



Local fungophiles hunger for morels

Last summer's burned areas may prove fertile ground for rare cash crop

written by Amy Maestas

If nature and history join forces this summer in the Missionary Ridge Fire area, mushroom lovers may be able to cash in on a delicacy sprouting from the ashes.

Morel mushrooms – a rare find in this area – could possibly appear in the fire area, creating a bumper crop of the nutty, sweet, mouthwatering fungus for fungophiles and commercial harvesters to swoop up. If they appear, it'll be the first time such a phenomenon has overtaken the forest floor of the San Juan Mountains.



Morel mushrooms, such as these, can fetch lucky mushroom hunters up to \$15 a pound. However, whether the cash crop will flourish in the wake of last summer's fires is still anybody's guess.

Many mushroom species grow wildly in Southwest Colorado. Normally, prime conditions bring them out of the ground each year. Though mushroom experts don't exactly understand the scientific reasons how and why morels grow in the wild, they at least know that the mushrooms often thrive in areas of disturbed soil. Mycologists suspect it's because of the drastic change in the soil's nitrogen.

"It's one thing about morels that always makes you wonder," says John Sir Jesse, a naturalist, mushroom expert and owner of Herb Walker Tours in Telluride. "The fire didn't bring them in, it just activates them. That means they are here all of the time, it's just that normally we don't have the right conditions."

Combine disturbed soil with warm weather and moisture, and morels will likely flourish locally for several weeks this spring. And with several thousand acres of charred landscape on Missionary Ridge, officials at the San Juan National Forest Service are preparing for a possible influx of mushroom harvesters to take advantage of the morels – if they appear.





“We don’t know for sure if it’s going to happen,” says Ann Bond, public information officer for the San Juan Public Lands Center. “But we know it’s happened in other forests after a fire, so we think it’ll happen here.”

Indeed, in 1994, a wildfire outside McCall, Idaho, spawned abundant morels. Forest Service officials there

reported that people collected “millions of dollars” worth of morels during a 56-day season. And in 2000, the mushrooms grew profusely in the Kootenai, Bitterroot, Salmon-Challis and Helena national forests of Montana and other Northwest areas, where forest fires charred hundreds of thousands of acres.

But in the arid Southwest, morels aren’t typically part of the fungus landscape. They are better suited to grow wildly in Minnesota and Michigan, or in the wetter climates of the Northwest, where the commercial harvesting is a multimillion dollar industry. People in Darby, Mont., near the Bitterroot Valley, say that after forest fires in 2001, mushroom hunters took advantage of a glut of morels, which fetched as much as \$15 per pound.

To prepare for the possible onslaught of mushroom hunters in Colorado, the Forest Service prepared a report required by the National Environmental Policy Act. The report, which will soon be available to the public, outlines how the San Juan National Forest plans to mitigate the impacts. Gretchen Fitzgerald, forester for the Pagosa Ranger District, says she received about a dozen comments from the public, mostly concerns over trespassing and soil erosion.

“It’s hard to plan for,” she says. “We’re trying to do our best to be prepared by talking to other forest districts and our regional office. We’ve taken information from them about how they’ve dealt with this in the past.”

Along with the permits each mushroom hunter must acquire, the Forest Service will give people a map of the 70,000-acre Missionary Ridge fire. The map distinguishes between private and public land so that people won’t illegally access private property. It also indicates which areas of the forest are closed or off limits to mushroom collection.

In addition, the Forest Service districts that fall within the fire acreage will increase law enforcement.

“If it really gets crazy, we’ll ask law enforcement from other districts to help us out,” Fitzgerald adds.

But because of the limited access and steep terrain of Missionary Ridge, she expects an orderly experience.

“Much of it is so inaccessible that I expect more recreational hunting than

commercial hunting. But I could be wrong,” she says. “The good thing is that the use of the land will be so scattered that we don’t expect there to be much erosion.”

However, because of unstable soil and trees, Fitzgerald admonishes fungophiles to understand the dangers of entering the burned area. Beware of flash floods, sand, ash and falling trees, she says.

