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← NEIGHBORS IN THE NEWS THIS WEEK (see inside) →



MUSHROOM HARVESTING



Table Mountain morels attract swarms of pickers

by Jim Fossett
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CLE ELUM - Eight U.S. Forest Service visitor centers in Washington sold over 1,300 commercial mushroom permits in the 91 days between April 1 and July 1.

Although estimates of

the harvest from Table Mountain vary depending on which of the buyers you talk to, in general it's said a seasoned picker averages 20 pounds per day. One buyer said to see 500-700 pounds at the scale is considered a good day.

Although those numbers can't be confirmed, if they are correct that translates into a decent if short-lived livelihood for pickers at \$10 to \$15 a pound.

The catch: To make good money you've got to be a strong-backed individual willing to hike the high country from dawn to dusk in all kinds of weather.

"I made \$450 in a few hours, but I know what I'm doing. One time I made \$265 in two hours," smiled Guatemala native **Sal Mateo** as he held up a five-

inch morel, large in Table Mountain terms compared to the thousands of smaller ones showing up on commercial drying beds here.

Mateo and others say pickers are paid varying rates depending on the buyer, and what buyers get from wholesalers varies on the networks buyers have struggled to develop.

Said **Justine Tina Chow**, an assistant buyer working out of a tent near Blewett Pass, "My boss has been in the business for 28 years. When he broke off on his own three years ago to become a buyer it took him a long time to build up a [reliable] network of wholesalers."

Since this story was written, it's said the number of buyers in the region has increased to as many as 12.

MIEN MOND TURNS MOREL MUSHROOMS at the Blewett Pass buyer's camp every two hours on two kinds of drying beds employed: wood-framed screens and tarps. A large five-inch Morel (inset) shows the size in comparison to a human hand.

N.K.C. TRIBUNE/Jim Fossett photo - 2013

On a typical day what's the drill?

Locally, pickers line up at the USFS Cle Elum District Ranger Station Monday through Friday before the doors open at eight.

"It's been hectic," said Public Information Officer **Nancy Jones**. "We've sold over 1,000 permits from April 1 through July 11, a lot more than our seven other offices. We have eight total in the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest, but Naches hasn't sold a one."

Jones said 10% of those were \$100 seasonal permits and the rest split between \$20 four-day permits and \$50 30-day permits.

"We've been seeing a lot of the same people and, yes, because of the Table Mountain and Taylor Bridge wildland fires last fall this rates as a first time experience for us."

According to Chow, who

says she won't accept mushrooms from pickers if they come to her without a permit, the average day on the mountain runs anywhere between eight and 12 hours.

"Pickers travel on foot between three and ten miles a day," she said. "We start seeing them at the scale in the early afternoon."

How many pickers are on Table Mountain at any given time? The answer to that question is that accurate estimates are unavailable.

A couple weekends ago there were over 40 cars counted at Table Mountain with as many tents set up at various campgrounds. Chow said depending on the day of the week there are ten to 15 families camping on the site her boss leased.

According to Chow, the average age of the pickers she deals with ranges between 20 and 40-something,

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...but to see elders in their 60s and 70s isn't unusual.

Some pickers said they were out to make a few dollars, others said they just wanted to be alone with Mother Nature by themselves or with family and friends.

"It's nice to work without a padrone (boss) hanging over me," grinned Mateo.

How does a commercial picker conduct a hunt?

"It depends," Mateo said. "I usually go back and forth tracking upwards. I look for mushroom stumps as a sign an area has been picked over, then [I adjust my course.]

"Mushrooms like shade and some pine needles on the ground, so I look for those spots.

"I found a five-inch morel in a hollow created when a [tree burned, uprooted and fell]. But where you find them varies. There's no [set formula]."

How do pickers get through a day heavy with heat and thick with mosquitoes?

"I'm out there picking 12 hours a day," said one man. "Heat and mosquitoes don't bother me.

"I carry a five-gallon bucket and two 16-ounce bottles of water. Usually in the morning I have a cupcake or something and through the day maybe a piece of candy to keep me going. That's all the food I need. I take a break now and then when I get tired, and at night I have a good dinner," he grinned.

As far as trail food is con-

cerned, other pickers seem to be doing it up.

At noon on Saturday, June 8, an elderly group of pickers returned to their Table Mountain camp for rounds of vegetable-rich noodle soup and tea.

