



Porcini-ing

BY DR. MICHAEL AMARANTHUS

In the woods here in Oregon there is a special creature that hides beneath the soil surface. This creature can appear suddenly and take your breath away. No, it isn't a stalking carnivore that eats squirrels like candy. It can't swiftly slice into the soft underbelly of a porcupine or take down a frightened deer. It's not a Mutual of Omaha Wild Kingdom moment.

Nope, this riveting creature is a fungus. No kidding. This fungus, a "bolete," isn't an extraordinary athlete that catches prey with stunning speed and agility. However, it does pop out of the earth with amazing size and speed. Italians love them and call them "porcini" (little pigs) for their round bulbous shape and delectable meaty flavor. It is called the "cep" in France, the "steinpilz" in Germany, and the "king bolete" in English-speaking countries. A basidiomycete, this fungus is in the Boletaceae family, genus and species *Boletus edulis*, if anybody cares about these taxonomic giberishisms.

The "king" is actually the fruit of a fungus that lives as threads in the soil and is attached to roots as a mycorrhizal associate, usually with conifers, but also sometimes with hardwoods. It has an obligate association with the roots of these trees, aiding them in absorbing nutrients and water while receiving sugars from the tree's photosynthesis. In the fall in many places it is difficult to find them without insect larvae in them. But the *Boletus edulis* in the spring is almost

completely free from worms and highly prized.

Mycologist friends of mine tell me there are two distinct populations of the king in Oregon. One occurs in the fall and is widespread in a variety of forest conditions, soil, and elevations. The second occurs in the spring in mysterious islands of conifer forests scattered around the high Cascades. Wandering around for 30 years, I've brushed into evidence of the "spring" king on a couple of occasions, but they were often unidentifiable young buttons or were way "over the hill." Slimy, buggy and decomposing bolete-like, it was difficult to imagine what they might have looked like in their prime.

The year 2007

I'm a guy who wanders through the woods looking for nothing in particular, which is to say everything. Over the years, wandering around the forests of the world I've seen many things: monkeys, a jaguar, tree kangaroos, thundering herds of wild emus. I've bumped into a startled bear while in an inflatable kayak. I faced off against a brightly colored wild cassowary in a tropical forest and observed one very pissed-off Tasmanian devil in the temperate Eucalyptus forest. But what I really wanted to bump into was a flush of the storied spring kings. Suffice it to say that I have been much graced in the woods. But for years I've had to endure the descriptions from my friends of their glorious finds of spring kings—a true mushroom-hunter's dream.

My wife Eileen and I have a cabin that sits on 200 acres near the Pacific Crest trail in the southern Oregon Cascades. The cabin is named Cabina Morchella in honor of the morel mushrooms that occur on the property in May of every year, sometimes stretching into the first week of June. Hunting morels with friends and preparing the delicacies with homemade wine has been a May tradition for more than a decade. As has my scouring the areas around the cabin for mushrooms of all shapes and sizes.

I often hunt mushrooms with Chuck. Chuck is a 77-year-old Italian with a passion for wild mushrooms, tremendous energy, and an uncanny ability to find "shrooms." In the first week of June 2007, Chuck and I went shrooming around the cabin to find the last remnants of spring morels. After several hours of hiking and the discovery of a few scattered and dried-

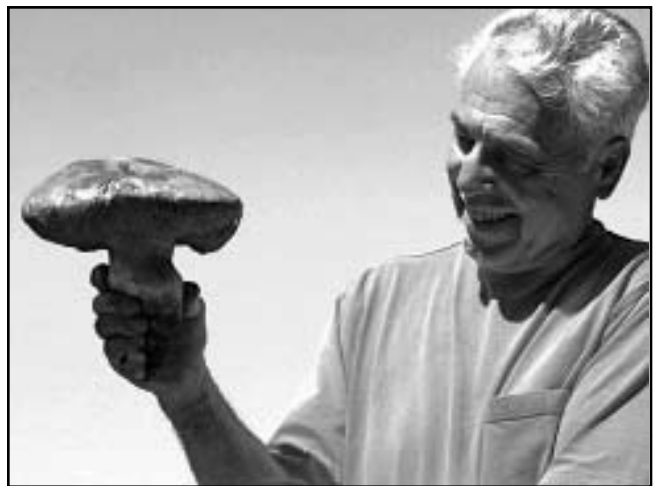
up morels, I returned to the truck, tilted the seat back as far as it would go and closed my eyes to "recharge my battery." Then something weird happened. I had a porcini dream. I saw them: large mushrooms clustered beneath an inch of pine and fir litter. And what really was weird was that I recognized exactly where this cluster was. It was about a mile away, along an abandoned skid road, in a mix of young fir and pine in a former timber harvest unit. I rolled down the window and hollered at Chuck, "Chuck, I know where the porcini are! I saw them in a dream. Let's go get them." Chuck, always ready for a challenge, jumped into the truck.

