

Where The Wild Things Grow

BY PETER SMITH

Inside the kitchen of Dan and Candice Heydon's wooden saltbox in Damariscotta, three large glass windows salvaged from an elementary school look out onto a forested backyard. Three antique clocks, all with slight variations of time, hang on an adjacent wall. A cast-iron stove is topped with bottles of candy cap mushroom vinaigrette. Two refrigerators hum. A casserole cools on one counter; a digital scale and a basket of pens sit on another. The only clue that this isn't a regular kitchen is the dizzying aroma of damp forest that hangs like a thick aromatic fog: the smell of a hundred pounds of wild black trumpet mushrooms.

Dan Heydon of Oyster Creek Mushroom Company



Tomorrow a shipment of said mushrooms goes to a broker in Las Vegas. Nevada is desert, not mushroom territory, and mushrooms sell there for up to \$70 a pound. On Tuesdays, Dan drives to restaurants and stores in Portland. Wednesdays, he goes to Rockland. Thursdays, Boothbay Harbor. Farmer's markets Wednesdays and Saturdays in Camden, and Fridays in Damariscotta. "Hopefully he comes back Saturday with just empty boxes," Candice says.

The phone rings in the office. "Oyster Creek Mushrooms," Dan answers.

It's Sunday night. The pickers are calling. Oyster Creek grows shiitakes and oysters down a hill behind the house, but most of their wares—ramps and morels, blackberries and black trumpets—come from the wild. On Sundays, from as far away as Somerville and Saco, the pickers come calling.

Pickers don't just sell mushrooms. "They pick berries, rake blueberries, tip brush," Dan says. "There's not too many clammers. But they're all independent people that want to work when they want to work."

As far as where the pickers find their treasures, he says, "They

don't tell me and I don't ask."

Blue coveralls, gray Velcro shoes, bug dope, pocketknife, paring knife, wooden basket, wicker basket, plastic Wal-Mart basket, a pack of Pall Malls, a toothbrush, and sometimes a black lab named Otis: the contents of Ken Wills' Subaru before he goes picking resemble supplies for a hunting trip. The only thing missing is beer but Ken is diabetic and doesn't drink any more. He justifies smoking his son's cigarettes, the last of his vices, by saying that smoke deters deerflies.

Ken learned to pick five years ago. After he saw a newspaper ad about buying wild mushrooms, he bought an Audubon field guide, studied the Latin names for fungi, and started picking. Five years running through the woods has kept him off diabetes medication.

Branches snap under foot as Ken barrels through the hemlock and beech trees. When he's not in the woods, Ken works part-time at a sporting goods store and full-time as a dispatcher at the Naval base in Bath. When there are no planes to refuel, he carves duck decoys. Days off mean hunting: duck, venison, bass, and *Craterellus fallax*, the black trumpet.

Suddenly, he stops. A spot of orange: *Dentinum repandum*. "A hedgehog," Ken says. He bends over at the waist, picks the pale mushroom and

carves off its stem. "Slugs and bugs," he says, "They get their share."

He puts it in a wicker basket and takes off through the woods.

Ken knows diners don't want beech leaf on a pork and black trumpet entrée. Twigs and leaves get toothbrushed off. "I'm kind of meticulous about things," he says. At home, he charts mushroom harvests with a system that scores mushrooms in four amounts: 1-2, 2-4, 5-10, or for patches like the one he found last week blanketing the forest floor, "Holy Moley."

Besides charting harvests of edible mushrooms, Ken keeps a constant eye out for poison mushrooms, deer ticks, and poison ivy, all of which he manages to pick up in a year. Surprise is constant. Toothbrushes he's lost appear

unexpectedly in the forest; edible *Boletus* are indiscernible from poison species; or an unexpected yellowfoot chanterelle crops up. "That's the best thing about mushrooming," Ken says, "you never know what you're going to find."

Whatever is out there, he picks. Death Caps go to classes he teaches at the sportman's club. Hedgehogs for Dan and Candice and hedgehogs for his fry pan. A king boletus and lobster mushrooms for the hell of it. He clear-cuts whole patches of black trumpets. His basket fills up. Because mycelium lives in the soil, picking the mushrooms it sends up is not like timbering oak or fishing cod. "The plant's in the ground," Ken says. "Like apples on a tree. You pick the apples, but the tree's still there."

