

Cashing in on Morels

Wildfires bring tasty mushrooms
and spark a scramble to find them

BY BETH JUDY

In the late 1970s, Paul Lynn was fishing Rock Creek, east of Missoula. High water forced him to walk upstream in the brush. “I discovered a whole bunch of mushrooms. I didn’t know what they were.” He took some home and showed them to Kim Williams, an expert on wild food who talked about them sometimes on the radio. They were morels. That night, he ate them with his trout and a salad. Ever since, when the lilacs bloom each May, the now-retired letter carrier heads to “his” spot—no longer Rock Creek—to search for morels. Shaking a finger, he warns, “You can’t write where.”

Many Montanans like Lynn enjoy hunting mushrooms, especially morels. Spying a conical morel cap with its signature pits and ridges at the base of a dead cottonwood, in a burnt-out root hole, or even under the back porch evokes crows of triumph and shrieks of excitement and somewhere inside, a sense of wonder. What are these strange beings that look like alien brains?

Morels belong to the fungal family *Morchella*, but ask any morel expert the exact number of species and the best you’ll get is an opinion. No one knows. Charlie Hopkins, a mushroom picker and seller for 22 years, reels off a list of what he believes are subspecies. They’re named and categorized according to color, whether they grow after fire or not, the number of layers in their walls, habitat, and when they appear. ▶





Moyu Harada finds a morel mushroom in a burn area in the Flathead Valley. | Photo by Sumio Harada



Research on morels—and mushrooms in general—is sparse and difficult to do. Remember, mushrooms are neither plant nor animal. They belong to a “kingdom” of life all their own, one that is, surprisingly, more recently related evolutionarily to our kingdom, Animals, than to Plants. Those marvelous fleshy growths that we pluck (or, better, cut cleanly) from the forest floor aren’t the actual morel organism, they’re just sexual structures pushed up to disperse seed, or in this case, spores, like apples on a tree. They’re actually known as fruits, and their appearance, as fruiting. Below them, in the dirt, the true organism lies: a mass of threadlike strands of cells known as a mycelium that grows to between the size of a horse and a whale. No one knows how long one morel mycelium lives. Researchers began noticing the association of some types of morels with fire in the 1980s, when huge forest fires became more prevalent in the West. Vast “flushes” of morels appeared the spring after a fire. Where there hadn’t been a fire in 100 or 300 years, had those mycelia been waiting all that time for just that moment to fruit?

“People say cockroaches will outlast us, but when the last person dies, a mushroom will be there to eat him,” says Arley Smith, of Forest Fresh Products in Portland, Oregon.

Missoula mushroom expert Larry Evans agrees: “Fungal biology encompasses all other biology. Anything a plant or animal can produce, a mushroom can take it apart.”

Morels excel at adaptability. It’s thought that disturbance causes them to fruit, whether it’s a fire, soil compaction from a trail, or dying trees (the latter may explain why some morels reappear year after year in certain areas). Disaster! Time to reproduce! Unlike our cells, with their single nucleus, morel cells teem with up to 65 nuclei, each with potentially different mixes of genetic material. These resources may enable parents to pull, literally, from their caps, traits their offspring might need to survive drought or logging. Such complex genetics explain in part why morels stump researchers. It’s hard to tell, for example, where one mycelium ends and another begins. Two offspring growing shoulder to shoulder can be genetically distinct.

The West had always been good morel habitat, but harvesting on a commercial scale began with the 1980s fires. As snows receded in the spring, thousands of “pro pickers” converged on burned lands in Montana and other states. They are people who can walk miles a day up and down mountains, read clues in the land, and return with pounds and pounds of good-quality morels. Field buyers



This year, after 140,000 acres burned in 2007, Lolo National Forest expects up to 3,000 commercial mushroom pickers.

set up tents near the burns to purchase the pickers' fleshy, earth-colored gold. They paid cash. Today, this continues, only larger outfits like Arley Smith's Forest Fresh and the Cascade Mushroom Company in Portland use software to scout potential mushroom habitat, and the Forest Service publishes maps of burned areas online.

This year, after 140,000 acres burned in 2007, Lolo National Forest expects up to 3,000 commercial mushroom pickers. Permitting varies from forest to forest. Last year, fees in the Lolo ranged from \$20 for 7 days to \$75 for a month. Forests designate picking areas and campgrounds for commercial or personal use. It's an attempt to prevent confrontations between locals and pro pickers, many of whom also happen to be Asian or Hispanic. It also gives Forest Service personnel—including law enforcement—a chance at maintaining sanitation and control.

