

Forage for food, fish then feast in Tofino

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Culinary adventure is best way to experience surfing town

DAVE POTTINGER

We've been blessed with a big haul.

"We're getting lucky this morning," exclaims Nick Nutting as he thrusts a hedgehog mushroom into the air for us to marvel at. Nutting is the head chef at Tofino's acclaimed Wolf in the Fog restaurant, and we're looking at a toasted marshmallow-hued 'shroom with a wavy, scalloped top, only one in an assortment of fungi treasures that overflow from our baskets during a morning forage.

Blades of light pierce through the dense fog that cloaks the treetops and illuminate the undulating forest ground in golden puddles. Combined with the right amount of rainfall, this thick mist rolls in every August and September here on the edges of Kennedy Lake, and creates optimal conditions for mushrooms to grow. Once we spot our first hedgehog, along with an elusive matsutake mushroom, we're on a scavenger hunt, scanning the damp, verdant forest for clues with a laser focus.

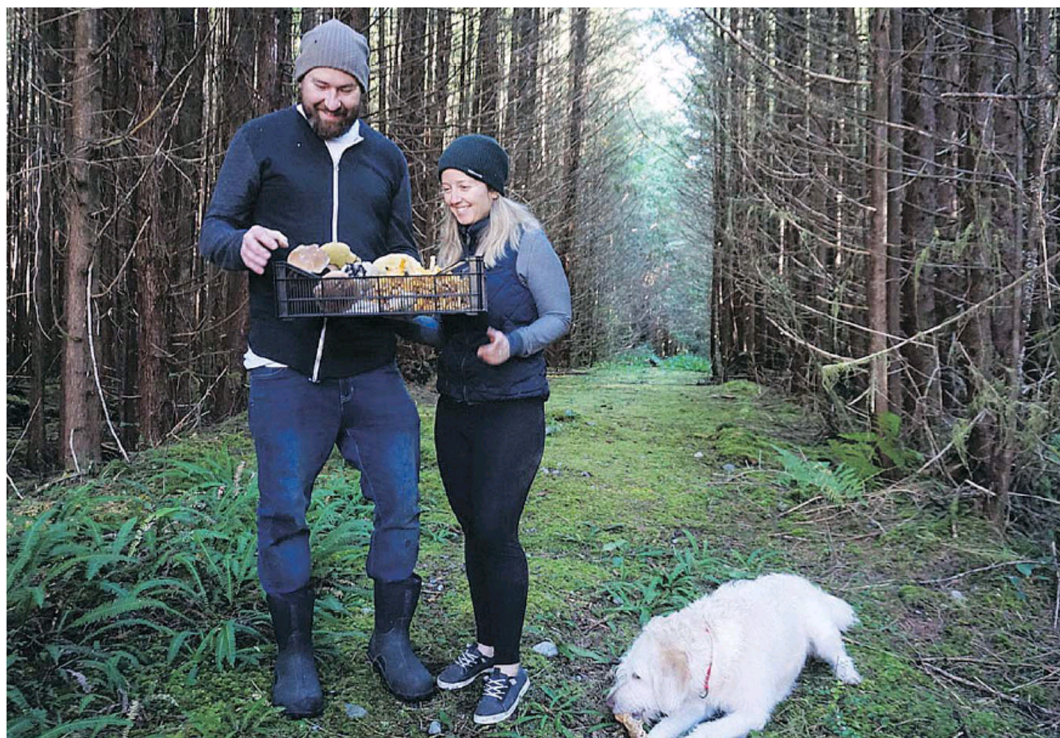
Other than the occasional celebratory cry when one of us spots a large or unusual mushroom, foraging is a quiet, meditative affair; the forest floor, glowing lime green with moss, has my singular attention. Nutting shows us the correct way to pick a mushroom (a clean slice with a knife just above the base),

while his partner and Wolf in the Fog bar manager Hailey Pasemko teaches us how to spot edible berries with names like salal and cynamoka that roll off the tongue like the whispers of Latin lovers. She'll be infusing spirits and syrups with these tart, ruby-like nuggets, which will be shaken and stirred into the restaurant's cocktails.

It's not just the thrill of the hunt that has me beaming at every chanterelle and porcini I spy. After our morning wraps up and we begin the jolting drive out of the forest along an old, potholed-logging road, Nutting hauls our foraged finds back to the restaurant, where he'll combine them with our catch from a fishing excursion the next day.

In the morning, we leave our seaside haven at Pacific Sands Beach Resort when the moon still hangs in the sky, and we're on the water just as the first ribbon of golden light appears on the horizon. Fisherman and former Wolf in the Fog cook Joel Nikiforuk of Tofino 1stClass Fishing is a born-and-raised Tofitian and just launched the Catch & Cook experience we're taking part of, in partnership with the restaurant. The program allows groups of up to six people to go out on the water with Joel for a half day to three-day long fishing trip, and then have their fresh catch whipped up into a savoury feast at Wolf in the Fog.

Coho salmon are the first



Nick Nutting, the head chef at Tofino's Wolf in the Fog restaurant, leads foraging for edible mushrooms. — CHLOE BERGE

order of the day, and to catch these we're lingering in the aptly named Happy Face, a calm, almost glassy inlet that's protected from the Pacific swells. Although a lot of fishing is about waiting, Joel assures us that "fishing is exciting when it's on — I've 'fought' 70 salmon in a day." It isn't too long before one of my companions feels a tug, and rod on her hip, she reels a fat, shimmering Coho in.

As if in celebration, we leave the inlet's calm waters, flying out onto the open ocean. The

nose of our 28-foot boat smacks down on the sea's surface as we careen over two-metre swells. For someone with a sensitive stomach, Happy Face seems like a distant memory, and it's not too long until I'm hanging over the side of the boat. I recover quickly, my heart set on catching one of the electric-blue ling cod or rockfish that flit about these darkened depths. I hold the rod steady on my waist until I feel a strong tug on the line that lurches me forward. The 'fight' is on and

it's a surprisingly easy win. Joel holds the net open to catch the prehistoric-looking cabezon I've hooked.

That evening, we grab a table on Wolf in the Fog's upper patio, regaling each other with our fishing exploits over cedar sours, the restaurant's smoky, herbaceous signature cocktail.

The earthy scent of porcini mushrooms on toast rises from my plate, followed by seven other courses which weave in our fresh-from-the-sea (and land) ingredients.

Velvety ling cod dripping in a creamy beurre blanc, fried cabezon with chilies and green papaya, grilled salmon showered in chanterelles, and a crab and pine mushroom risotto scooped right out of the shell. It's as if I'm tasting the ocean and forest with each bite.

There's no doubting Nutting's culinary genius, but every dish tastes unequivocally more delicious knowing I plucked the ingredients from the earth and sea with my own hands.

Friends mourn Ethiopia crash victim from B.C. NEWS PAGE 6

Hughes could play Wednesday or Friday depending on ankle SPORTS PAGE 4

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WOLF IN THE FOG

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