

Nº.28 FALL 2014

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**A Wild
Hunt**

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Tigran Valdez of Glenwood Springs, en route to a secret mushroom foraging spot deep in the Thompson Divide. The Divide's endless alpine meadows make it prime foraging country, but it's also a Bermuda Triangle of sorts: many foragers, hikers and horseback riders tell of getting lost in the area.

A wild hunt for wild food

Sometimes, to find mushrooms, you have to lose yourself

Story and photographs by Nelson Harvey

LOOKING BACK, it's hard to pinpoint exactly where things went south. Certainly, it was before the lightning storm, before the realization that we'd wandered too far north and were hiking down the wrong drainage and before Mark had puked for the eighth time.

But when, exactly, did it start to matter that we hadn't told anyone where we were going, that we had little food other than the King Boletus mushrooms we'd foraged that day or that the muddy dirt road we'd followed deep into the

Thompson Divide could easily become impassable as the heavens opened up and the rain began to fall?

Perhaps the trouble started at around 9,000 feet, as the excitement of the hunt began to take hold.

TIGRAN STOPPED his truck and peered off into the undergrowth. Amid the thick forest of aspen trees that had bordered the road for miles, isolated pines were beginning to appear, a sign that we were nearing optimal early-season mushroom altitude.

"This is prime mushroom country," said Mark W., surveying the forest from the passenger seat. "Especially this early in the season, you want to look above 10,000 feet."

An hour earlier, I'd met Tigran and Mark W. (who declined to give his last name, he said, to avoid the scrutiny of the IRS) in the parking lot of a Carbondale shopping center, where I'd folded myself into the backseat of Shirley, Tigran's ancient Toyota pickup. Tigran named the truck in honor of his great-grandmother, and despite her 235,000 miles and her



Mark W. cuts open a porcini to check for worm damage.



A plump porcini mushroom sits beneath a pine tree.

lack of a front end, Shirley seemed to be going strong.

“Shirley, she’ll get you there,” Tigran said, reciting the truck’s apparent motto as I climbed in past the front seat.

Tigran, 36, and Mark, 46, have been friends and inveterate foraging partners for nearly 20 years, ever since they met while conducting a “safety meeting” (read: pot smoking session) in the trees at Aspen Highlands. The two men, both of Glenwood Springs, often forage in the 221,000-acre Thompson Divide between Sunlight Mountain and McClure Pass, and they’d agreed to let me tag along that day as they scouted a new route into the area.

As Shirley continued grinding up the steep, rocky road southwest of

Carbondale, Tigran turned and gestured at a dog-eared Colorado atlas on the seat beside me.

“We were up last night studying the map, and thought we’d check out this area,” he said, glancing back at me through round black glacier-style sunglasses that combined with his shoulder-length brown hair to give him the friendly and mildly deranged look of Johnny Depp in the movie *Willie Wonka* and the *Chocolate Factory*.

I briefly considered the map. Tigran and Mark had requested that I not disclose the precise location of their foraging grounds, but as it turned out, I couldn’t have done this if I’d tried: The Divide is a vast expanse of primeval forest, steep creek drainages and open meadows

that seem to endlessly repeat themselves, a Bermuda Triangle of sorts for even the most seasoned traveler.

“I’ve been lost up here twice,” said Mark, who is tall and thin with piercing blue eyes. He wore his longish hair swept up beneath a green baseball cap, and had a turquoise amulet around his neck. “After a while, it all starts to look the same.”

COLORADO IS HOME to a veritable cornucopia of wild foods, from medicinal plants like nettles, arnica and osha root to sweet fruits like currants and raspberries. Our natural pantry even includes healthful flowers like violet, elderflower and dandelion, but wild mushrooms occupy by far its most glamorous shelf.

What’s the law of the fungi?

In the White River National Forest, foragers are supposed to pull a permit before going hunting, but the fact that only five law enforcement officers patrol the vast, 2.3 million-acre territory makes that regulation tough to enforce.

Still, the permits are cheap: Recreational foragers can gather up to five gallons of mushrooms per day—or a total of 67 pounds per season—without paying a dime, while those planning to sell their haul commercially can pay \$100 for a full season pass permitting the harvest of up to 333 pounds throughout the year. (Cheaper permits with lower time and harvest limits are also available.)

Contact your local ranger district for instructions on obtaining a foraging permit.

