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The lost significance of hunt and harvest

by Rich Heffern



A yellow morel (Dreamstime)

It started in the blackberry patch. As a kid one July day I was taken to an overgrown pasture outside of town where gallons of this delicious wild fruit hung, free for the taking, on thorn-bristling vines that dropped heavily toward the earth. We filled our pails with berries until our hands were stained dark blue and then hauled them home to use in pies, cobblers and homemade ice cream.

I can remember being spellbound beyond all reason, pleased that the local countryside had provided this bounteous harvest without any sowing or cultivation on our part, but just by means of its unheeded daily comings and goings: The spring rains had fallen, the June sunshine happened, and on those long July afternoons the fruit had ripened while the meadowlarks sang and the bluebirds warbled overhead.

I have never forgotten the lesson of those pastures, long since gone to shopping malls. The earth takes care of us. She provides a pantry from which we draw our daily sustenance.

I've spent some time learning to identify and cook with wild foods. It's become a kind of hobby for me.

Even in the city there are opportunities to eat off the land. In fact, at the front steps of my workplace small clumps of purslane -- an edible wild plant with small chewy leaves that can be used in salads, as a potherb or a pickle -- have been growing most of the summer out of the sidewalk's crevices. My colleagues step over it every morning to get to their offices. In a park a block away I've gathered poke and lamb's quarters, both good edibles.

Wild edible mushrooms especially have always piqued my interest. They have unique personalities and are generally not easily found, but the pursuit of morels, shaggy manes, coral and oyster mushrooms has taken me many miles down trails and country lanes.

Their hunt requires skill, patience, luck. For many, the ritual of the mushroom hunt reaches the status of a sacred activity, often veiled in secrecy, though sometimes they are just stumbled upon without effort.

On a late summer day this year my wife and I were hiking on a trail alongside soybean fields by the Marais des Cygnes River near Kansas City. It had been a wet summer and the field edges were crowded with goldenrod, asters and bowed-down sunflowers. At trail's edge ahead I spotted some large brownish lumps nearly hidden by the grasses. It was a colony of puffball mushrooms. The speckled brown surface covered a creamy white interior. I lifted the mushrooms from the earth and put them in our backpack. Soon we found more.

At home the next day we sautéed the diced puffballs along with potatoes and onions just purchased at a farmers' market, then added chicken broth, tarragon from the garden, flour and milk, making a scrumptious mushroom soup. We served it to friends who were excited -- though maybe a bit wary -- at the prospect of trying a food that could be gathered free from the countryside.

Wild food has spirit. It has genuine connections. It's local, from home. It's part of the yearly round of seasons.

For hundreds of thousands of years, our ancestors depended on the direct procurement of edible plants and animals from the wild. The activities of hunting, gathering, storing, preparing and sharing these foods are in our blood and genes. Religious celebrations blossomed from people's appreciation for the mystery and magic of fertility, and for new life, out of the maturing and dying of all life. Indeed the central ritual of Catholic Christianity is the meal, with shared bread and wine.

Thousands of years since these beginnings, our relationship to hunt and harvest has not changed, even though much else has.

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Big agribusiness and constant global availability of various foods have radically altered the diversity of the foods we eat, our perception of those foods in relation to the seasons, and our concepts of bounty and plenty. When anything is available anytime, for a price, the significance of here and now, of hunger and harvest is lost.

This separation of ourselves from where we live, from the seasons and from the hands and faces of those who grew or gathered the food we eat, causes a serious disconnect from our human center, from our history, from our bioregions, from God.

One April day several years ago we hunted the best edible mushrooms, the morels. A two- or three-week

season comes each year to the Midwest when country people have enough sense to drop whatever they are doing and head for the woods in search of these delectable inventions of the wild earth. Up early, we had been out for hours, without much luck. Just as I decided to head back for the thermos full of coffee in the truck, I caught a tantalizing glimpse out of the corner of my eye. Could it be?

Heading for the base of a sycamore tree, I saw the first mushroom -- elfin, pockmarked, and moistly fresh -- poking up through the dew-sprinkled grass. Elated, I lifted it gently from the leaf litter. As I placed it in my sack, I saw another peeking from around the side of the tree. And another. Then another. I had stumbled on a whole morel colony. Soon my bag was full, and so was my heart, with the ancient joy of the forager.

Walking back to join my friends, I felt good. If Donald Trump had offered to trade places with me, I would turn that ballyhooed billionaire down flat. Not all the money on Wall Street could begin to purchase a shred of the unalloyed joy that warbled within me.

That night the delight and excellence of the day was rekindled as we cooked up a dinner that centered on the morels. We stuffed their hollow goodness with garlic, fresh parsley, ground pepper, eggs, rice and cheese. Someone brought some good bread. We made up a salad, dressed it with lemon, olive oil and fresh mint, then uncorked a bottle of wine. Our appetites honed to an edge by a day of fresh air and exercise, that plate of food loaded with stuffed mushrooms and fresh salad was everything anyone could ever want from a dish, even in a dream.

We talked the evening away over our empty plates in that happy stew of congenial company, peppered and salted with lots of joking, laughter.

Foraging for wild foods makes me show up, pay attention to the world, and makes it easier for me to appreciate the moment. And if you ask me where I found all those mushrooms, I'll tell you ? rather vaguely.

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