

FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN

The Secrets of Burn Morel Hunters

Langdon Cook

The author of The Mushroom Hunters: On the Trail of an Underground America reports from the fire-scorched corners of the Pacific Northwest on the competitive business of harvesting burn morels.

On September 9, 2012, a lightning storm exploded over Washington State, igniting scores of wildfires in the tinder-dry North Cascades. A few of the fires merged into the Table Mountain complex near Blewett Pass, a two-hour drive east of Seattle, burning nearly 45,000 acres before containment.

Jeremy Faber had his eye on the conflagration. Like so many mushroom hunters across western North America, he is a firewatcher. He pays

close attention to the blazes that rip through montane woodlands west of the hundredth meridian each summer, bookmarking pages on Inciweb (the U.S. Forest Service's online incident management system) and even filing away dispatches from small town newspapers about minor fires that never get noticed by the national press. Fire-watching fungiphiles such as Faber know that morels will often fruit in eye-popping numbers in the spring following a burn, for reasons that are not well understood.

But Faber didn't have plans to pick the Table Mountain fire. He was hoping all the other commercial mushroom pickers and buyers with whom he competes for business would be drawn to Table, like moths to a flame, leaving him plenty of room to

work below the radar.

Faber is owner and proprietor of Foraged and Found Edibles in Seattle. Since 2001, he's been selling fresh wild foods, many of which he picks himself, to restaurants and farmer's market patrons. The month of June is an important moneymaker for Faber. That's typically when burn morels are at their height, and he needs to be on top of the latest scuttlebutt about locations and access to the best producing burns. He drives all over Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, and even into the remote backcountry of Canada to find the motherlode, sometimes on only a whisper from a trusted source.

I had my eye on Table too. Like many recreational mushroom pickers in the Seattle area, I was salivating at a chance

Below: Jeremy Faber of Foraged and Found Edibles picks a Washington State burn.





Astro van for a new Prius wagon to save on gas and remain inconspicuous (“Fifty miles to the gallon,” he crowed. “I can fit 600 pounds of mushrooms in the back and no one knows it’s me!”). We drove together on country byways, turning on a gravel logging road, and finally onto a rough jeep track. It was a clear sunny day, but the burn—hidden by a dense bottomland of old-growth timber—was nowhere in sight. This pleased Faber. He muscled his already dented Prius up the jeep track, moved a downed maple tree out of the way (replacing it across the track as soon as

Hem clenched tightly in his teeth, Faber uses his shirt when the bucket is out of reach.

to pick a huge burn close to home. The fact that the burn came right down to the road, for easy access, made it attractive, too. One evening in early spring, I met Faber in a bar armed with all my fire maps and big ideas. In typical fashion, he punctured my hopes right away.

“Table is a joke,” he said in his blunt way. (Faber is a New Yorker by birth and temperament.) “A big burn right off the highway? Gimme a break. Every out-of-work mushroom picker will be there, and it won’t even get good until July, when snow melts off the top.” Faber started reeling off the names of tiny, lesser known fires around the Pacific Northwest and told me to get more adventurous.

His prediction proved eerily correct. As early as mid-May, professional pickers were camped on all sides of the Table Mountain burn, waiting. The morels had hardly shown because most of the “quality ground,” as Faber calls the higher elevation grand fir forest that can be so productive, was still cold. Even so, by Memorial Day the area was drawing hundreds of recreational pickers from Puget Sound’s cities, and the commercial guys, needing cash, started hitting it hard as well. All this pressure resulted



Closeup of a fresh burn morel, called “conica” in the industry.

in a massacre of immature, thumb-sized morels and a stampede of killing footprints across virtually every square inch of scorched forest that was snow-free. In a burn where commercial pickers hoped to harvest fifty or more pounds a day, the best among them were maybe getting a couple buckets. Many decamped for Idaho, where another over-crowded morel carnival was in progress.

Yet, according to Faber, there was no reason to leave the state. He invited me to scout a much smaller burn an hour to the north of Table where, as far as he could tell, no one had been. We met at a gas station near Lake Wenatchee. I was surprised to see he had traded his usual four-wheel-drive

we had passed), and pulled into a little opening in the woods. A cool, shaded creek ran by a few yards down the hillside, a perfect place to store crates of morels during the heat of the day—if there were any to be had.

