

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.

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The great California caviar rush

By Stinson Carter, Wall Street Journal

On a breezy April afternoon in the grassy delta flatlands of Galt, fins and tails were churning the waters inside raised tanks the size of above-ground swimming pools.

The bellies of the 100-pound, six-foot-long sturgeon of the Fishery aquaculture farm were white, their vacuum cleaner-nozzle mouths toothless and slightly be-whiskered. The fish have shark-like skin. Down their wide flanks run reptilian spikes, called "scutes," ancient prototypes of fish scales. They are brutal in appearance, ugly even, living fossils from a prehistoric evolutionary crossroads.

Sturgeon – Acipenseridae – have outlived whatever killed the dinosaurs. They've survived everything in the past 250 million

years, only now to fall prey to man's desire for their clusters of glistening roe. Their eggs sell for as much as \$270 per ounce in gourmet shops world-wide, and garnish the \$50 entrees of white-tablecloth plates everywhere.

Caviar—the other black gold—sublimely salty, sweet, earthy, an acquired taste, to be sure, and pleasant to the eye, has been a delicacy of khans, tsars, monarchs and aristocracy for millennia. But in the past decade the market for wild sturgeon caviar—the crème de la crème of the delicacy—has been wracked by poachers, smugglers, polluted waters and the threat of extinction for the most prized of the world's 27 sturgeon species, those producing wild beluga caviar.

Besides protecting endangered sturgeon, import bans on Caspian Sea caviar have another upside. They created an opportunity for a group of entrepreneurial biologists and fish farmers in California's Central Valley region, where cattle ranches have given way to sturgeon farms. Now domestic roe farmers have birthed a sustainable caviar industry, winning over, however reticently, the collective palate of the haute-cuisine stratosphere. And greenmarket grocery chains such as Whole Foods Market have dropped Caspian Sea caviar mainstays for the sustainable domestic brands.

Read the whole story

Hard Rock helping to fill Bread & Broth's shelves

Hard Rock International is turning 40 years old. As part of the milestone, Hard Rock will host 40 Days That Rock, where Hard Rock Cafes around the world will host local-market

events, concerts and promotions for rockers of all ages.

This month, Hard Rock's 40 Days That Rock will kick off in cities around the world, including Lake Tahoe, with Hard Rock Cafe Lake Tahoe's "40,000 pounds of Food in 40 Days" event. Beginning May 18, Hard Rock Cafe Lake Tahoe will partner with Bread & Broth; an all-volunteer program in South Lake Tahoe that provides hot, well-balanced meals to those in need; to help collect 40,000 pounds of food in 40 days.

Non-perishable donations will be accepted at the Hard Rock. To thank its loyal guests, Hard Rock Cafe Lake Tahoe will offer a 20 percent same day discount off food, non-alcoholic beverage and retail at Hard Rock Cafe to all who donate.

Monetary donations for Bread & Broth will also be accepted in the cafe and will be recorded at 4 pounds for each \$1 donated conversion.

Hard Rock Lake Tahoe is inside Harveys at Stateline.

Countdown to Fair Play Wine Festival

The artisan winemaking families of Fair Play are putting on the 27th Annual Fair Play Wine Festival June 4-5 from 11am to 5pm.

The 17 participating wineries are planning festivities, including gourmet fare paired with Fair Play wines, live music, barrel tasting, art, demonstrations, wine specials, and much more.

Participating in the festival are Busby Cellars, Cantiga

Wineworks, Chateau Routon, Colibri Ridge, DK Cellars, Fitzpatrick Winery, Granite Springs, Iverson Vineyards, Latcham Vineyards, Mellowood Vineyards, Mount Aukum, Oakstone, Perry Creek, Sierra Oaks, Single Leaf, Skinner Vineyards, and Toogood.

In addition to access to all of the festivities on both days, participants will receive a complimentary souvenir glass and a VINGO playing card. Prizes will be awarded for the completion of your card.

Tickets are \$20 online, \$15 at participating tasting rooms, and \$20 at the door.

2 El Dorado County vintners to showcase wine in D.C.

By Chris Macias, Sacramento Bee

The nation's capital will soon get a taste of some wines from the Sacramento area. Two El Dorado County wineries, Crystal Basin Cellars and Holly's Hill, are among the vintners being featured at a sustainable seafood symposium set for June 7-10 at the Smithsonian.

Billed as "sustainable, biodynamic American Rhônes," the sold-out event features two dozen wineries from across the country. The bulk come from California, especially Paso Robles and the Central Coast, though El Dorado County's reputation continues to grow as a sweet spot for Rhône varietals, like a bit of southern France in the Sierra Foothills.



Grapes from El Dorado County vines will be showcased at a Washington, D.C., food symposium.
Photo/LTN file

While Holly's Hill specializes in syrah, Crystal Basin Cellars will pour its 2008 Roumanier (\$20), an equal-parts blend of roussanne, viognier and marsanne. Crystal Basin will also feature its 2008 Mourvèdre (\$27), which nabbed a "best of class" award at the 2010 California State Fair Commercial Wine Competition.

There's just one slight snag in this trip to Washington, D.C. Crystal Basin founder Mike Owen can't make the trip.

When he's not running the winery, Owen works as the chief fiscal officer of health services for El Dorado County. Budget meetings in early June will keep Owen close to home, so his wife, Melissa, a co-owner and tasting room manager, will make the trip on behalf of the winery.

