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Spring funtime for Western Oklahomans

First . . . The Redbuds . . . Then The Treasures



By Pat Kourt

Remember the anticipation of hunting Easter eggs in hillside pastures and green wheat fields? That same thrill occurs every spring for many folks who live near the South Canadian River. No, decorative eggs are not the treasures they seek, but they are even tinier treasures known as morels, a variety of wild mushrooms (they aren't poisonous!).

These tan, spongy, honey-combed plants are the prey in a frenzied search which is signaled by one of Oklahoma's favorite sentinels--the redbud. When the drabness of winter has vanished, small, clustered, pink flowers cover the redbud branches like popcorn. Spring showers, followed by a sunny, windless day, which warm the ground, are favorable conditions for morels to begin popping up.

Then, families affectionately called "river rats" wander along the riverbanks with grocery sacks or gallon buckets and are the first hunters of the morels. Soon, they are joined by hunters of all ages from nearby communities. Also, former river-community hunters who have moved away come back home just to enjoy a weekend of mushrooming.

As the redbuds bloom, mushroom magic continues:

"Here're two!"

"Mom, I can't find none!"

"Move closer to the cedars, son!"

As the bags are filled, taste buds tingle as thoughts begin about the savory fried mushrooms.

Precisely where are these sought-after delights? No one can really tell or show someone else exact mushroom spots. Only hints can be given of their whereabouts.

"Check the ravines through the brush and the river bottom land. Look for the cedars. Most generally they're

around the fall line of cedar trees. They're hardly ever in the same place year after year; that's the fun of hunting 'em. Morels are almost the same color as the dried, dead, grayish-tan leaves under the trees. It takes a keen eye to spot 'em. And a few will have a splotch of red."

"Pull 'em up carefully by the lower part of the stem. Gently shake the sand out and add 'em to the mess in your sack," advises Mutt Rymer, a veteran mushroom hunter of rural Thomas.

Most morel hunters have their own special method for preparing the mushrooms, but they generally agree on the basic steps:

First, split the mushrooms lengthwise and soak them in cool salt water for several hours. The fine river sand is stubbornly imbedded and will cause the mushrooms to taste gritty if they aren't soaked.

Next, rinse the plants and drain them on towels; turn them once so that all drops of water are gone.

Dip the mushrooms into beaten egg and milk; roll the pieces in crushed saltine crackers.

Fry the coated mushrooms in one-half inch of corn oil in a cast-iron skillet until the morels are golden brown.

Although many people eat morels plain for snacks or in salads, there is no danger of accidental poisoning. Of course, if a cook is in doubt, he should simply throw the mushroom away. It should be readily identified. Too, most mycologists suggest that all wild mushrooms should be cooked.

Need an adventure? Remember the redbuds in the spring--from early April to early May. They may lead you to a special afternoon of treasure hunting--perhaps a Western Oklahoma *first* for you! ♣