When I heard rumors of a type of sea vegetable that, when cooked, tasted like bacon, I wanted in.

But by the time I reached out to the researchers growing it, they'd already been inundated with requests and didn't have samples to go around. As it turned out, this seaweed-bacon was already the trendiest health food around, and it hadn't even reached stores yet.

But last week I took a trip to the original source of the stuff — a fishing village in Ireland — and got a chance to taste it. Here's how it went.

Om nom nom.
The story of this tasty sea vegetable began in 2015, when researchers at Oregon State University patented a new strain of seaweed that allegedly tasted like bacon when cooked. Fisheries professor Chris Langdon came across the vegetable while trying to find a good food source for edible sea snails, or abalone, a popular food in many parts of Asia.

When Langdon's colleague, OSU business professor Chuck Toombs, caught a glimpse of the growing seaweed, Toombs suggested the veggie had "the potential for a new industry for Oregon," according to a 2015 press release.
Dillisk or dulse.
The seaweed resembles red lettuce and has twice the nutritional value of kale. It's a new type of red algae that normally grows along the coastlines of the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans.

Irish Moss and Pepper Dulse.

*Flickr/Akuppa John Wigham*
At the time OSU researchers started cultivating the plant, no American company was growing red algae — also called dillisk or dulse — for human consumption. But knowing that people in Japan and northern Europe had been eating a similar sea crop for centuries, Langdon and his team decided to commercialize it.

Seaweed salad.
As of May 2017, Langdon says a couple of small farms on the Oregon coast are successfully growing it with his help. And they're selling it to two Portland restaurants: Headwaters at the Heathman and Imperial Restaurant.
Right now, Langdon says his research team is "trying to reduce costs so that it will be more economic to grow dulse inland, away from a continuous supply of seawater."
While eating dulse might be a new concept in the US, Irish families have been cultivating it for centuries. A company called Wild Irish Sea Veg started with two products, dulse and carrageen, in a shop on Ireland's west coast. It now sells a full line of seaweed snacks worldwide.

The Talty family.

Source: Wild Irish Seaweeds

Source: Wild Irish Seaweeds
They even host what they call "Seaweed Safaris" to show people how the products get harvested, dried, cooked, and eaten.

Michael senior A.K.A "Granda Mickey" Talty at work.

Wild Irish Seaweeds
On a recent trip, I spotted one of their products at a seafood market in the village of Howth, which is a 25-minute train ride from Dublin.
The small white bag was labeled "Irish Sea Salad," and its first ingredient was dulse.
I tasted it while on a hike. It was slightly rough and required some effort to chew, but its savory, umami flavor reminded me of Japanese nori, the seaweed used in sushi. It didn't taste like bacon, but I thought it was tasty. (The fact that I was also enjoying this view didn't hurt, either.)
The next day in Belfast, I spotted a man selling small white bags of something dark and leafy. Sure enough, it was dulse. At the equivalent of $1 US dollar for two bags, I refilled my stock. This dulse was sharp, pungent, briny, and chewy. I can't say it's the best thing I've tasted, but it wasn't bad.
This stuff seems to be popular in northern Europe for good reason. In terms of upkeep, you couldn't ask for a better crop. The seaweed requires planting and harvesting, but little else. There's no fertilizer and no watering required. Plus, it grows fast — up to 6 inches a day, according to some estimates.

Source: The Washington Post
It's also environmentally friendly. Seaweed absorbs nutrients from its surroundings and filters seawater. "Planet-wise, seaweed is a clear win," writes Tamar Haspel, an oyster farmer and food columnist for the Washington Post.

Source: The Washington Post
But uncooked, dulse's flavor is slightly odd and might not appeal to people who haven't grown up eating it. It smells strongly of the sea, and a few bites were enough to satiate me for the day. Also, while it's rich in vitamin A, C, potassium, fiber, and iron, it's high in iodine, which can cause thyroid problems when eaten over-zealously.
It seems Langdon and his researchers have a challenge ahead. I'll have to try their bacon-flavored batch next.

Barbara Tasch contributed to an earlier version of this story.