

foraging for fungi

Exotic treasures await the intrepid hunter

BY JANET EASTMAN

imagine walking through a forest and stumbling upon a picnic basket filled with pricey matsutake mushrooms and black truffles. Now imagine it's okay to take a handful of these gourmet treats home for free. Well, the only part of this story that's not always true is the basket.

In state and federal forests in the Northwest, rare culinary fungi grow naturally. And if you know how to detect the ripe ones, you can pluck them out of the ground and make a meal that will be the envy of chefs around the world.

With their earthy, smoky flavor, capped mushrooms and their underground cousins, those nugget-like truffles, can perfume the blandest dish. In season, wild chanterelle, sorrel, porcini, and matsutake mushrooms as well as ripe black and white truffles can elevate simple country-bread toast, risotto, pasta or veggies to lofty heights. Or they can hold their own in the spotlight when paired with lobster, foie gras and other culinary stars.

Restaurants that specialize in Northwest cuisine embrace winter's



mushrooms and truffles. Jack Czarnecki and son Christopher Czarnecki find these edible delectables in fir forests in Oregon's Willamette Valley wine country. The father and son chefs have earned an international reputation for the mushroom offerings at their restaurant, The Joel Palmer House, outside of Salem. Here, they create wild mushroom beef stroganoff, black chanterelle, and molasses sauce and a soup of puréed sullies mushroom and crème fraîche. They also make all-natural Oregon White Truffle Oil (\$30 for 5 ounces) with the truffles they find.

Mushrooms and truffles pack a lot of flavor punch in mere ounces, but they are expensive. A few shavings of a black truffle can double or triple the price of a restaurant dish. Specialty markets and stores such as Far West Fungi in San Francisco sell Oregon white truffles for around \$20 an ounce and Oregon matsutake mushrooms at around \$28 a pound. Or, like the Czarneckis and so many others, you can find your own.

picking the time & place

The best way to learn to pick mushrooms and hunt for truffles hidden under forest duff is to tag along with an expert who can show you the difference between something edible and something toxic that can alter your state of mind, cause serious stomach pain or even kill you.

Unfortunately, most of the people who are good at foraging for these wild gems don't want to share their secrets. After all, nature produces only so many of these coveted treasures. In order to fruit, fungi require a symbiotic relationship with the roots of very specific and limited tree species. Climate conditions have to be right, too, as does an intense understanding by man and animals of what should be left for reproduction. One novice ripping up a patch on the verge of producing can make any hunter — from the passionate hobbyist to the commercial mushroom harvester — get territorial very fast.

John Getz — the mushroom whisperer



For those new to foraging, community colleges offer classes and there's always a lecture or two at mushroom and truffle festivals. The Oregon Truffle Festival was co-founded by Charles K. Lefevre, Ph.D., a respected mycologist and researcher. Every January for six years, this fact-filled festival has taken a serious approach to learning how to spot truffles, cultivate them, and teach a dog to find ripe ones. The Napa Truffle Festival, a weekend-long event debuting at the beginning of December, promises classes where truffles are studied — then sautéed.

Devoted mushroomers know to wear sturdy boots and long sleeves, and tuck a copy of David Arora's *All That the Rain Promises and More* guidebook or the *Field Guide to North American Truffles* by Matt Trappe, Frank Evans, and James Trappe into a pant pocket. Forest rangers, too, are a great resource. Whether you're a novice or committed forager, always check in with the rangers before you take anything from public land.

Hobbyists like Jaxon Ravens of Seattle post YouTube videos on how to find chanterelle, morel and "elusive" matsutake mushrooms. "Never eat any mushroom that hasn't been identified by an expert," Ravens advises, before explaining why he's in mountains, forests, rain, snow, and sunshine pursuing his hobby: "Mushroom hunting is a lot like hunting for Easter eggs except that you can do it all year-round and sometimes the mushrooms can be really hard, if not impossible, to find. When you find one, you get that same thrill you did as a child. You've found a unique treasure that no one else was able to find. It is also a low-cost and low-impact sport."

Ravens credits "mushroom Jedis" and members of the Puget Sound Mycological Society for sharing their insider knowledge. A list of North American mycological societies can be found at www.mykoweb.com.

