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One wild weekend

Forging friendships through foraging

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Imagine living in a land where the fruits of the forest and the sea can be plucked at will and transformed into a gourmet dinner, and then realize that, in fact, you do. The bounty of the Pacific Northwest is well-known, and celebrated for good reason.





Plates are garnished with
the lichen old man's beard,
or Spanish moss.



Jonathan Jones cooks up mushrooms on a Kasai Konro grill.

Fresh chanterelle mushrooms can go for \$40 a pound during peak season. Willapa Bay oysters are shipped around the world. But the forest and the bay can be deceiving, offering plenty of poisonous alternatives to the good stuff, so it doesn't hurt to have an expert on hand.

Enter Matt Nevitt, purveyor of all things wild.

Formerly an engineer at Nike, Nevitt decided to exit the rat race more than a decade ago to pursue his lifelong passion of living off the land, a different sort of hand-to-mouth existence that he learned growing up in Raymond, Washington.

Nevitt has cultivated a reputation as one of the premier foragers in our region, providing restaurants throughout the Pacific Northwest with wild mushrooms and other found goodies. Chances are, if you are a fan of fine dining on the coast, you have nibbled on one of Nevitt's treasures.

His company, Wild Foragers, also sells directly to the public through the North Coast Food Web in Astoria.

Foragers, by nature, are notoriously secretive. They have to be to protect their special spots.

"I see myself as a farmer," Nevitt said. "Or, more accurately, a caretaker of the land. All of the patches I visit tend to become more abundant each year, because I'm doing things to promote propagation and spreading seeds and spores as much as possible."

So it was indeed a rare opportunity for Nevitt to offer a two-day guided tour of his choice patches among the waterways that slip through the trees off of the pristine Willapa shores. The spoils of this adventure would go home with the lucky participants. The apex of the experience — an all-inclusive trip with a cost of \$425, including tent camping on-site — was a Saturday night pop-up dinner at Wild Foragers' Raymond headquarters, a celebration of the abundant wild foods of the area.

This event had gestated for more than three years, ever since Nevitt met Kenneth "Kenzo" Booth, chef and owner of Būsu in downtown Astoria. Būsu's playful, Northwest-driven, Japanese-inspired menu relies heavily on local, foraged ingredients.

Nevitt was one of Booth's first vendors, and the two soon became fast friends, dreaming up a way to combine their talents.

"(Matt) is incredibly kind," Booth said. "And those are exactly the kinds of humans I want to be around, work with, and (I) consider him family."

The planning

The October sky was shockingly blue and crisp above the Willapa River on the first morning of the event. These were good omens for the campers as they arrived to pitch their tents on the lapping waterfront of Wild Foragers headquarters, a property bought by Nevitt in 2014 on the original site of the Pacific County Marina.

“I’ve heard old stories of giant ships from Japan that once docked here to unload oyster seed and load up with our local trees to take back to Japan,” Nevitt said.

The property had also been an oyster cannery and a boat shop before Nevitt and his father helped build the house that now stands on the shore.

“Our area has long been known as one of the epicenters of the best wild mushrooms in the Pacific Northwest,” Nevitt said. “Also, Willapa Bay is considered one of the cleanest natural estuaries in the world due to many factors, including all the oysters filtering the water.”

The weather was just sheer dumb luck, but everything else was meticulously planned. Nevitt called on friends and family months ahead of time to arrange everything just so. Two long, live-edge tables on the dock that spilled out over the river had been harvested from an old-growth tree by Kaley Hanson, a friend of Nevitt’s who is a woodworker and owner of Raymond’s Pitchwood Alehouse.

The warehouse on the dock had been transformed into a semi-outdoor kitchen, though the structure itself had plenty of room for prep work, and a walk-in fridge Nevitt designed himself. Jessaid Pagán Malavé, a project manager from Seattle, was on hand with his partner, Cerena Gonzalez, to help make everything go smoothly.

Pagán Malavé had met Nevitt not even a year before, having taken one of his foraging classes. He soon took another.