Why such fuss? In late winter this year, dried morels were selling for \$160 to \$240 a pound online. Fresh morels were out of season, but a pound could be pre-ordered for \$54. In

2001, after extensive fires, commercial pickers flocked to the Bitterroot National Forest. Fire management officer Rick Floch remembers, "Millions of dollars left this valley," giving the local economy a boost before they did. That summer, records show 16,888 pounds of morels were picked commercially in the Bitterroot, but the actual poundage is probably higher. Says Doreen Stokes, a Plains resident who field-bought one summer on the Flathead Reservation and in the Yaak, "No one tells you where they picked or if they have permits. And you probably don't want to know."

That summer was something of a disaster for Stokes. With a background in commercial gathering of medicinal plants, when Stokes saw an ad for morel field buyers, she figured she had a leg up. A mushroom company on the West Coast filled her bank account with six or seven thousand dollars every other day, and she set up a buying station near the forests. But she learned quickly that morels aren't just any forest product. "They're a commodity," Stokes says. Prices fluctuate daily and drop as supply rises. Several times, stuck with mushrooms she had bought over a weekend at a price the company wouldn't honor on Monday, Stokes forfeited the slim quarter per pound that was her profit. Competition between buyers was cutthroat, and pickers took advantage ▶

Facing page: Mushroom hunters scour a freshly burned forest for morels near Polebridge. | **Photo by Chuck Haney.** This page: Morel mushrooms can grow to be as big as a can of soda. | **Photo by Peggy Hamlen.**

of it. Carrying so much cash created security issues. Finally, with hollow bodies, morels dry out quickly and must be dried or shipped immediately. From the Yaak, that meant a two-hour trip late each night, one way.

Picker/buyer Charlie Hopkins warns that profit's a gamble for morel pickers, too. "There may be two or three days where you make \$1,000. But some days you make nothing and actually spend money putting gas in your tank to drive around." Doreen Stokes' field-buying summer would have been a loss without Rus Willis. Willis, who lives in Noxon, uses a modern drying facility with 40-foot wind tunnels to turn fresh morels into small lumps "as hard as golf balls" which are then scoop-shoveled into boxes and trucked away. Willis helped Stokes by drying her surplus mushrooms, then together they sat on them until the price went high. For Willis, who uses the facility for other forest products too, morel season is intense, with some trucks pulling in at midnight. This spring may be busier than ever with a 2007 burn of 99,000 acres right in his neighborhood. How the Forest Service regulates picking concerns Willis, especially a proposal to open burned areas up for bid to single mushroom companies. The companies would bring in their own pickers, depriving locals, Willis feels, of opportunity.

Charlie Hopkins has picked all over the West and into the Arctic Circle, sold morels on the street in Spain and France, had a gun pulled on him by an unbalanced fellow picker, and seen areas picked clean in minutes by company pickers. He's spent years immersed in the ecology of

mushrooms and the industry that surrounds them. He feels that Forest Service regulations are problematic in general. "They don't match how picking and morels work," he says. What happens, he asks, if one company pays top dollar for an area, then the mushrooms don't show? After all, if temperature, moisture, and if other factors aren't right they may not fruit. Nor, Hopkins says, do Forest Service officials always choose the best areas for picking or consult with people who would know. Paradigms for timber and hunting don't apply to mushrooms, Hopkins notes.

Heedless of controversy, morels go on fruiting and Montanans seek them out. Most people pan-fry them simply in butter, perhaps with salt or garlic. Lynn still loves filling his creel with morels and trout. Hopkins never grows sick of morels and reminisces about his most memorable morel feast, far from any trailhead, involving a mushroom two thirds the size of a football, a roasted grouse, parmesan and garlic. Two elder Missoulians who are also friends, Chinwon Reinhardt and Gertrud Lackshewitz, still venture into the woods in the spring. Both moved to Montana years ago from countries that prize wild mushrooms, Korea and Germany. "Morels have a noble taste," Reinhardt says.

"It's the essence of the earth," Lackshewitz agrees, with a smile and a shrug. ■



Beth Judy lives in Missoula. She also writes and voices "The Plant Detective" on Montana Public Radio.

NEW FLOORS AND TRIM RESTORING MONTANA'S OLD GROWTH.

Harvested from small-diameter Western larch trees from forest restoration projects in Montana, Treadlight™ is the beautiful, long-lasting, and environmentally responsible premium flooring, windows and trim option.

treadlight

WWW.NORTHSLOPEWOOD.COM

a movable feast.

watch videos & sldeshows, renew your subscription, buy gifts, submit your photos.

do it all on www.montanamagazine.com

It's new, It's fun & It moves.