

Bountiful crop of morels hiding in the Lake Tahoe Basin

By Kathryn Reed

Bring a knife and a canvas bag. Meet in the Mikasa parking lot.

If a friend hadn't emailed this message, I might have been alarmed.

Friday the 13th turned out to be my lucky day. My first day to forage for morel mushrooms. Kim had been telling me about her escapades in Lake Tahoe and Alaska, but I had never been party to any of the expeditions until last week.



Harvesting a morel on the South Shore.
Photos/Kathryn Reed

I wasn't even sure I knew what a morel looked like. I just know they are expensive. Some years they cost \$100 a pound. At the Ferry Building in San Francisco on Sunday they were selling for \$36 a pound.

Morels fetch such a high price because they cannot be grown like a crop. They are in the wild, usually found in burn areas

and in land that has been disturbed by logging or for some other reason. And the growing season is rather short.

In Lake Tahoe these shrooms with their honeycomb caps are most prevalent in May. But they are like chameleons in how they hide under logs, blend with the shades of brown dirt and don't seem to like direct sunlight.

U.S. Forest Service employees and firefighters are said to know when morels are in season because they are in the woods and have been to burn sites – controlled or otherwise. (I'm not allowed to reveal exactly where we began our forage.)

Any type of wild mushroom hunting can be dangerous because there are so many lethal ones. In fact, false morels are poisonous. And real morels should never be eaten raw. I don't recommend picking any kind of mushroom without someone experienced by your side.

Kim swears by the book "All that the Rain Promises and More" by David Arora. Her pocket guide to Western mushrooms is well used.

She first started foraging for mushrooms while living in Alaska.

"There are so many edible mushrooms there you can't not notice them," Kim said. She and friends would cook them in just about anything.

There is much lore that surrounds the morel. Some say only the chosen are able to find them. Gatherers often don't speak to one another while in the woods. In some ways, this mushroom foraging cult is a bit underground.

Our first morel sighting is about 25 feet from our vehicle. We keep walking. Kim drops to her knees. And suddenly it's like a veil has been lifted from the ground as several morels reveal themselves.

With our Swiss army knives, we cut off the stems and put the mushrooms into our canvas bag. Kim has a special morel knife that on one end is a brush to get rid of the dirt. It also allows you to measure the mushroom.



Kim with her special morel knife.

Photo/Provided

We have a good bounty – about a pound in less than an hour.

Back at my house we take the stems off, wash the mushrooms in cold water, dry them with paper towel and get out the butter and wine. The butter is for cooking, the wine for drinking.

It only takes a few minutes for the morels to get a little crispy. What a dinner.

They are a bit nutty in flavor. Definitely fattening with the butter. But so rich, delicious and addicting.

With the bigger morels, Kim suggests filling them with Gruyere cheese, coating them with olive oil and grilling.

When she has more than she can use, she dries them, stores them in a Mason jar and uses them until the next season in pastas, risotto and omelets.

Morels like warm days and cold nights. Time will tell if the recent snow will hurt the harvest.

In late summer Kim is out hunting for porcini mushrooms. These

delectables show up when the Sierra has had plenty of thunderstorms.

Mesick, Mich., claims to be the mushroom capital of the United States. For 51 years it has had a festival devoted to the fungi.

A county in Kansas is calling 2011 an exceptional year for morels.

I'm hoping to say the same for Lake Tahoe. I'm ready for my next expedition.

ngg_shortcode_0_placeholder (Click on photos to enlarge.)