Everything about edible fungi at first seems elusive, a secret world for eccentrics and hermits.



At home with his baskets of hedgehogs and black trumpets, he announces to his wife and son (who don't eat mushrooms): "I got a ying yang of 'em. There's a whole pile back there."

He calls Dan. "I got a mess of hedgehogs," Ken says.

"Really?" Dan says. A mess to Ken is about two pounds.

"Yeah," Ken says. "I ate 'em."

When they're not a meal, "mushroom money keeps the tank full," he says.

A wet, cool summer



Dan's display at Camden Farmers' Market

All photography by Jim Bazin © 2006

ENTRÉES THE SECRET WORLD OF MUSHROOMS

has produced a bumper crop of black trumpets that is overwhelming Dan and Candice. “Having one mushroom,” Dan says, “is like having a paperclip store.”

September’s variety—hedgehogs, hens of the woods, and chickens of the woods—keep the business running. “Then Ponderosa,” Candice says, “matsutake, and then it will be over. The ground will freeze and we start selling dried mushrooms.”

“You got to go with the seasons,” Dan says, “and right now that’s black trumpets.”

Black trumpets are gray-brown, vase-shaped, and smooth. They look rubbery but are brittle; they taste earthy and ephemeral. A fruity damp odor escapes their horned cap. Dan says it is one of the few mushrooms you can eat raw (“With caution,” he adds). “People ask me what it tastes like,” he says. “They say, ‘Do all mushrooms taste the same?’ ‘No.’ ‘But what do they taste like?’ ‘I don’t

know. What does milk taste like?’”

Everything about edible fungi at first seems elusive, a secret world for eccentrics and hermits who can’t or don’t want to describe smells, tastes, locations, or names.

The demand for fresh gourmet mushrooms often outpaces supplies.

The truth is mushrooms are fickle. Seasons change. The wind blows the wrong way and nothing grows. Ken charts his harvest. Pickers compete. Another picker fills a Delorme Atlas with his private foraging locations. What seems to unite the pickers and their pick is chance.

Dan Haydon grew up on a farm in Nebraska, and had a farm with his first wife in Bowdoinham that he says, “went with the divorce.” Candice’s family has always lived in Wiscasset but their land was not tillable. “Just rocks and

trees,” Dan says. The couple made and sold Christmas wreaths until Candice had to stop. “I was taking more allergy medicine than anything,” she says. At the time they were also clearing land

for their house. “Just burning brush fires,” Dan says, “and I thought, ‘What a waste.’ Then, she saw the article.”

Printed in the weekly *Coastal Journal*, the article said something like, “Grow Exotic Mushrooms on Unutilizable Oak.”

“And I looked out the window,” Dan remembers, “and I said, ‘We’ve got a lot of unutilizable oak.’”

Typical supermarket mushrooms, buttons and portabellas, are *Agaricus* mushrooms. They often grow on manure. Shiitake, literally “oak mushroom” in Japanese, grow on decomposing oak. The Heydons used their unutilizable lot to grow shiitakes and they began selling shiitake wraps at festivals. The problem: shiitakes were not familiar white buttons, and their wraps didn’t sell. “When people saw our stand,” Dan says, “They saw a four-letter s-word.”

Selling exotic mushrooms took an education: consumers needed to learn about unfamiliar names, and the Heydons did too. One chef wouldn’t purchase mushrooms unless Dan called them by their German names. Latvian women still come up to him and ask for mushrooms their grandmothers foraged. Like the New World importers who may have changed the Italian cappelone (big hat) to New York’s portabella (beautiful port), Dan and Candice have had to persuade customers raised on white buttons to try a pungent Old World product: the wild mushroom.

