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Photograph by George Sakkestad

## Loose Morels

Lee Yamada tempts you to join him at the 28th annual Fungus Fair

By Sarah Phelan

A RAINY SATURDAY in winter is a great time to stay in bed--unless you're a fungophile. Take Lee Yamada. For him, rain pattering on the windowpane promises mo' mushrooms--a promise that has him grabbing his gathering basket and

heading for the hills on even the wettest of days. Which is why he and I are silently suffering raindrops trickling down our necks as we forage for fungus in the Santa Cruz Mountains on a recent storm-filled Saturday.

A member of the Fungus Federation of Santa Cruz, Yamada often leads forays in this area and beyond, glad to share all he knows about these much maligned forest fruits, whose names--cowboy's handkerchief, death cap, and black elfin saddle--speak volumes about the fear-and-loathing-style relationship that has evolved between them and most of English-speaking humankind.

Death caps and destroying angels *are* as deadly poisonous as their names suggest--which is why it makes great sense to go mushroom collecting in the company of experts, such as Yamada and other FFSC members. But the group's primary purpose is to demystify fungi--not scare people away.

Crouching by a fallen oak tree to examine a golden-hued cluster of honey mushrooms growing on its trunk, Yamada explains that these innocent-looking growths killed the tree, thereby opening up the way for seedlings--including those of the oak--to grow.

And while a few fungi are parasitic, many are recyclers, replenishing the soil by breaking down dead wood and dung, or are in mutually beneficial relationships with trees, bringing nutrients from a wider area than a tree's root system can cover.

"It's important to understand," says Yamada, digging round the base of a slippery jack (whose yellow cap lives up to ultraslime expectations) to

reveal a cobweb of fine white threads leading away into the soil, "that mushrooms are the fruiting bodies of the mycelium, an *underground* network that can be huge."

Just how huge *is* huge?

"People claim one honey mushroom mycelium covered almost the entire state of Oregon, underground," says Yamada. "Using DNA testing, scientists determined that mushrooms popping up in one part of the state were genetically identical to those popping up miles away."

DNA testing may eventually throw into chaos a system that currently classifies mushrooms according to key physiological features such as veils, gills and pores, and clunky Latin binomials. Given that most fungi fanatics are self-taught amateur scientists, shifting to a DNA-based and thus lab-dependent ID system would spell a big mess for experts and beginners alike.

Brought up gathering wild mushrooms, Yamada got out of the habit when his parents died. Regaining his skill many years later when he joined a fungus federation, Yamada now follows the rain, not the sun, traveling with fellow fungophiles to melting snowlines and thawing mountainsides in search of shrooms. Hell, he once picked mushrooms in July--in Colorado at 11,000 feet.

In winter, Yamada need not venture further than the Santa Cruz Mountains, home to 3,000-4,000 types of mushrooms, of which 50 are edible, 20 are choice eating, a few are hallucinogenic and a dozen are deadly. By the end of our foray, a drenched but

smiling Yamada has 10 edible specimens nestled in his gathering basket--10 tasty reasons to visit the 28th annual Fungus Fair.

Co-sponsored by the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History and the Fungus Federation of SC, the fair features a woodland display of hundreds of wild mushrooms, cooking and medicinal demos, touch-and-smell tables--and wild mushroom delicacies. Yum.

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**28th Annual Fungus Fair**, Saturday-Sunday, 10am-5pm, at the Loudon Nelson Community Center, 301 Center St., \$5 general/\$3 seniors and students/kids under 12 free. Call 420.6119.

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