In a few minutes we parked the rig and scampered up the hill to investigate the spot in my dream. I stood there in disappointment, turning slow 360s in search for humps in the duff. Of course, it was Chuck who made the discovery. About 30 feet away there were giant humps in the duff in a line that extended another 20 feet down the skid road. Sure enough, they were spring kings; giants with some caps over a foot in diameter. We filled our bags.

I don't have any heavy message to share. I certainly don't think I have any mystical powers. But I witnessed a magic moment. They were there. Big, dignified, great masses of huge rounded flesh erupting from the earth. Spring kings!

I think sometimes there is much where we think there is nothing. Where there were no spring kings, there were spring kings. And in my own backyard. Mother earth has many mysteries to share. Remember that.

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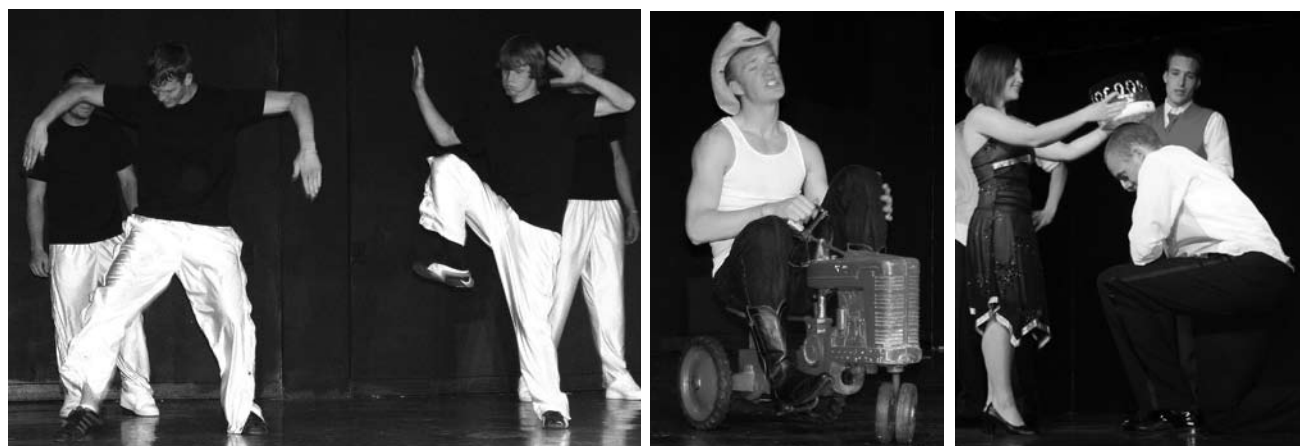


Above: All Mr. Mustang contestants participated in the opening number. It was so popular, they did an encore at the end of the program. (Photo by HVHS yearbook staff.)

Below left: Seniors Jordan (l) and Justen (r) Nielsen danced their hearts out during the opening act of Hidden Valley's Mr. Mustang competition. (Photo by Barbara Holiday.)

Below middle: In the talent competition, Mr. Mustang wannabe Taylor Willi did his own take on Kenny Chesney's "She thinks my tractor's sexy." (Photo by Barbara Holiday.)

Below right: Mike Kirkwood was crowned "Mr. Mustang" by Kaylee Van Leeuwen at Hidden Valley High School's fundraiser for Children's Miracle Network. Kaylee's 9-year-old twin brothers, Kenneth and Kyle, are the 2008 Children's Miracle Network's national ambassadors. Born at just 24 weeks of gestation, both boys weighted less than two pounds. (Photo by HVHS yearbook staff.)



Mr. Mustang crowned at Hidden Valley High Annual fundraising event for Children's Miracle Network

Mike Kirkwood, the 2008 "Mr. Mustang," was crowned on April 2 during a heated competition at Hidden Valley High School (HVHS).

Organized by seniors, this year the annual Mr. Mustang event raised \$1,300 for the Children's Miracle Network. The monies will go toward a bililight for the neonatal unit. A bililight, costing around \$8,000, is a phototherapy tool to treat newborn jaundice, which can cause brain damage.

Other competitors included seniors Curtis Belew, Cory Dean, Jordan Nielsen, Justen Nielsen, Jeramiah Sayre, Travis Warren and Taylor Willi. Leading up to the crowning were several intense segments: an unforgettable opening act with all contestants; the viewing of each competitor's personally created video; talent; formal wear; and, lastly, the critical question-and-answer segment.

The event was organized and emceed by senior Bibiana Guerrero, who was supported by Sam Edwards and Kim Deforest's student government class.

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