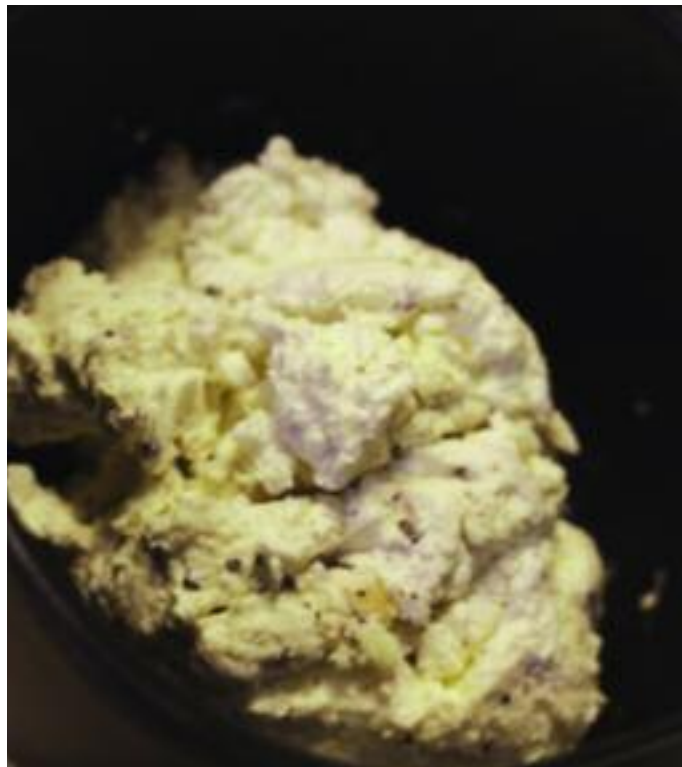
If beginners are incredibly lucky, they may meet John Michael Getz in the Oregon Dunes. He is the rare commercial picker willing to share what he knows about mushrooms if you promise to care for the rich black earth that you harvest from.

the mushroom whisperer

John Getz is patient. He can wait until the most dedicated commercial pickers have returned empty handed after scouring miles of land in the Oregon Dunes and Cascade Mountains, then walk right up to a field of matsutake mushroom mounds and fill up his sacks.

Known affectionately by the organizers of the Oregon Truffle Festival as the "mushroom whisperer," the 6-foot-tall Getz can be standing completely upright, talking about research on how fungi can save the world, and still spot something growing under a palm-size mound of moss.

What gets his attention is tension — that's when the moss appears as if a mushroom that's growing one third of its size every day for several days has suddenly spread it apart. He bends over, pats to confirm he's found a mushroom cap, digs down with two fingers halfway down the stem, pops out a white matsutake, and pats to replace the moss. He dusts dirt or sand off the "matsie," as he calls them, places it in his bags and continues his route.



fresh truffled ricotta

Chef Heidi Tunnell of Heidi Tunnell Catering Co. in Creswell, Ore., has catered to Hollywood stars at the Cannes Film Festival and food luminaries such as Julia Child. The creative chef sources from small producers around Eugene and takes full advantage of the wild edibles that pop up in the winter. A favorite is her truffle-infused Ricotta, which she will serve at the Oregon Truffle Festival's Sunday Marketplace.

Ingredients

- 1 gal whole cow's milk
- 1 pt heavy cream
- 1 cup lemon juice
- 1/2 tsp salt
- Oregon Black Truffles, roughly chopped

1. Blend the milk, cream and lemon juice on medium low heat for 45 to 50 minutes until it reaches 165° to 170°. Stir only once or twice during this time. Stirring more will break up the curds too much.

2. When there are pea-sized curds, increase the heat slightly to medium for 7 to 8 minutes or more until the temperature reaches 200° to 205°. When it is on the verge of boiling and curds are creamy, remove from heat and allow to rest for 15 minutes. Curds will settle to the bottom; whey will rise to the top.

3. Pour into a cheesecloth. Drain for 20 minutes. Add salt and refrigerate.

4. Fold in rough chopped Oregon Black Truffles. The amount depends on how "truffled" you'd like your cheese.



Getz has been doing this for so long — 25 years — he knows when to look: two weeks after a rain for porcini mushrooms, 33 days after temperatures hit below 48° for matsies. And he knows where to search among miles of pine duff and sandy dunes. He's a master at finding mushrooms still concealed by soil, foiling anyone who has to wait until the mushroom shows its white cap. He calls the above ground ones "light bulbs."

