



CONFESSIONS of a FORAGER

*Food lover Julie H. Case spills the goods on
good gathering in the Pacific Northwest*

I'm not supposed to tell you these things. Where I find them. How I find them.

That the feral world at the edge of our civilization is spilling over with a bounty of edibles; mushrooms in so many sizes and flavors a whole menu couldn't contain them; weeds so succulent gardeners will put down trowels and seek them out. I shouldn't reveal how easy it is, once the eyes become accustomed, to recognize the telltale sign of a razor clam at the surf's edge. Foragers, like magicians, are taught to never reveal their secrets.

FURTIVE GLANCES

In mid-May, even before the snow has receded to its summer mountaintop home, before enough spring rain has fallen and the earth around the base of the cottonwood and pine trees has warmed to the typically ideal temperature for morels, my mushrooming partners—Jim and Erin—and I head east along Highway 2.

We keep the Wenatchee River to our right until just past Tumwater Canyon campground, where the forest turns to blackened pines. A wildfire licked 458 acres of these hills in 2011, and much of the native plants and ground coverings have yet to return. In addition to sandy soil and pine forests, morels thrive in disturbed soil—often appearing earlier and more abundantly than normal in areas of recent burns.

Morels are mycological chameleons. They hide in plain sight, blending in with the forest floor, grow in shades from tar black to blonde to bone white, and often resemble pinecones. Mostly, it takes intuition and the willingness to stand still, free the mind, and let the peripheral vision do the work.



The author unearthed this edible gem, a wild Oregon truffle, on an outing near Dayton, Ore.

Your eyes will sweep 20 feet of forest floor, but it's often only in the brief second after your focus shifts that you'll "see" a morel behind you. Turn back, and it's almost always there.

Even when you know exactly where they should be, finding *Morchella* is work. On this day, it takes more than an hour of hiking followed by hours of scrambling dry, 60-degree, pine needle-littered slopes before our bags begin to fill.

By the time Erin radios us to lunch, our hands are dark with dirt; our pants crisscrossed in charcoal stripes from crawling over scorched logs. Trying not to get greedy with mushrooms, Jim and I make our way across a blackened saddle and up, way up, until we emerge at the pinnacle. Below us, the Wenatchee winds. Directly across Highway 2, a capricious thread of silver blue water tumbles down a mountain's granite face.

As we relish the view and eat smoked oysters from a can, we detect something garlicky in the air. So, we tug at the nearby green stems that turn purple where they enter the rocky ground, and coax up small, white bulbs: We're surrounded by wild onions—ramps, as they're called in the south.

That night, we share ramps (sautéed with asparagus) and morels (halved, dusted in flour and fried in butter) accompanied by Oregon lamb (topped with morels which have been dry sautéed then simmered with beef broth and sherry) and Washington wine.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: PHOTO OF THE AUTHOR BY RICK DAHMS; THIS SPREAD: FORAGED FOODS BY JULIE H. CASE

URBAN ENCOUNTERS

To bide time outside of morel season, I work my Seattle-area parks and wetlands for other edibles. Foraging in Discovery Park guarantees conversation. As I harvest nettles—hands in rubber gloves—I look up in time to stop a woman from grasping the stinging plant with bare hands. I explain to others how nettles taste like the green of the forest, if you could eat the forest floor, and they are delicious. I send passersby to the Sunday Ballard Market with recipe tips (nettles sautéed with potatoes and eggs) and directions on where to find purveyor Foraged and Found Edibles. Eventually I return home, grocery bags brimming with nettles, and by evening a bowl of shockingly green vichyssoise appears in a white tureen, the forest erupting on the tongue.

SEASONAL SECRETS

Between spring and fall mushroom seasons, I'm left to forage other things. Donning diving gear in July, our group descends below the retired docks in Edmonds for a crab rodeo. We herd Dungeness, taking care, even in neoprene gloves, to avoid their viselike pinchers. We throw the females with their wide abdominal flaps back and, between barnacled pilings, we measure the males by hand to ensure they're 6.25 inches across.

In Oregon, in August, I look for snakebite holes in muddy estuaries and extract ridged cockle clams as big as my fist. I wade around sea anemones and starfish to tug mussels from the crags at Seal Rock State Park. Farther up the shoreline I gather sea olives and seaweeds in a dizzying array of shapes, then cut tiny gooseneck barnacles off rocks.

I harvest it all, clean it all, cook it all, eat it all.

By October, leather boots are exchanged for rubber. Razor clamming on the Pacific is not a passive sport.

At Grayland Beach, on a blustery evening, friends and I strap headlamps over hats, pull on rain pants, draw long rubber kitchen gloves over thin cotton ones and, kerosene lanterns in hand, high-step past dune grasses toward shore. The surf recedes, doubles on itself and recedes again. We bump clam "guns"—nearly 3-foot-long PVC tubes capped and topped with a PVC handle—against rubber boots as we chase the tide, scanning the dark wet sand.

Soon, someone drops his lantern, circles a teardrop-small hole in the sand with the open end of his clam gun and leans in. He wriggles the pipe down and at an angle, huffing as he goes, bearing full weight on the gun until the sand grows stiff and tight and his hands are inches from the beach. His thumb covers a hole on the gun's cap and he heaves until all of it emerges, then lets go, and a perfect dark core of sand forms a tail along the ground. He kicks through it, searching, then comes up clutching a perfect, eight-inch-wide razor clam.

Nearby another friend dives shoulder-deep into a rapidly filling hole to fetch another clam burrowing away.

Even though it's getting dark, the beach is dappled for miles with hundreds of tiny lights that bob like fireflies. The rain comes in sideways, but we refuse to quit until we've reached our fill, which happens somewhere around 10 p.m. Then, losing our way momentarily among the dune paths, we march the mile back to camp in boots filled with water. **■**



FINDABLE FEASTS

Only eat what you are absolutely certain you know; if you have a doubt, keep it out of your mouth. Your local mycological society, as well as the mycologist at your local university, will often be happy to help you identify mushrooms. The Puget Sound Mycological Society (psms.org), one of the largest in the nation, offers forays, mushroom identification clinics, and more. Find your local chapter on the North American Mycological Association's website (namyco.org/clubs).

Only wild onions smell like wild onions. Harvest a plant that looks like one but doesn't have the exceptionally pungent odor, and you could be dead. *All That the Rain Promises and More...* by David Arora fits perfectly in a pocket, backpack or mushroom bag, and *Mushrooms Demystified*, also by Arora, should be on every forager's bookshelf.

Mushroom harvesting rules: Unless you know the owner, it's bad form to forage on private property. State and national parks are another story. Check the PSMS rules page (psms.org/rules.php) for permit and limit information for nearly every corner of Washington; the Cascade Mycological Society (cascademycology.org) covers much of Oregon.

Visit the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife website (wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/shellfish) to find out when and where you can dig for razor clams and harvest crab and oysters along the Washington coast.

Go with a guide: Mycological societies offer regular forays, but professional outfitters such as Wild Food Adventures (wildfoodadventures.com) also offer guided clinics and day and weekend excursions in search of everything from mushrooms to mussels.

Seattle-based contributor Julie H. Case earned her MFA in creative writing from Pacific Lutheran University and has fond memories of finding her first morel at age 9.