



# Morel hunters

Butte County morel bounty.  
PHOTO BY HENRY LOMELI

## A mushroom foray with local eco-tour guide

**H**enry Lomeli encourages people to get over their fear of mushrooms. “Americans typically are fungiphobes,” he explained. “We’re the only culture that’s like that. All around the world, people have been eating mushrooms for thousands of years.”

by  
Nate Daly

**Join the hunt:**  
For information on Sacramento River Eco Tours visit [sacramento.riverecotours.com](http://sacramento.riverecotours.com)

Lomeli is the owner and chief guide for Sacramento River Eco Tours, and he is happy that the mentality is starting to change: “In the last 10 years, there’s been a big push for people that want to learn how to grow their own food, cure their own meats or go out in the woods and gather their protein. It’s kind of like this ‘new thing.’”

A wildlife biologist and recreational specialist, Lomeli offers a variety of guided outdoor activities with his company, including eco-tours on the river, ranch safaris, culinary hikes and wine excursions. He added mushroom hunts to the roster in 2013 to develop the company’s year-round operations, and on a recent Saturday, two friends and I joined Lomeli for a morel excursion in the area between Yankee Hill and Pulga.

Many might romanticize the idea of mushroom hunting—skipping through the woods with a cute basket among the birds and flowers—but when it comes to tracking the prized morel, foraging is hard, cutthroat work, involving long drives on dusty mountain roads and avoidance techniques to guard prime habitat.

“Our western black morel hunting takes place in steep, rugged, mountainous terrain that previously burned in a wildfire,” Lomeli wrote in an email prior to the forage date. “This is an athletic event that will make your legs burn. On a scale of one to 10, I would put morel hunting up around an eight.”

Morels grow throughout the world, their spores carried by the wind, and with the ability to remain dormant for more than 100 years. After a fire and under the perfect growing conditions, morels explode through the soil. Avid foragers take note of fire reports throughout the year and will travel hours to burn zones.

In the wake of last year’s wildfires, Butte County mountainsides are popping off, and Lomeli expects this year’s season to last through mid-June. Next year, there will be less than a quarter of this year’s morel growth, making it an opportunistic activity. (Note: Lomeli’s trips take place on public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management or U.S. Forest Service; foragers should avoid private property.)

When a morel hunter comes across certain indicators—soft burn zones with plants in the right growth stage and soil with specific moisture content—they’ll bail out of the vehicle, clamoring over charred trees and through burnt underbrush to search for the delicacy. It’s hard, dirty work for a monumental reward. A true wild mushroom, morels cannot be grown commercially and fetch up to \$45 a pound.

“Morels are unique in that they’re the one mushroom that comes up in the spring,” Lomeli said. During the hike, he was a fountain of information, delivered through stream of consciousness as he tromped through the woods. Spending a day with Lomeli, one leaves with the knowledge and skills needed to hunt morels without a guide. “That’s where the reward is, when you put it together yourself,” he said.

After the outing, we returned to Lomeli’s house to enjoy a glass of Aimée Bollicine Brut while we created a magnificent soup featuring morels, plus black trumpet and hedgehog mushrooms previously collected in the Mendocino area. The recipe below can be prepared with any mushroom type, but the exquisite nutty, woody taste of morels makes everything magical.

### Dark Forest Wild Mushroom Soup

In two tablespoons of butter, sauté 1 tablespoon diced shallot and a half cup of diced red bell pepper. Add 1 quart chicken stock, 1 cup heavy cream, 1 teaspoon soy sauce, a quarter cup cream sherry, a few dashes of Tabasco, white pepper and salt to taste, a chiffonade of 5 fresh basil leaves and 1/8 teaspoon of nutmeg. Add 3 cups of wild mushrooms and simmer for 30 minutes. Pair with pinot noir.

**NO.**  
IT IS A COMPLETE SENTENCE

**INTERVENTION and PREVENTION**  
*Rape Crisis*

Serving Butte, Glenn & Tehama Counties  
**342-RAPE**  
24 hr. hotline (Collect Calls Accepted)  
[www.rapecrisis.org](http://www.rapecrisis.org)

**PAGEANT THEATER**  
MAY 24 - 30

From the Academy Award winning director of SON OF SAUL

**SUNSET**  
FRI - SAT: 4pm and 7pm / SUN: 1pm and 4pm  
MON - THU: 4pm and 7pm

**ARETHA FRANKLIN**  
**AMAZING GRACE**  
SAT: 1pm / SUN: 7pm

530-343-0663 [pageantchico.com](http://pageantchico.com)

**A Menu From Around the World**

- 10 New Menu Items
- Breakfast & Lunch
- Authentic Flavors
- Exceptional Service!

**ROOTS**  
CATERING & RESTAURANT

3221 ESPLANADE | 530.891.4500 | MON-FRI 8AM-2PM SUN 8AM-1PM

**We've got SPAM you want!**

**INDAY'S FILIPINO**

BREAKFAST & LUNCH  
CATERING AVAILABLE  
SATURDAY DINNER BY RESERVATION  
530.520.2593  
1043 W. 8TH STREET

**Graduation Special!**

**30% OFF**  
your order

648 W. 5th Street, Chico  
(530) 924-3171 • [ILikelkesPlace.com](http://ILikelkesPlace.com)

Present this coupon at time of order. Taxed on order total. Cannot be used with any other offer. Expires 6.5.19