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FEATURE STORY

Oregon's Secret Harvest

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For a time in the early nineties, when the value of the matsutake soared, there was concern that the mushrooms might become more valuable than the timber. If that had been the case, says Dan Luoma, a biologist at Oregon State University, the Forest Service would have had to manage the forests for the benefit of the mushroom harvesters rather than the loggers. With loggers already feeling beset by lost jobs, telling them they were being replaced by mushroom pickers might have been the last straw. Because the price eventually crashed, this never came about, says Luoma, but the Forest Service did undertake a long-term study of the matsutake, and Luoma was one of the lead researchers on the project.

The study showed that the matsutake crop can be sustained so long as the ground isn't exposed by raking. Raked ground dries up and the mushrooms can be damaged. A good or bad season depends more on the weather than on the harvest of the previous year or years.

"Rain in September is a good sign," says Rick Bond. "In a good year there'll be four or five flushes," periods of good production. "In dry weather the flushes are smaller." He pauses, then continues with some exasperation. "The truth is, we have no idea what a normal season looks like." In his own forest he can only make a guess: "A million pounds? A million and a half? So how do we know what makes a good year or a bad year? We've never figured it out."

I return to the buyers' bazaar in Crescent Junction around 10:30 that evening and meet Koy, who's just finishing packing up crates of mushrooms. On our way to the pickers' camp she tells me that she was born in Laos, the daughter of a Thai father and Vietnamese mother, and lived in Thailand until she moved with her parents to Alabama. In her teens she moved to Eureka, California, and after coming to Oregon one year to pick mushrooms she decided that living in the forest was what she wanted to do.

The road into the campsite is dark. Silhouetted pickers move



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about campfires. Koy pulls her white van over to the side of the road. As I get out I hear a quavering contralto that trills through the chill air and resonates among the ponderosa pines. Koy escorts me across the road and through the plywood door of Peng's, the camp's ad hoc mess hall and social center. A young woman in a black parka stands holding a karaoke microphone, singing along in Thai as the words of her song run across a small television screen. Built on tall wood posts and covered with a patchwork of tarps, Peng's is spacious enough to contain an old camping trailer, two pool tables, and three long dinner tables with plastic cloths. Despite its size, the assortment of bare bulbs, the fluorescent fixtures, the plywood wainscoting, the dirt floor covered here and there with old carpeting -- or perhaps because of them all -- Peng's has a welcoming warmth. At this late hour it has the feel of a tavern approaching last call, a few regulars lingering.

Koy, clearly attending to protocol, introduces me to Peng, who, cigarette pursed between his lips, listens to her introduction in Khmer and shakes my hand. Then he returns to the card table, where he stands and deals a hand of ma-wong (a sort of Asian version of Texas hold 'em) to a few men gathered behind stacks of poker chips.

Behind the singer clouds of steam rise from woks being worked in the trailer's kitchen, and Koy orders us bowls of pork, fish, and noodles. "It's not just matsutake," she says. "Next month we go to Cape Junction" -- on the Oregon coast -- to pick black trumpet and hedgehog mushrooms. Then we go to Washington to pick chanterelles. Some years there's hundreds of us. Some years a thousand. Then we go picking in northern California. Then we break for a month."

The soup arrives with a platter of scallions and lettuce leaves and a tray full of choice chili sauces.

"Then we come back to Oregon to pick beargrass and boletus. Then to Montana to pick morels, and then huckleberries. Then we come back here for matsutake."

The higher the price for mushrooms, the more pickers come, the regulars joined by those looking for quick money. But the quick money is getting harder to find. This past fall a bumper crop of matsutake in Korea's pine forests caused the Pacific Northwest market to crash. With prices down to two to three dollars a pound, pickers quit picking. When prices remained low, many just pulled up stakes.

I wonder not that people might prefer to make their living in the forest, but that people do. Unlike migrant workers who follow the seasons from farm to farm, picking for a daily wage, the mushroom pickers work for themselves. They're forest nomads who, as nomads have for thousands of years, know how to make a living from the natural cycle of the seasons. It's a sustainable harvest that takes only the perennial produce of the forest. In this century, in this country, that seems almost miraculous.



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Photos: Antonin Kratochvil

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