

Morels in Eastern Tibet

by Daniel Winkler

WE WERE DRIVING up a rough and bumpy road to get to the Caterpillar fungus collecting grounds above treeline. As we wound our way through dense primeval fir–spruce forests, the narrow ravine opened to reveal five Tibetan women, all wearing green Mao caps, brewing a pot of tea right at the edge of the road. Not your average spot for a cup of tea! I wasn't surprised—Tibetans love to brew their salty butter tea whenever they take a rest. But why were these women brewing tea out here, in the middle of nowhere?

I noticed the bulging bags sitting on the ground near the women. Did we hit the jackpot? Were these bags full of morels? After all, we had come so far to look for caterpillar fungus—morels were another day's agenda on our MushRoaming tour. Just the evening before, our guest-housekeeper's daughter had brought home a bag of *Khukhu shamo*, as she called morels. I asked the roadside tea party if they had any *Khukhu shamo*. It turned out they had been collecting morels; with a big smile, one of the women showed me her load of black morels. Each of them had collected several pounds, and they were finished for the day. They had been at it for eight hours and were hoping to catch a ride down to their village.

Morchella bicostata



I was surprised that there were no men with them. Mushroom hunts are often family affairs. Losang Yangzom, the woman who had shown me her haul, told me that their men were still in the mountains above looking for *Yartsa gunbu* (caterpillar fungus). The women had remained at home on their farms, minding their children and milking the yak cows. They were making some extra cash by picking morels. Local buyers pay around CN¥ 130 for one kilogram (nearly US\$7 per pound) of fresh morels, whereas the daily wage for unskilled hard labor is ¥40 (\$6).

The morel price in the Tibetan areas of Yunnan was much higher than in more remote areas of the Tibetan Plateau—where, I was told, it was only around ¥70 per kg. The discrepancy could be explained by proximity to Kunming, from where most of China's wild edible mushrooms are being exported. Also, European buyers have been active in East Tibet for the past few years. In mushroom markets in

mushroom markets in Shangrila (formerly Gyalthang or Zhongdian, Dechen Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, NW Yunnan), Kunming, and Chengdu, dried morels have been offered for ¥1400–1600 per kg (US\$ 94 to 107 per pound).

Morel prices in the Tibetan areas compare favorably to prices in North America. In Tibet, morels trade for about ten times the value of other edible mushrooms that are not exported. The morel trade is a phenomenon of a globalized market; it exemplifies the reach of globalization into the most remote valleys of the Tibetan hinterland. This fungal sourcing started in the mid-1990s. Affluent European households have since feasted on their beloved “Morcheln” and

“morelles,” often without knowing where they were actually collected. Although the income derived from morel picking does not compare to that earned from collecting caterpillar fungus (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*) or matsutake (*Tricholoma matsutake*) (see Winkler, 2008), morels do contribute significantly to family cash income in some areas of rural Tibet.

Tibetans call morels *Khukhu shamo*, “the cuckoo mushroom” because the time the morel fruits coincides with the cuckoo bird’s return to Tibet, in the spring. The cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*), of course, is named for its unique call. It is an iconic bird in Tibet—a symbol of spring, rejuvenation, and romance. There are many references to cuckoos in Tibetan songs and poems—most notably a famous Tibetan Buddhist text from the eighth century, *The Cuckoo of Rigpa* (*Rig pa’i khu byug*), Rigpa being the innate primordial awareness of the mind. However, morels themselves cannot claim iconic status in Tibet, even among mushrooms. In some areas of East Tibet, they were not known to be edible; in Kongpo, by contrast, they have been enjoyed for generations (see Winkler, 2007).

Once they were commoditized, knowledge of their edibility spread quickly. Buyers from export companies taught local people and buyers when and where to collect morels. Several species are collected in the Tibetan areas. Most common are *Morchella elata*, *M. conica*, and *M. esculenta*, but there are also reports of *M. angusticeps* and *M. crassipes* (Mao et al., 1993). However, just like in North America, morel taxonomy is still in flux in Asia. Interestingly, on the mushroom market in Shangrila, Dr. Yu Fuqiang, co-author of a pocket guide on mushrooms in Yunnan (Wang et al., 2004), pointed out to us the newly described, double-ridged, flesh-colored *Morchella bicostata* (Chen & Liu, 2005).

In general, morels fruit in spring and early summer. Morels start to appear in lower elevations (i.e. 2500 m [7800 ft], which is about as low as it gets in Tibet) in April and fruit as late as July or even August at higher-altitude sites—some at over 4200 m (13,000 ft). (For comparison, the treeline is some 500 m higher.) The main morel flush coincides with the fruiting of *Yartsa gunbu*.

With the help of a Tibetan friend, we found some *yartsa gunbu* the day after meeting the morel women, but we wanted to find some morels ourselves. A snowstorm had just covered the alpine *yartsa gunbu* grounds, so we headed for lower ground. We went to Hong village, located at 3000m (9900 ft), nearly 1000 m above the Dza Chu or Mekong River. We were informed that *Khukhu shamo* had already peaked in May. The season was basically over, but a few might still be growing higher up.

We followed our guides, Losang (the local healer) and his friend Wangdu, on a small path beyond the village, passing a farmhouse with an all-new solar-heated bathhouse financed by fungal income. We walked through pine-oak forests that boasted a few Yunnan Douglas firs (*Pseudotsuga forrestii*), then followed a gushing creek fed by fresh snowmelt and completely shaded



by tall spruces and firs. The ground was densely clad in a soft, luxurious layer of moss. Little brown mushrooms abounded. Everything was so verdant, it reminded me of hiking up a ravine in a coastal Pacific Northwest conifer rainforest, but thickets of *Fargesia* arrow bamboo added a distinctly East Asian element. We had a hard time keeping up with our light-footed guides. Low oxygen and picture-taking in this enchanted forest conspired to slow us down!

We left the ravine and climbed a steep forested slope, its ground covered by four-foot-tall *Rodgersia pinnata* plants. We used them to pull ourselves up the slope. Meanwhile, Losang had run ahead to look for morels, while Wangdu stayed with us slow pokes, making sure we will get to the morel site at some point. Eventually, we heard a loud hollering far up the slope. When we caught up with Losang (half an hour later), he proudly produced a small black morel. We knew we secured a delicious dinner.

References:

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