*Top: Coral mushroom in an early stage of growth in late July.
Below: A pristine porcini mushroom ripe for the picking.*

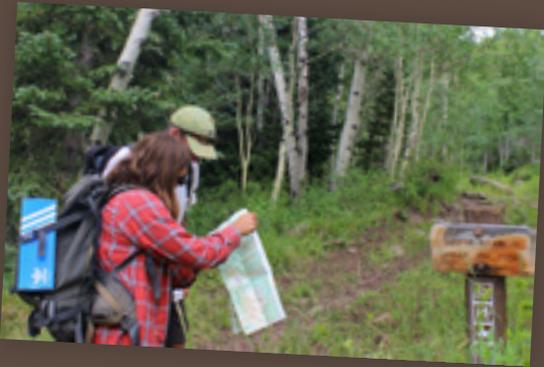


Learn to forage like the pros with Hunt and Gather

From correctly identifying scores of wild plants (and avoiding toxic ones) to hiking for miles in the remote woods without getting lost like I did, the cardinal skills of foraging take time to learn, and companies like Denver's Hunt and Gather have emerged to teach them.

Hunt and Gather founders Graham Steinruck and Nick Martinez offer private foraging tours throughout Colorado, along with private catering and cooking classes built around wild ingredients. Tours cover wild mushroom identification, habitat and seasonality, along with mushroom harvesting, preservation, cleaning and cooking techniques.

Tours run from May through September, and Hunt and Gather charges a base fee of \$250 per tour, along with \$50 per guest for groups of 10 or fewer. Discounts are available for larger groups. For more, email HuntAndGatherColorado@gmail.com or call 719.321.1571. —NH



Mark and Tigran study the map at a trailhead high in the Thompson Divide.

The state boasts more than 2,000 varieties of mushrooms, hundreds of them edible, and on that morning our target was the King Bolete, or porcini, a meaty specimen with a bulbous top and a golden brown hue that thrives beneath pine trees at the edge of high meadows.

Porcinis, like many mushrooms, have symbiotic relationships with trees: They're the fruit of a fungus called mycelium that covers the forest floor and feeds on organic matter, helping trees absorb soil nutrients. This complementary arrangement makes it impossible to farm many mushroom varieties, so foragers must strike out into the wild to find them instead.

Over the course of Colorado's mushroom season, Mark and Tigran target about five of the tastiest edible varieties growing in the state: Morels arrive in May beneath cottonwood trees at lower altitudes, while white puffballs, porcini, chanterelles and oyster mushrooms typically bloom in the mountains following the monsoon rains in July and last until early September.

It's a short season, and the two men take full advantage.

"I'm pretty much a nomad," Mark

said as we drove. "I have no girlfriend, no job and no worries. So at this time of year I go out whenever I can."

As Shirley rounded what seemed to be the hundredth blind corner of the morning, the road abruptly ended near the South Branch of Thompson Creek. Mark and Tigran hopped out and gathered their gear: shoeboxes and Tupperware for the anticipated haul, knives and small brushes to dispense with dirt while harvesting, rain jackets, matches and bug repellent.

"You know, mountain money," Tigran said.

We hit the trail, ascending gradually for about 20 minutes before regrouping at the foot of a steep, east-facing slope, which we proceeded to climb. It was hard going up the hill, through gopher holes and knee-high grass, and when I finally crested the ridge I spotted Tigran rummaging beneath a copse of small pine trees nearby. It seemed he'd already found what we came for.

Kneeling, he cut into one plump, caramel-colored porcini after another. Chipmunks or worms had already chewed through some of them—"that proves that they're edible," Tigran said—but many

others remained pristine. I asked Tigran why the foraging was so particularly good along the meadow's edge.

"It's the nature spirits that hang out there," he explained frankly, and before I could ask if he was serious he let loose—Eeyodellleeeeeehooooo!—with a sudden yodel that would have made a German *fräulein* blush with pride.

In the distance, we heard Mark yodel out a faint reply. This was how the pair communicated during foraging jaunts, to keep track of one another in the unmarked and unmapped forest.

"Sounds like he's found something," Tigran said. "I can tell by the sound of it."

We struck out walking south through the forest, Tigran and Mark yodeling as we went in a high alpine game of Marco Polo. Soon we spotted Mark squatting beneath a tree at the edge of a vast meadow.

