

Hunters prowling the woods for late King Bolete harvest

By Kathryn Reed

A secret handshake isn't part of the initiation process, but being sworn to secrecy and the threat of bodily harm if the secret is betrayed were all part of the indoctrination process.

Welcome to the world of King Bolete.

As with all edibles this year, the harvest is late – even for these mushrooms. Better known as porcini, especially in their dried form, these shrooms are still being plucked from the forest floor in the Lake Tahoe Basin.



A basket of King Bolete found in Tahoe in October.
Photos/Kathryn Reed

So secretive is this foraging business, I'm neither allowed to say who I was with nor where we went. I can say she is a teacher in Lake Tahoe Unified and that we were near a body of water on the South Shore that wasn't Lake Tahoe.

Different theories abound regarding where they grow and the

best time to find them. My teacher likes going out at the break of day before school. I don't do mornings well so we went after school.

These mushrooms, which look nothing like the morels I was introduced to in May, are much larger, found in different areas and are not cooked the same.

King Bolete tend to grow near water, in the woods. Some say they will be near where snow plants have been. Some say the best hunting is near a full moon. I'm a believer in that scenario having gone out this month during the week of the full moon.

Most everyone, though, says moisture is key. It had just snowed, so the ground was still wet as we traipsed in the woods near a creek. When Tahoe gets thunderstorms in the summer the King Bolete are apt to show themselves shortly afterward.

They often hide. The tops blend into the terrain. Sometimes they are hidden in tufts of pine needles.

Once one is found, start walking in a line from there in all directions because they grow in a line – sometimes several feet apart.



Smaller, younger King Bolete are best to saute.

I've been told not to take ones that are near a rusted can or a poisonous mushroom.

A single Bolete can weigh several pounds. Dried, they can cost about \$8 for a couple ounces in a store. It can take 10 pounds of fresh mushrooms to get a half-pound of dried, according to Gary Ottoboni.

Ottoboni, his brother and parents are part-time neighbors of my friend who is introducing me to the King Bolete. They are the ones who taught her to be a shroom hunter and how to "put them up".

June Ottoboni uses a combination of boiled vinegar, cloves, peppers, cinnamon, and garlic to give them a pickled flavor.

Many people sauté them. Others grill them with olive oil and a little pepper.

Drying is the most common form so they can be used throughout the winter in soups, risottos and various Italian dishes.

Just before I called, Gary Ottoboni had sautéed some King Bolete to add to pesto.

"You have to sauté the young ones. The big ones you can only dry," Ottoboni instructed this rookie. "You sauté them in olive oil and very little butter so the pan doesn't get too hot. Add garlic and parsley. The secret is you squeeze a little lemon."

There were other secrets to cooking the King this way, something about when to put the lid on, but I'm afraid of telling too many secrets.

The word "cult" comes to mind after talking to long-time shroomers.

Because mushrooms don't have seeds – they have spores – they can't be a row crop. Instead, they grow in the wild. This is

why they are so expensive.