On the Trail with Langdon Cook, Mushroom Writer

by

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Hunting for morel mushrooms deep in the North Cascades, a home to grizzlies and wolves, author Langdon Cook and his friend started hearing strange noises. These were definitely not animal noises, but sounds of humans. Feeling unsettled, they backed off. Suddenly, the two men reached a clearing in the woods and turned around to find commercial pickers. Cook instinctively knew these guys were serious. With nearly eighty pounds of morels each in enormous packs, the men were thrashing through the Douglas Firs and Hemlocks with extreme confidence and skill. Cook was not intimidated at all; rather, he was captivated.

Holding a woven Guatemalan basket filled with only a few pounds of morels, Cook was immediately intrigued by the mechanics of this subculture. Cook’s most recent book, “The Mushroom Hunters: On the Trail of an Underground America,” was mostly inspired by the people involved. These are mostly disenfranchised workers who are not only buried within society, but are also found deep in the woods without a map or compass. “It’s a colorful cast of characters working out there in the woods,” said Cook. “They are mostly hidden; in fact, the entire industry is mostly hidden.”

Most people do not realize when they dine at an expensive restaurant they are eating mushrooms that have been picked by someone out in the forest. They probably assume they were cultivated. The Pacific Northwest is the perfect place to find a variety of mushrooms including morels, chanterelles and porcini. This exceptionally damp and fertile region of North America creates a thriving environment for all types of fungi. With a season lasting twelve months out of the year, mushrooms are the main attraction in many dishes. Cook often uses mushrooms to make pasta sauces, stuffings, and even cookies with sweeter fungi known as candy caps.

Cook has a passion for food, nature, and of course, writing. He has been picking mushrooms for over twenty years and enjoys focusing on “the whole scene from patch to plate.” Whether it’s digging for clams or fishing for salmon, Cook just really likes being outside. Wandering the hidden corners of the Pacific Northwest is a way for him to escape the urban lifestyle and dive deep into a sea of wild foods. “Being in the woods is kind of my church,” said Cook.

In 2004, Cook was able to pursue his dream by living closer to nature than ever before. After leaving his job at Amazon, Cook and his family moved off the grid to a cabin in Southwestern Oregon. This is where Cook’s re-immersion back into the woods really began. Spending just a few hours in the nearest town every ten days, Cook and his family would grocery shop, do their laundry, and pick up any supplies they needed. Cook would also use this time to update his blog, maintained to inform family and friends about their adventures in the woods. However, when he returned home about a year later, he had accumulated a large number of stories from his experiences in the woods.

“I started working on this raw material just the way a potter would work on a lump of clay,” said Cook. “I started molding it and shaping it and eventually I started writing personal essays.” At a certain point, Cook realized there was a constant theme of wild food foraging throughout his essays. With fifteen to twenty years worth of stories, Cook was able to dig deep into his past and make the characters he had met on his adventures come to life on paper.

“The writing flowed very quickly,” he says, “it just poured out of me.” Soon after, he published his first book “Fat of the Land: Adventures of a 21st Century Forager.” The germination for Cook’s second book, “The Mushroom Hunters: On the Trail of an Underground America,” stemmed from a chapter on morels in his first novel. When he ran into the commercial mushroom pickers, he was instantly mesmerized and knew he wanted to write about this interesting group of people. However, this was not an easy task, even for someone like Cook.

Cook slowly worked his way into the process of getting to know the people involved in this mysterious industry. By immersing himself in the life of a mushroom hunter, Cook was able to gain their confidence and make the pickers feel comfortable having him around. Soon an entire world opened up for both Cook and his readers. No one had ever written a book about the pickers and buyers of the wild mushroom culture. “So I just got on the [mushroom] trail and started following this itinerant kind of ‘carnivalesque’ scene from town to town, from patch to patch,” Cook explained with excitement. The mushroom trail is a fungi-filled path, between the Yukon and Northern California, which the pickers follow throughout the course of a year.

On the mushroom trail, Cook went camping with pickers in the National Forest and was also able to get to know chefs who were interested in cooking with wild mushrooms. About nine years ago Cook was introduced to chef and food writer, Becky Selengut. Through their mutual love of fishing, foraging, and cooking wild foods they became friends immediately. Over the years, Cook and Selengut have been on many mushrooming adventures together. According to Selengut, her foraging experiences with Langdon are thrilling and bring her absolute joy. “It feels secretive and it feels like you’re part of a club,” said Selengut.

With elements pertaining to the Gold Rush and the Wild West, Cook developed a narrative non-fiction that incorporated ideas fascinating to him. He liked the idea that this industry was composed of “people who work outside for a living and who are very connected to the natural world.” These pickers drive their cars down back roads and camp in covert areas of the forest. Their sense of direction and knowledge of the woods is impeccable, but also essential for survival.

This year, Langdon Cook won a Pacific Northwest Book Award for “The Mushroom Hunters: On the Trail of an Underground America.” Thom Chambliss, Executive Director of Pacific Northwest Book Association, described Cook as “one of those people who gets excited about little learning opportunities.” He continued to explain Cook as a very down-to-earth and personable individual who loves sharing his stories. Nine booksellers are appointed by the board of directors to nominate the authors for the annual Pacific Northwest Book Awards. According to Chambliss, the committee adored Cook’s book this past year because it was easy to read and the viewers learned a lot from it. He then disclosed, “I think they [the committee] also see him as an up-and-coming famous author.”

As a popular and successful writer, Cook encouraged aspiring authors to read widely. Finding a specific angle and making it their own will also lead the writer toward greater opportunities. He commended the importance of being observant and advised looking for new subjects that are personally interesting. Once the topic of choice is uncovered, dig deep into the subject matter and make it your own. Comparing this idea to his own experiences, Cook learned that he was not an expert on foraging. However, he realized he knew more about it than most people.

Cook was fortunate enough to dive into the wild food foraging world just as it was becoming a trend. “I was able to kind of ride the wave a little bit there,” he said. Ultimately, for people interested in writing non-fiction Cook recommended being curious and to begin “observing and keeping your eyes open for subject matter maybe that hasn’t been fully explored, and then really delving into it.”

**Sidebar**

Seasonal Mushrooms in the Pacific Northwest

**Winter:** At this time of year the mushroom hunters are in Southwest Oregon or Northwest California for what is known as “winter pick.” The three main winter species are:

1. Black trumpets, *Craterellus cornucopioides*
2. Yellow foot chanterelles, *Craterellus tubaeformis*
3. Hedgehogs, *Hydnum repandum*

**Spring:** In the spring and early summer, commercial pickers march up the eastern slopes of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the Cascades in search of:

1. Morels, *Morchella*
2. Spring porcini, *Boletus edulis*

**Summer:** Starting in late summer, mushroom pickers will begin to focus on harvesting:

1. Lobster mushrooms, *Hypomyces lactifluorum*
2. Chanterelles, *Cantharellus cibarius*

**Fall:** When the rain starts to fall in the Pacific Northwest, pickers are drawn to:

1. Fall porcini, *Boletus edulis*
2. Matsutake, *Tricholoma Matsutake*

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