"I puked five times on the way up here!" Mark proclaimed, explaining that, like me, he'd had a long and rather boozy weekend at Carbondale's annual Mountain Fair.

The air was muggy, and I noticed that Mark, in an apparent attempt to beat

the heat, had flipped the bottom of his T-shirt up to expose his midriff in a style popular at car-washing fundraisers. I opted not to follow suit, but began trailing him nonetheless as he worked along the edge of the meadow. As we talked, it became apparent that he considered mushrooms to be a kind of gift from the gods.

“Chefs use chanterelles like a bow on a present,” he would say, or, speaking of porcinis, “They’re like Christmas presents under all these little trees.”

As we worked our way north, the two men filling their boxes with porcinis they’d later sell for about \$15 a pound to local restaurants, I couldn’t help but admire Mark’s foraging view of the forest.

The perils and risks of the wilderness—getting lost, getting hurt, getting struck by lightning or attacked by bears—are well publicized, as are some of its many benefits: fresh air, solitude, inspiring beauty. Yet it struck me that for foragers, a wilderness excursion is also a treasure hunt, the Rocky Mountain landscape a garden full to the brim with edible and medicinal treats just waiting to be found.

BY THE TIME Mark and Tigran had nearly filled their packs with porcinis, a light rain had started to fall. Tigran produced a map and a compass, and after a brief consultation he suggested that we head south to intercept the trail leading back to the car. We began walking, me trailing Tigran as Mark forged his own route through the forest to our left, inexorably trending northeast.

“We have to go south, Mark,” Tigran yelled through the woods, but Mark seemed too far off to hear.

We continued, picking our way around dead fallen trees on the forest floor, and before long we stumbled onto an unfamiliar creek. We’d followed the South Branch of Thompson Creek up to



Tigran stops to clear debris from a mudslide before charging through it in Shirley, his ancient Toyota truck.

the foraging grounds, but this, it appeared, was the Middle Branch. Or maybe the North Branch—we didn’t know. We were lost. For some reason, Tigran and Mark appeared unfazed.

“This is what happens about 50 percent of the time out here,” Tigran said casually. “This is what keeps most people from coming out here—they get lost once and they never come back.”

We walked on. By 3 p.m.—seven hours after we’d left Carbondale—we were still lost and the collective mood had started to sour. Mark was slowing down, too, pausing occasionally to dry heave as he went.

“I’m just as frustrated as you are, Mark,” Tigran said at one point after we’d stopped to get our bearings.

“Oh, yeah? How many times have you puked? I’m up to eight!” Mark shot back, before descending into another heaving fit.

Morale, it appeared, was running dangerously low.

As if on cue, in a gesture that may well have amounted to a giant middle finger from on high, the rain began to pour. Huge bolts of lightning flashed to the south, and by the thunderclaps that followed we could tell that they were close. Soaked to the bone by the rain and wet brush, Tigran and I scurried

straight down the steep hillside, hoping to find the road below. In my tennis shoes, I rolled both ankles repeatedly, yet somehow managed to avoid a sprain.

“I’m not going to spend all afternoon walking in the wrong direction,” Mark muttered, before marching off south across the hill away from us. I was stunned that we were splitting up while lost in a heavy storm, but I said nothing. And despite the chaos, Tigran remained sanguine.

“We’re like an old married couple,” he said. “He’ll blame this on me and will probably not come out with me again for a while. But we’ll get over it.”

Bushwhacking on through the sheets of rain, we suddenly heard a whoop from further down the hill. It was a miracle: Mark had found the road. We trotted down to meet him, and Tigran ran on to fetch the truck while Mark and I followed, walking just fast enough to keep warm in the rain. I was bone tired from the long downhill slog, and Mark’s back had begun to seize up.

Within minutes, Tigran appeared to collect us, and we collapsed with relief into Shirley’s warm, worn seats. An hour later—after fording a vast mud puddle that nearly sent us into a ditch, crossing a mudslide and almost spinning out on the wet dirt road—we hit the pavement, and let fly with cries of jubilation.

“Just a couple of outlaws heading back to town!” Mark exalted, as Tigran and I whooped along with him.

We coasted back to Carbondale, drowsy with relief, and the conversation gradually turned again to foraging. Despite the day’s narrowly averted disaster and our muddy, exhausted condition, Mark and Tigran heartily agreed on one thing: The chanterelles were coming, and they’d be out hunting again within a few days. eA