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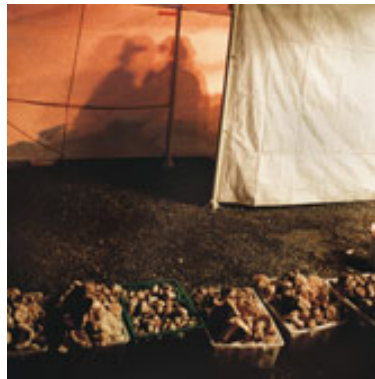
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FEATURE STORY

Oregon's Secret Harvest

by Bruce Stutz

Deep in the forests of the Pacific Northwest, matsutake and other rare mushrooms are prized delicacies -- not to mention big business.



I arrive too late. It's seven o'clock in the morning and already the mushroom pickers have bought their permits and headed up into the surrounding forests. Only a single pickup truck remains in the parking lot. When a man and woman come out of the Forest Service station in Chemult, Oregon, and approach the truck, I introduce myself and tell them I'd like to go out picking with them. The man, a middle-aged Asian with a weathered face, squints, wipes his hand across his brow, then shows me his open palm. "Fifty," he says.

"Thirty," I say, and pull out my cash.

He shakes his head.

"For gas. Fifty." He holds up five fingers.

My bargaining position is not good. He knows where the mushrooms are and how to find them, and I don't. I've collected forest mushrooms for many years but never hunted for one that couldn't be seen above the ground.

"Forty," I say.

"Good," he says quickly. "You follow me."

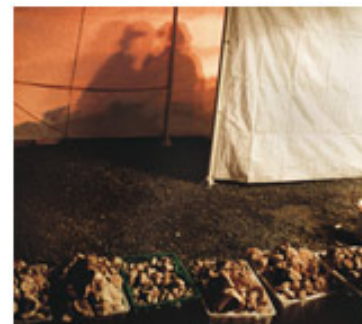


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I trail the pickup along the winding and steepening maze of dirt roads that lead up into the Deschutes National Forest until, somewhere above 5,000 feet, my guides pull off onto the narrow shoulder and park. When the road dust settles I see we're on the upper edge of a deep, forested ravine, one of several that cut through the 20-mile vista of high mountain ridges standing between us and the volcanic peak of Crater Lake. There on the road, we make our introductions. Henry Niem Saetinem and his wife, Chem, drove nearly three hours this morning from their home in northern California. Like most of the pickers who come here for the fall forest flush of matsutake mushrooms, Henry and Chem are Asian-Americans. Some of them are immigrants who came after the Vietnam War, or children of immigrants from Thailand, Vietnam, or Cambodia. Henry and Chem are Hmong people from the Cambodian mountains.

Henry lifts the back door of the truck bed cap and pulls out a couple of makeshift backpacks -- rectangular plastic wastebaskets fitted with shoulder straps. He hands one to his wife, and then each of them takes a broom-handle walking stick. From a lockbox Henry pulls out a silver 9-millimeter Luger and sticks it into his waistband. "For animals," he says simply. But I know better. Mushroom hunters began carrying sidearms years ago, when the business was far more rough-and-tumble.

We walk up into the stand of pine and moss-draped fir, trees as big around and as straight as ship masts, some 150 years old and more. Henry and Chem split up, rambling their separate ways, their eyes cast down at the dense mat of pine needles. The cool morning air is already starting to get uncomfortably warm. The clouds that blow from the Pacific onto the Oregon coast drop most of their rainfall on the west side of the Cascade Mountains. Here on the east slope there's as little precipitation as in Tucson.

