

## A Serving of Wildness

By Patricia Kyritsi Howell

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For us who lead a non-wild life, rare moments of finding food in the wild can flip reality from something merely novel—looking for wild food—into an ageless human experience. A few weeks ago, early one spring morning in the mountains, after two cups of bracing black tea, I set out on foot for a bit of exercise. This usually means being dragged around the national forest at the end of a leash attached to Willie: a retired 85 lb. Black and Tan coonhound with three legs, high hopes for one last catch and an uncontrollable response to certain scents.

Half an hour later, Willie's nose zigzagged up a rise onto a level patch of sun where, a 100 years ago, had stood a house. My eyes fell onto a tan pinecone shape jutting out of the dirt. I couldn't believe my eyes. I was looking at the most prized edible fungus in North America. A foot away was another. Then another. Dozens of morel mushrooms pushed through a carpet of leaves.

Suddenly the tables turned as I frantically pulled Willie around the clearing. My fingers dived into the dirt like a child who just got lucky at an Easter egg hunt. When my pockets could hold not one more mushroom, I ran toward home. Willie kept looking back to see what must have been chasing us.

I shot inside: "Morels! I've found morels!" emptying my pockets, grabbing a basket and yelling back to the voice upstairs that I was talking about *mushrooms*, not my character. "I said that I found a lot of *morels*—('more L's')— not morals! Come help me!" I flew off the porch and back down the lane into the forest.

In case you're uninitiated in the joys of wild foods foraging, the pitted, 3-4 inches tall, incredibly delicious morel mushroom (*Morchella esculenta*) is picky about the weather. Look for it on the first sunny morning after a wet cool spell. On my way back to the house—carrying more morels than I'd ever seen, even after diligent hunting each spring—I was swept outside the realm of civilized, cultivated, hybridized eating.

For a few precious moments, I was an ordinary gatherer-hunter roaming a land abundant with wild foods that nourished my wildness. I was kin of the traditional peoples around the earth who are preserving the wisdom and skills needed to harvest genuinely wild food: certainly not fast food, but simple to gather. Usually all foragers need are a sharp knife, patience and plenty of time.

Most urbanized North Americans view as ridiculous the idea of spending an hour or two collecting enough wild greens to make a meal. Yet, isn't it a little odd to spend several hours a day working indoors earning money to buy non-wild food while spending "free" time outdoors trying to get rid of wild, edible plants in lawns, gardens or cracks in the sidewalk?

The common disdain for edible outlaws—who live proudly outside the confines of manicured, cultivated spaces—results from a thorough and deliberate campaign by the commercial food industry. This bizarre, yet effective, propaganda poisons our natural relationship with the plants we eat.

Brainwashed to fear foods that grow freely in the wild, most of us think we're safer eating freaks of nature: mutant plants that only survive in artificially manipulated growing conditions. The

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In contrast, most species of wild edibles are direct descendants of plant families that have bravely maintained their species' integrity for thousands of years. Morels, in particular, defy commercial attempts to tame them. In addition to nutrition and taste, wild foods offer an adventure into literally tasting our unpredictable and unknown heritage as wild beings.

For supper, I washed and split the morels down the center and dropped the bowl full into a skillet of sizzling butter. Hollow, they cooked in a few minutes. Knowing how rare they are, that this could be the last time I'd experience them, I savored every bite. A taste vaguely reminiscent of fresh pecans, slightly roasted, filled volumes in the library of the senses.

The next day, we struggled to find words for the pleasant woodsyness that lingered in our mouths. We failed to find words for another sensation: an unaccustomed euphoria that had spread through our bodies for hours after we ate the morels. One thing became clear: an old, deep, unspoken hunger had been fed.

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