



## ARE WE LOVING OUR MORELS TO DEATH?

By Theresa & John Maybrier

This time of year most people aren't thinking about morels, the conversations around the water cooler will inevitably be centered on the HOT weather. Some people don't mind the heat after all it is summer, others just can't take it. The farmers' markets are just really getting into full swing with sweet corn, berries and even some real tomatoes. I love summer food! So fresh and healthy, but where are the mushrooms? Mushrooms fall into a food group that absolutely cannot take the heat!

We just got back from picking in Washington and Idaho. Based on what we experienced and what we observed I would say the total harvest would be down again this year. We hunted in the higher elevations where it was cool (65 to 70 degrees)...but by the time we headed down the mountain (100 degrees) to sell them, they wilted.

The professional pickers are always grumbling about something but this year I heard something that was not typ-

ical. They were all complaining of over harvesting, that is, not giving the mushrooms a chance to grow and create batches of bigger morels. Why the sudden concern for the morels that most of them take for granted? Usually there are large enough forest fires or several large fires that the commercial pickers and buying stations have a chance to spread out. This season's crop is based on last summer's forest fires. Last summer in the Northwest there seemed to be a lot of wildfires or forest fires. Unfortunately for the commercial pickers, the fires were mostly in Wilderness Areas, which are protected. This forced the states of Idaho and Montana to "close" their forests for commercial harvest.

What's a mushroomer to do? Well, in Idaho the possession limit for personal use was a limit of ten gallons per household. In Montana you could harvest five gallons per person as long as all the mushrooms harvested were cut in half lengthwise. The professional pickers were now limited to hunt in Washington and Oregon, where there were some

"good burns" but there weren't any real big fires. The camps were full and competition was very much an issue. Normally, there is no way to cover all the burned areas, with some burned areas producing better than others. I would hang around the buyer's tents when the guys (and girls) came in to check out the quality of the mushrooms and to see if they were finding any different varieties, like grays and yellows but most all the morels brought in were conicas (burn morel mushrooms similar to black morels). If you think getting a spot from your buddies is tough, it was almost comical to hear someone even ask. And if they do tell you, are you really going to believe them?

Even though the harvest wasn't great, the quality was. The prices were pretty good, anywhere from \$5.00 to \$7.50 a pound. It was rumored that some buyers paid \$12.00 but we couldn't confirm that price from any of the regular buyers I deal with. I have hunted with the same Asian group now for the past three seasons and they believe with more pickers and less land to hunt they are definitely noticing the numbers of pounds picked decreasing. Does this sound kind of familiar?

I observed the mushrooms coming in every night and thought how strange it was that the size of the morels were practically the same, no big ones! The buyers thought it was sort of odd also. I believe the cool nighttime temperatures had a lot to do with it. Additionally, with good pickers in a confined area the morels never had a chance to get big. A

pro-picker will leave the small ones and come back in a few days. Not this time! With such fierce competition and so little area someone was always just behind you to pick it.

The same was true in Michigan this last season. I noticed how this one particular area (a well known secret spot) was just getting hammered and how the hunters were taking everything they could find. I was pleased to see most hunters were carrying mesh bags.

I am more concerned every year that as we all become better hunters (and more of us) that we are depleting our morel population. It seems everyone agrees that there used to be more morels in the good old days. Is it because more of the morels are being picked so fewer spores is left in the woods to do its job?

Do I think you should leave some for the next season? That's what the mesh bag is for, to let the spore do its job of repopulating the forests with morels. I do think you should leave the ones that are too small to really be edible and to leave the older ones behind as well.

Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois and Indiana, Kentucky, Minnesota and Wisconsin all had a pretty good harvest. These states had the right rains in the month prior to morel season as well as during the season. These fortunate places had beautiful large morels in almost every variety. For the areas that missed out... there is always next year.

Have a great summer!

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