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## FEATURE STORY

### Oregon's Secret Harvest

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**M**atsutake-picking has long been an autumn ritual in Japan, as apple-picking is in the United States. A Japanese-American friend who moved to the States when he was 9 says that fall days out with his family collecting matsutake remain a vivid memory. But the days he recalls are nearly gone. Over the past 100 years the red-pine forests of Japan have suffered devastating episodes of blight, which in turn have killed off the prized mushrooms that grew in the trees' shadows. Tens of thousands of forest acres have been lost. The matsutake harvest crashed, but in Japan the mushroom's scarcity only enhanced its allure and its market value. Matsutake became big business.

It is not a mushroom for everyone's taste. Dense, with the texture of a macadamia nut, its most distinctive characteristic is a smell that hints of strawberry and basil (it has in common with both the aromatic oil methyl cinnamate) combined with a whiff of aging cheese -- intoxicating to some, not altogether pleasant to others. Norwegian mycologists dubbed it *Tricholoma nauseosum*.

In Japan the matsutake is often cooked in broth or coated with soy sauce and grilled. The Japanese appetite for it is such that its rarity has led buyers to look elsewhere -- in the pine forests of Korea, China, Tibet, and the Pacific Northwest.

Without the matsutake, all of these forests would be ecologically poorer places, if they could survive at all. The matsutake, like most mushrooms, is the fruit of a fibrous fungal body that spreads through the soil. Bacteria that live on the fungus produce nitrogen by decomposing the leaves and pine needles on the forest floor. Where tree-root tips and fungus intertwine, the tree takes up nitrogen and the fungus takes up sugars that the tree has produced by photosynthesis. This web of interactions makes trees and fungus mutually dependent partners. The destruction of one will threaten the survival of the other.

A little after 8 p.m. there's some activity around the buyers' tents. With nightfall, the temperature drops quickly, and despite small space heaters the buyers work in coats. Many wear gloves.

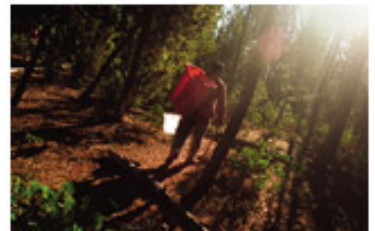


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#### ◀ SLIDESHOW

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Pickers have been arriving, but word is that the price has not yet reached last night's \$9 a pound. The pickers wait. The buyers stand idle. It's a little drama whose ending is predictable. The pickers have to sell while their mushrooms are still fresh and heavy with moisture. The buyers have to buy to get their shipments on the road to Canada. The pickers smoke and chat by their trucks, feigning nonchalance. The buyers get on their cellphones. Are they talking to Joe Chung? Or is it all a charade? Have they known all along how high they'll go per pound?

"Okay, we're going up to nine dollars," calls one of the buyers. Pickers with their baskets queue up at the tents. Others rush to their pickups to unload their take.

Terry Culp was first to come up in price. A tall, lanky, blue-eyed blond with a cowpoke's demeanor, he is suddenly very busy sorting mushrooms. Recognizing a newcomer, he proceeds to interview himself. "How long have I been in this business? This is my twenty-second year. Where do I go for mushrooms? From the Yukon to Mexico City. When did the market crash? In the mid-nineties, when they started getting mushrooms from Korea and China. Before that, in the early nineties, mushrooms could go for up to six hundred dollars a pound. I used to work for myself. Now I sell to Japanese companies. How much do we handle? A hundred ton a year."

As he talks he works quickly, sorting the mushrooms into five grades according to how tightly the cap is closed. The pickers stand by and watch carefully, since there's a difference of \$2 a pound between grades one and two, and a dollar less for each grade after that.

Culp works with the deftness of a croupier. There's little wasted motion. His sorting done, he passes each white plastic shipping box to an assistant who puts it on a butcher's scale. That assistant calls out the grade and weight, and another assistant writes it down, does a tally on a pocket calculator, gives a receipt to the picker, and deals out the cash.

In the boom time, with the Japanese willing to pay \$1,200 a pound for matsutake in the Tokyo market, a large amount of currency was changing hands. Vern Oden, a retired U.S. Marine who now monitors the harvest for the non-profit Pacific West Community Forestry Center in Taylorsville, California, recalls one picker selling a single mushroom for \$710. The trading-floor frenzy at the buying bazaar was matched by the gold-rush passions in the forest.



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Photos: Antonin Kratochvil

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