I follow Chem and soon, in a little clearing, she stops and scans the ground in front of her. Noticing my gaze, she points her stick toward a small mound of forest duff, a pile of pine needles raised like a stack of iron filings lifted by a magnet. Then she points the stick at several similar mounds that form an arc a few feet long. She returns to the first, pushes the stick down a few inches into the hard gray volcanic soil, presses down as if it were a pump handle, and pries up a mushroom. She bends to pick it up, brushes off the clinging dirt with her fingertips, and hands it to me. Ivory white, a few inches long, an inch and a half across the cap, the mushroom has the heft of a golf ball. Its white cap is still closed over its bulbous stem -- a prized young specimen and the hardest to locate. Chem pries up another just like it beneath every mound to which she pointed. She drops her finds into her basket and gives out a short, high-pitched hoot to which Henry, now out of sight, responds with his own call. She smiles and nods, then bends and covers up each of the holes left by the mushrooms she removed.

After an hour or so of observing my companions, I think I've got the search image in my head, and I begin wandering on my own, looking for one of those little mounds of raised pine needles. I



poke into a few clumps of needles but come up empty, then finally find a matsutake. Like a proud student I present it to Chem, who accepts it, smiles, and hands it back. With her thumb and forefinger an inch apart she says, "Too small. No good." The pickers have to be aware of the minimum size limits that the Forest Service places on the mushrooms.

Over the next couple of hours I find a few more, and conclude that a day of this would be fun but tiring on the body as well as the eyes. A week or two, I'm certain, would be exhausting. But most of the pickers -- and nearly a thousand have paid for permits so far this season -- will remain here for a month, sometimes two, hiking each day from dawn to dusk through miles of lush but often difficult terrain where the mornings can be near freezing and the middays hot as the desert.

But there is money to be made. Mushrooms are big business. And mushrooms such as matsutake, boletus (porcini), chanterelles, and morels, which continue to resist attempts at large-scale cultivation, must be picked in the wild. For hard-core pickers such as Henry and Chem, the fall matsutake harvest is only one stop on a yearlong journey through the forests of the Pacific Northwest, where the soils, climate, and conifers produce the country's most abundant and reliable wild mushroom crop. The pickers follow the fruiting of the mushrooms. "The circuit," as it's known, will take them west across the mountains to pick and sell boletus and chanterelles and then, in the spring, north as far as Montana to pick morels. Come summer, when the soil dries up, they'll remain in the forests to gather beargrass for sale to florists, who use it for decoration, and to pick huckleberries. For these people the forest is home.

Henry tells me I can meet up with him that evening in nearby Crescent Junction, where most of the buying takes place. At dusk I head out and along the way spot roadside tents with crude signs that read, simply, "We Buy Mushrooms." Nearing Crescent Junction, I find myself behind a caravan of pickup trucks with California plates. There's darkening forest on either side of the road and then suddenly the Junction appears, the kind of place that seems to belong in a model- train setup -- a tackle and gun shop on one side of the road, a grocery and gas station on the other. The parking lot next to the grocery, however, looks like a Turkish bazaar. There are white tents lit within by bare hanging bulbs, dozens of people milling about or trying to keep warm around wood fires burning inside the steel rims of truck tires. It could be a market scene anywhere, except for the fact that the only thing being bought and sold here, being hauled in milk crates and buckets, being weighed and graded, packed and loaded, is matsutake mushrooms.

Inside the tents the buyers stand behind long folding tables stacked with white plastic crates. Despite the presence outside of a hundred pickers, most with bucketfuls of mushrooms, the buying tents are empty for now, the buyers idle.

"They're waiting for the price to move. It's only seven dollars a

pound and they're waiting for nine," a buyer tells me.

"Who sets the price?" I ask.

"Joe Chung."

At least 75 percent of the "matsis," as the buyers refer to them, end up with Joe Chung, an enigmatic Vancouver exporter about whom everyone speaks with some reverence as the man who makes or breaks the matsutake market. By phone from his Canadian lair, Joe Chung dictates prices to the buyers. Virtually all of the matsis are shipped to Japan. And the market there, where matsutake also come in from the pine forests of Asia, can be volatile.

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Bruce Stutz, former editor-in-chief of *Natural History*, became a contributing editor to *OnEarth* in the fall of 2004. He is at work on his second book, *Chasing Spring*, to be published in 2005 by Scribner's.

Photos: Antonin Kratochvil

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