He didn’t waste time. I followed Faber on foot up an avalanche chute that had carved a semi-navigable path through these nearly impenetrable woods. We clambered over devil’s club, through thickets of slide alder, and among newly leafed-out patches of thimbleberry. Enormous red-cedars and western hemlocks stood all around us—hardly the trees one associates with burn morels. The hemlock was an especially bad sign. This looked more



A packboard increases carrying capacity.

like a coastal rainforest and I, for one, was skeptical. After a quarter-mile of tough bushwhacking through an obstacle course of downed timber and muddy bogs, I could see up ahead the predominant red color of spot burn on the edge of the fire zone—the dead needles of fir trees. We stepped from a green room into a red room and didn't have to take another step before the morels showed their impish heads among blackened ash.

Faber got down to business. He had on a primitive looking backpack with a single compartment that could hold about thirty pounds of morels. His bucket was good for another ten. (Later he would use a packboard that could carry more than a hundred pounds.) We followed the edge of the burn on skier's right (Faber is an avid back-country skier when he's not working), up through steep rocky pitches that leveled out into terraces loaded with morels. With some elevation gain, we could see that the burn was much larger than he had originally guessed, having burned in a horseshoe shape that didn't immediately reveal its size. The nicest flushes, to my surprise, were among the roots of cedar trees along a creek, where Faber snatched up "hand grenades" by the bucketful—big, fat, palm-sized morels in perfect condition. "Yeah, cedar never produces mushrooms!" he cracked, mocking the conventional wisdom one hears from time to time.

He used his shirt as a receptacle when the bucket was out of reach, clenching its hem in his teeth. To

He planned to camp on the burn a few nights a week, in between buying missions to Ukiah, Oregon, and elsewhere for the several hundred pounds he needed daily to keep business humming. Every other day he would "clean" a section that was in perfect fruit, while resting other sections. He hid his car up the jeep track and made sure to keep the conveniently fallen tree blocking the



The author with a pair of "mountain blonds."

pick a hundred pounds a day required efficiency. We continued up the slope despite the coming twilight. Faber wanted to get a look at the burn in its entirety. We found chutes and flats alive with the thimble-sized caps of baby morels pushing through dead pine needle duff. "I'll save these for next week," he said. After scrambling over to the far side of the burn across ledges and muddy cornices that gave way with each footfall, we descended on skier's left and trudged back to camp in near darkness, where we made a campfire and cooked a hearty meal of pasta with asparagus, green garlic, and—yes—morels. Faber had about forty pounds' worth from this brief three-hour sojourn. Now it was time to settle in and get serious.

path. If anything, he said, he should have been picking this burn a week earlier; he hadn't realized how low in elevation it was. Already he had missed out on pounds and pounds of what he referred to as "gak"—morels too old or waterlogged to sell fresh. Another picker might take these sub-par mushrooms for the dried market, but Faber refused to sell such compromised morels.

Over the next two weeks he never saw another human being in the burn. The rugged, quarter-mile bushwhack to hidden, unknown territory was a deterrent for every other picker, recreational or commercial. One day he picked eighty-five pounds, another day 120 pounds. A week into it, he texted me that the first gray morels



were forming. The grays (*Morchella tomentosa*) are perhaps the species most coveted by restaurant chefs in the know for their meatiness and large size. Many morel hunters don't realize that grays usually won't fruit until after the first flush of regular burn morels (called "conica" in the industry, for an out-of-date Latin name). They're often found in difficult, mountainous terrain that tests the mettle of the average hunter. Faber told me about one of his favorite burns of the past, how it didn't start producing grays until August, how the ground "just carpeted" with grays as far as you could see—how all the other pickers were long gone, having already switched over to far less lucrative chanterelles and lobsters. Under such conditions, it wasn't hard to pull a hundred pounds out of the bush in a day, selling to restaurants for \$15 or more per pound.

Meanwhile, an hour to the south, the legions of dispirited morel pickers camped at Table Mountain were trying to decide whether to stick it out and hope for a better flush that could support them all—or cut their losses and head to another big burn on the more traveled parts of the mushroom trail. †

Left: Jeremy Faber ready to pack out fifty pounds of morels.

Below: A buyer dries morels in eastern Washington.