Read the whole story

TV chef to lead cooking classes in Reno

By Johnathan L. Wright, Reno Gazette-Journal

It would be hard to imagine Sara Moulton, the celebrated television chef and cookbook author, garnishing her culinary instruction with staccato exclamations, cutesy nicknames or frat boy gestures familiar from Facebook.

Sara – Bam! – Moulton? No. Definitely not.

But Moulton's style – approachable, knowledgeable, cheery without being cheesy – has served her (and her readers and viewers) well through three Food Network shows and "Sara's Weeknight Meals" – now on public television – 20 years as executive chef of Gourmet, her current gig as food editor of "Good Morning America" and through the creation of three cookbooks.

On May 20 and 21, Moulton will appear at Nothing to It! Culinary Center to promote her latest book, "Sara Moulton's Everyday Family Dinners" (2010, Simon & Schuster), a finalist for best family cookbook in the International Association of Culinary Professionals 2010 awards competition.

She'll lead a hands-on cooking class on May 20 in which students will prepare dinner with her.

Read the whole story

Herbs good for cooking, health

By Geralda Miller, Reno Gazette-Journal

The sun is shining, the temperature is climbing and the snow melts on Peavine.

Gardeners are eager to get outside and plant flowers and vegetables.

Don't forget about herbs, local herbalists and regional plant experts said.

"The high desert is an ideal place to grow herbs," said Tom Stille, owner of the River School Farm in northwest Reno. "Find a place that is close to your kitchen door that has nice sun. Not only put in kitchen plants, but also, that would be a great place to grow your herbs."

Lisa Rojas, an herbalist who plans to open an apothecary and massage supply store in Reno in July, said herbs do more than enhance your favorite culinary dishes and are vital for good health.

"I believe herbs are medicine," she said. "I believe that our medicine is our food. It brings life to our food and into our bodies."

Botanist Evert Broderick and herbalist Kim Powers recently taught a course at Truckee Meadows Community College called, "Practical Herbology" and have initiated a yearlong certificate of herbal studies program, which begins in the fall.

The couple will be talking about making edible and medicinal herbal landscapes on Saturday at Moana Nursery.

Read the whole story

Tahoe restaurant looking for summer cocktail contestants

Calling all bartenders and elixir aficionados – Lake Tahoe’s West Shore Café & Inn will kick off summer 2011 with the Spirit of the West Shore cocktail competition May 28.

Those who have a must-try drink that’s perfect for sipping on warm summer days are invited to submit their recipes for consideration by May 13. The top 10 recipe submitters will be invited to the West Shore Café & Inn May 28 to prepare their thirst-quenchers for a panel of taste-testing judges. The judges’ favorite will be deemed West Shore Café & Inn’s signature cocktail.

The winner receives bragging rights and a 2011-12 season pass to Alpine Meadows and Homewood Mountain resorts. Recipe submissions may be entered online.

Rib festival in Truckee a bit of a throw down

A broad cross-section of the regional culinary scene will throw down the competitive gauntlet at the second annual Truckee RibFest slated for Father’s Day, June 19, at Citizens Bank Plaza from 1-6pm.

Those participating in this good-natured grudge match include Men Wielding Fire Fine Food Catering, PlumpJack Café, Sunnyside Restaurant, Smokey's Kitchen, Char Pit, Six Peaks Grille, and Truckee Pizza, which will offer some kid-friendly options.

Last year an estimated 500 people got their oink on at the inaugural event.

Event organizers have lined up a number of excellent caterers and restaurants that will offer their own creative variations on ribs. The event will feature judging by industry professionals for best ribs in addition to a People's Choice award.

A beer garden, children's activity area, free entertainment and more will round out the festivities.

Truckee High School Boosters Club was selected to be the event's nonprofit beneficiary.

Adult admission is \$12 in advance and \$15 on the day of the event. Admission includes entry, plus two food tickets. Each two-rib sampler costs two tickets. Sides can be purchased for one ticket. Admission for children 12 and under is \$10 in advance and \$12 on the day of the event. Children's tickets include entry, access to a fun activity center, plus one special food ticket that can be redeemed for hot dogs, pizza and other kid-friendly options. Additional food tickets are available at \$5 for two tickets.

For more information or tickets go online.

The Truckee RibFest is a fundraising event produced by Switchback Public Relations + Marketing Inc. For more information, call (530) 550.2252.

Feds catching up with California food safety standards

By Michael Doyle, McClatchy News Service

WASHINGTON – California lettuce and spinach producers are now closer to their goal of unifying farm safety standards nationwide.

Five years after E. coli-contaminated spinach sickened hundreds and killed three, the Agriculture Department on Friday formally proposed a “leafy greens marketing agreement” that would essentially extend California’s leafy greens regulatory system nationwide.

“This ... provides an opportunity for farmers, handlers and retailers of all sizes to work together and develop a practical program,” Deputy Agriculture Secretary Kathleen Merrigan said.

Governed by a 26-member board, including as many as seven handlers and producers from California, the marketing agreement would set binding standards on everyone who signed up. These would include recordkeeping, soil testing and field sanitation requirements, among others.

The existing California Leafy Green Marketing Agreement, put in place after the 2006 E. coli outbreak, covers nearly all of the lettuce and spinach produced in the state.

Read the whole story