Back at Chow's weigh station, afternoons are when she goes to work at the scale.

"Pickers usually bring their mushrooms to me in five-gallon buckets.

"I [cull] the ones I can't use, weigh and pay - and then we put them on plastic tarps or [wood-framed] screens for drying, turning them with a rake every two hours.

"The weather's been good for drying. It usually takes a day and a half to get them to where we want them. At first sign of rain we move them to cover. We use fan-heaters to keep them from molding.

"As a rule we fly mushrooms to our buyers from Sea-Tac Airport - that's the fresh morels. For dried morels we use ground FedEx®.

"Lately we've been getting a little over a hundred dollars a pound, which sounds like a lot, but the money doesn't go far after we pay for lease space and other expenses.

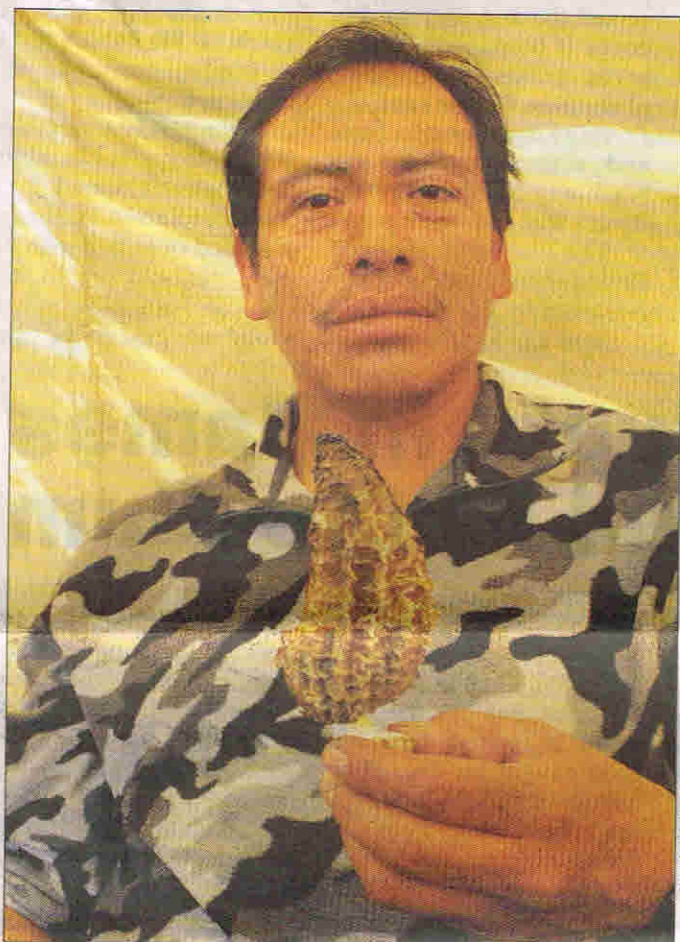
"Still, I love what I do. I grew up in a mountain village and I prefer to be outdoors," she smiled. "And we serve a purpose, helping the local economy. Our landlord is happy and I know a lot of our pickers are finding their ways to local restaurants and supermarkets. We're good for business!"



WHAT A MOREL MUSHROOM LOOKS LIKE, though they aren't always very big and for the most part require a trained eye to locate.



MOREL PICKERS HAVE BEEN LINING UP every morning at eight o'clock at the U.S. Forest Service District Ranger's Headquarters in Cle Elum - to get their mushroom permits. Forest service personnel have been putting in two extra hours a day, until 7:00 p.m., just to process the paperwork.



SAL MATEO holds a five-inch morel he said he found at Table Mountain, in the hollow created and overgrown when a tree ravaged by the fire last fall collapsed.



Recipe
Queen Anita Pardini on Cooking Morels
 Pioneer Days Queen Anita Pardini, 96, cooks on a secondhand Monarch, of the kind Admiral Richard Byrd chose for his second and third explorations of the South Pole. Asked how'd she prepare fresh morels, she laughed, "I'm not gonna tell you. No. It's really simple. Mix a little oil, butter, salt n' pepper, garlic and chopped onions in a frying pan and then throw in fresh morels. Dried morels soaked in water are good in sauces and omelets."

Photo essay by
Jim Fossett



TABLE MOUNTAIN has been home to commercial pickers since early April, though things are slowing down, morel buyers say.