trying to be, to the best of my ability, what I wish I had had more of growing up. Um because thankfully both of my parents were really outdoorsy, but I also know that for, for boomers in the Black community, like that's not the norm. I, I just got very lucky having the parents that I do and not everyone gets access to that knowledge from a young age. So I'm always out here trying to make this knowledge as accessible to as many people as possible. Uh because it really just, it opens your world up, you never know who's gonna need it either just for like, you know, the caloric of it all, you know, for the food of it all or just for feeling like the world that they exist in is a bit grander of a place than they maybe thought that it was previously. So I, I like to hope that I have helped the space diversify some, but I, I do think that it was diversifying even before I was yelling at everyone through their phone screens.

JVN: That was such a gorgeous story. And I'm so grateful that you have just brought the fullness of yourself into your work and that you share it so openly and I just have loved getting to talk to you so much. Thanks for coming on Getting Curious.

ALEXIS NIKOLE NELSON: No, thank you so much for having me, Jonathan. This has been just the peak of my week so thank you so much.

JVN: Is foraging for me? Uh I think I learned that it is! We can absolutely forage. It is also a way to like, say, fuck you capitalism and like save some money. I mean, I love a Whole Foods run just as much as the next person, but like, let's get our own dandelion leaves. Am I right? Uh also, I think if, if you have listened to this episode and you're like, "OK, I also want to forage," what I really heard Alexis say, is it like it's all about your local community? So finding what is, is um forageable in your community is really important. So whether that is through uh books and, and the most specific is possible is what I heard her say um because wild food can be approachable. It's gorgeous. Oh, but I also loved how much she talked about that foraging is about community. And that actually like really helps to build community. And I do think that like so much, so many of us are suffering from loneliness. And um I feel like when we lived in New Orleans just taking our dogs to the dog park, like it, we met so many great friends in New Orleans that really just we loved and we, you know, we go out for drinks with and go meet. And so if foraging is a way that we can meet people and get more community, I just love that. And I think that's beautiful and I think it's, it connects us to the earth and each other. So I just, I took a lot from that piece. I thought it was really beautiful. Um I think some of the most uh interesting takeaways was is that like prior to the um emancipation and the Civil War, trespassing was like a civil thing. It wasn't a criminal thing.

And so that I thought was really interesting around like when, when I thought about like looking at those orange trees as a kid, it's like, oh, you better not take one because that would be stealing. But it's like we don't have this like community oriented way of feeding people and providing for people. Um it's just like, you know, very commodified. It's mine. I grew, that was my water, that was my stuff. Um and I think that the timetable of that was really interesting also thinking about the ways that redlining affected food; like no shade canopy, like just no trees. Like we weren't really thinking about like making uh communities that were affected by redlining, like more accessible for food. So I thought that was really interesting um and devastating and also how come churches don't pay no fucking taxes? That's what I'm curious about too and do all churches and all the other countries not pay taxes? Because if so I'm starting here too for, the Church of Dick where we celebrate penis and we don't pay our taxes while we celebrate penis. And I'm also curious about, did Kim Carter or did, did Kris K really start...did you guys see that tiktok where Kris K started her own church of, of California? Did you, did they really do that? Because I think we all need to start a Church of Dick. Um OK that was a very scintillating. Are we loving the new structure of Getting Curious? You guys, I know I am um He love you guys so much. If you love this episode. How Has The US Disrupted Native American Food Sources? with Dr. Brittany Wenniserí:ioatha Jock. Great listen. Whose Land Is This Land? with Dr. Elizabeth Rule and also What Happened to the Racist Confederate Fucks After the Civil War with Doctor Eisenhower Ramirez. Uh we love you. Thanks for listening to Getting Curious. We'll see you next week. Bye.

You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. You can learn more about this week's guest and their area of expertise and the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. And honey, there's more where that came from. You can follow us on Instagram @curiouswithjvn. We are doing the most over there and it is so much fun. You can catch us here every Wednesday and also make sure to tune in every Monday for Pretty Curious! Still can't get enough? Subscribe to Extra Curious on Apple podcasts for commercial free listening and our subscription only show, Ask JVN, where we're talking sex relationships and so much more. Our theme music is Freak by Quinn. Thank you so much to her for letting us use it. Our engineer is Nathanael McClure. Getting Curious is produced by

me, Chris McClure, Julia Melfi and Allison Weiss with production support from Julie Carrillo, Anne Curry and Chad Hall.