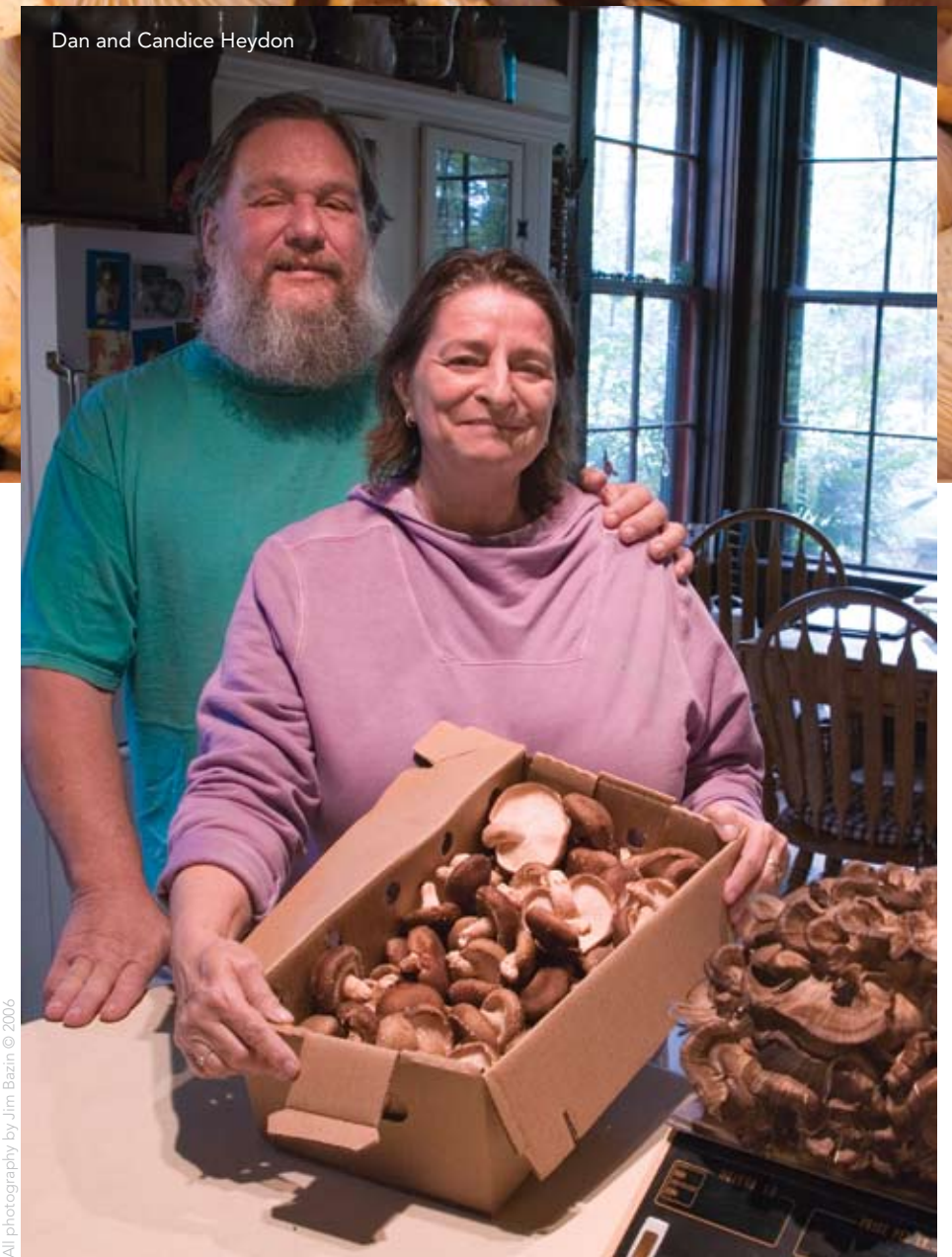
A wild mushroom is not an everyday find. Mushrooms don’t last in the fridge, and their range and season fluctuates wildly. At the end of August, yellow-foot chanterelles have wilted and gone by. The onset of a full-blown black trumpet season has forced the Heydons to scramble for markets. This rarely happens. Because of unpredictable harvests, the demand for fresh gourmet mushrooms often outpaces supplies. Andrew Smith sells organic shaggy mane’s, shiitakes, and oysters from a



Chanterelle Mushrooms



Lobster Mushrooms



Dan and Candice Heydon

warehouse in Newport, under the Mineral Springs Organic label, and he grows as much as he can. “I don’t eat shiitakes,” Dan says, “because I can sell everything I grow.”

Back in the forest, Ken finds three golden chanterelles. Ken says he likes “goldens” with eggs. Chicken of the woods, which tastes like chicken, he prefers with steak and onions. He holds up a chanterelle. “They’re one of the most highly-prized mushrooms,” he says.

No one has ever managed to grow *Catherellacum*. Dan says, “Only God gave us chanterelles.”

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