Dishing it up

Despite the hazards – and guesswork about what makes morels tick – the possibility of picking a mushroom so rare in this area excites many.

“This will be a real treat if it happens,” Jesse says.

Beki Javernick, produce buyer at Durango Natural Foods, hopes that the health food store will be able to buy morels from commercial harvesters who come to pick them. DNF and other natural-food stores in Durango don’t carry morels, nor are there any local commercial mushroom harvesters who can provide them. Store produce buyers get their mushrooms from a New Mexico supplier.

“We’d love to have them,” Javernick says. “No one ever offers them to us, but if people come in and want to sell them, we’d buy them.”

Durango resident Karen Anesi has been hunting mushrooms in Southwest Colorado for more than 20 years. She’s familiar with morels because they grow on property she owns in Ohio, where she picks them. This year, in addition to her usual forays to collect boletus, Anesi hopes to gather morels on her home turf.

“I’m looking forward to it,” says Anesi.

Local food aficionados can also look forward to it. Some chefs at Durango restaurants say that if they get their hands on morels, they likely will introduce special dishes using the delicacy.

Dennis Morrisroe, executive chef at Seasons, says it’s likely that the restaurant will serve meals with locally picked morels. Perhaps, he says, he’ll serve favorite dishes such as rabbit with fava beans and morels, or a morel and prosciutto omelet.

“The rabbit is rich and gamey, the fava beans have an earthy, buttery flavor, and then the morels add a nutty taste,” Morrisroe says. “It’s one of those trios of flavor that all come together great.”

He says Seasons likely would buy morels from someone selling them.

“If not that way, then I know some cooks in the kitchen will go pick them,” he said. “Basically, we’ll get them any way we can.”

Ditto says Ken Fusco, owner of Ken & Sue's. The restaurant already uses wild chanterelles and porcinis found locally.

"Right now I don't have any specific plans for dishes, but if someone comes to us with some, we'd probably do it," Fusco says.

A guessing game

Fitzgerald explains that morels traditionally are a spring mushroom, so people who want to pick them should pay attention to the snowmelt and temperatures. She guesses that the mushrooms will appear as early as May and last possibly for four to six weeks.

"Morel hunting is one of timing," Jesse says. "Sometimes it's very specific. You can't just look at the calendar and know. One clue might be to hunt when oak leaves on the scrub oak bushes are beginning to emerge."

The mushrooms can be difficult to track at first. Jesse says that they are "elusive." He suggests hunters use guidebooks for identification – or better yet, rely on the knowledge of people who are morel connoisseurs.

"Morels are one of the best disguised mushrooms around. If you have a picture in your mind of how one looks, it'll make them easier to find."

Anesi offers her tried-and-true advice: Pay attention to the grade of the soil and the forest floor. Typically, you'll find mushrooms where there is dappled shade and trees or bark are rotting.

Mushroom experts are expecting to see black morels and yellow morels grow in the burn area. Although there are as many as a dozen varieties of morels, the conditions in the San Juan Mountains exclude all but these two. Jesse says yellow morels grow at lower elevations – 7,000 feet and below – while black morels grow higher.

But while morels are easy to find once you've gained familiarity with them, there are precautions. False morels sometimes grow in the same area as true morels. That is, what you see may not be what you get. One false morel is the Snow-Bank. Instead of being hollow and having one large chamber, he says Snow-Banks look like "brains" with lobes instead of ridges and valleys. They are stocky and stout, too.

"These you have to be careful about," Jesse explains. "They have something akin to jet fuel in them."

In short, don't swallow if it isn't hollow.

Meanwhile, as everyone waits to see if the morels will be a bumper crop or a bumper crop, fungophiles urge neophytes to learn about other mushroom species they might unearth. You just might also stumble across a hearty-capped

boletus to make a scrumptious sauce or a smooth yellowish chanterelle to add apricot flavor to your appetizer.

“It’s like a treasure hunt that is enormously special,” Anesi says

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