Getz looks for the telltale clues of hidden matsies: a new mound underneath a pine tree, near huckleberry bushes and allotropa, or fresh animal digs. Occasionally, a voice in his head tells him to duck under a low branch, push back the brush, and look really, really hard. That instinct pays off more often than not.

He's purchased the right to pick large quantities of mushrooms in the Siuslaw National Forest on the Oregon coast and sell them to eager buyers. So have 99 other hunters. In season, a day's work for a commercial picker could result in 100 pounds of matsutakes, chanterelles or other desirable mushrooms worth thousands of dollars.

There are stories of pros scaring off other foragers with statements about "pickers' honor" or harsher deterrents such as baseball bats. Getz shakes his head when talking about tracking someone to discover a secret producing patch. "It's like sleeping with someone else's wife," he says, shrugging a nonverbal, "But what can you do?" and moves on.

kind to the land

Getz, the master matsutake hunter, protects the patches that have been good to him. He visits them every day in the October-November season, explaining, "It's like a paper route." He keeps a mental inventory of what's produced so far compared to previous years.

Throughout the year, he works with forest management to keep off-road-vehicle routes far away from prime mushroom habitat. He produced a harvest-technique video that Oregon rangers distributed with picking permits. Getz's instructions center on the principals of minimal disturbance.

When looking for mushrooms, he doesn't stomp, but does this trick of pivoting his ankles to lessen the blow on the soft forest floor. On the dunes, he doesn't bite his toes in the sand or slide down the banks. When he crawls, he

TRUFFLE FESTIVALS

The premier North American truffle gathering, the Oregon Truffle Festival in Eugene, runs Jan. 28-30, 2011, with day-long seminars taught by leading cultivation experts and scientists, cooking classes, truffle hunts with scent-imprinted dogs and gourmet dinners with multi-truffle courses (starting at \$175 for the dinner and up to \$1,050 for a weekend package). A ticket to the truffle market is only \$15. There, 50 producers offer tastes of truffles, cheese and wine, and truffle products are for sale. www.oregontrufflefestival.com

Michelin-star chefs will tease the best out of black truffles at the new Napa Truffle Festival Dec. 10-12, 2010. There will be cooking classes, wine-and-truffle pairing seminars, truffle orchard tours, and a gourmet dinner hosted by Michelin Star Chef Ken Frank of Napa's La Toque restaurant, with courses prepared by California chefs Josiah Citrin of Santa Monica's *Mélisse*, David Kinch of Los Gatos' *Manresa*, and Nancy Oakes of San Francisco's *Boulevard*. Other chefs participating are Gabriel Kreuther of *The Modern* in New York, NY; and Sylvain Portay of *Le Louis XV* in Monte Carlo, *Mix* in Las Vegas, and *Adour* in New York. A 3-day pass with dinner is \$1,325. The dinner alone is \$475. CC www.napatrufflefestival.com

positions himself to check as much area as possible with as little movement as possible. He doesn't ever rake with his hands, which can disturb immature mushrooms or the mycelium, the branching part of the fungi that absorbs nutrients. Instead, he gently pats the ground.

When he finds a mushroom, he carefully clears away around the cap and takes a firm grip on the stem at the middle. He rocks, twists, and pulls to break the mushroom free from nurturing strands of mycelium.

Finally, he fills and covers the hole, leaving the ground as he found it. "Moss heals up very nicely when it isn't left upside down," he says, "otherwise it will decompose, changing the habitat and ground temperature due to the loss of the moss, a natural thermal moisture blanket."

His point of view: "Don't think of yourself as a mushroom picker. Think of yourself as a steward of the land."

When Getz is totally spent from working 14-hour days in the pine forest and sandy dunes, he harvests from a patch named after his wife Connie. It's just inches away from where dune day-trippers wander. But he can find a pound of matsutake mushrooms here in a few minutes. He takes them home to Connie in nearby Florence, sautés them in butter to release the distinct spicy-aromatic aroma, then eats them as is or with rice. He calls them the "ultimate vitamin" that restores him.

Then he starts his rounds again early the next day, searching for the earth's offerings. CC