Born in Puerto Rico, he spent years in New York City in the finance industry before heading west. “I used to think people who picked berries out of a bush were crazy,” he said.

Consider him a convert.

“I worry for a living,” Pagán Malavé said. “We needed a plan and needed to work backwards. He trusted me with helping to bring his vision to fruition.”


Soon all that worry would pay off as three borrowed boats were attached to a small convoy of trucks and the 20-odd foragers in muck boots were whisked away to undisclosed locations along the estuary that

Nevitt has sniffed out, cultivated and nurtured for years.

The group of hunters was diverse, hailing from all over the Northwest. Some were chefs Nevitt has supplied, others were foodies, or naturalists. They ranged in age from early 20s to early retirement. Most were novices, so Nevitt’s advice was on full display, teaching the participants how to clean mushrooms with a knife before placing them into a basket.

That first day’s haul was impressive.

“We were able to find some great varieties of wild mushrooms that I was hoping to find. In particular, we found some of the most photogenic chanterelles and hedgehogs I’ve ever seen, and they were also some of the largest specimens I have ever found,” Nevitt said. “I led the group into the patches and they found them and they were so excited to find such amazing mushrooms.”



The Willapa Bay area has long been known as one of the epicenters of wild mushrooms in the Pacific Northwest.

Matsutake mushrooms
grilled with salt and pepper
on a bed of lichen and a
splattering of chili garlic oil.

The kitchen

Back at the warehouse, jutting out above the river, prep had been ongoing throughout the day while the foragers had been hiking through the woods. Booth had enlisted his old friend, Thomas Carey, to pull off the big meal. The two had met nearly two decades ago in the now-closed kitchen of Le Bistro Montage in Portland.

Nevitt delivered all of the mushrooms to Būsu a few days earlier. Booth gauged it was about a week's worth of prep for the main courses, though pickling started in the spring.

Nevitt estimated that over 90% of the ingredients used in the seven-course menu arrived in the kitchen from less than a 20-mile radius.

There was a gas grill on the dock and propane burners for pots and pans, and, of course, an oven and stovetop up the hill in the house.

Booth and Carey were later joined by Jonathan Jones, the executive chef of the Astoria Golf & Country Club, who showed up with a very large piece of kitchen equipment. A Kasai Konro grill is a monster of a

box typically used in Japanese cooking, like yakitori, where small pieces of meat or vegetables are grilled inches away from a special type of smokeless charcoal called Binchōtan, which reaches impossibly high heats and can be used indoors.

"I was fortunate to get the third released in the United States," Jones said. "I could not wait to use it so I thought it would be a great opportunity to break it in and put it out and see how it performed."

This was only half of the grill. Jones and his wife, Stacey, hope to utilize the whole beast with a new cocktail and small-plate eatery called BAR X.O., which they plan to open in Astoria.

"I have not worked with Kenzo before," Jones said. "But my wife and I are huge fans of his craft. To be honest, his izakaya is one of the main inspirations that made us feel like we can come out here and create a dining experience for the great community of Astoria."

Everyone in the kitchen fell into a rhythm and spirits remained high through all the chopping, sauteing and grilling.

Chef Kenneth "Kenzo" Booth holds a bowl of black truffle miso mushroom soup with rice noodles and pork at Būsu in Astoria.



The feast

After a very long day, the whole crew was ready to sit down on the dock and eat through the dusk. The vibe was certainly camp casual — muddy boots, jackets, rain gear that never saw a drop. More people showed up, friends of Nevitt's, including the tablemaker, Hanson, whose gorgeous work was now lined with an assortment of pickles and glass bottles of fresh Willapa Hills spring water that had been pulled straight from the source that afternoon. Nevitt produced a keg of Culture Shock kombucha, out of Seattle, frothy with a bit of bite.

Booth's cooking philosophy is to follow the seasons and the pickles on the table reflected these transitions. Pickled fiddlehead ferns and oxeye daisy buds — bright, salty bursts done in the style of a caper — represented spring, while curried pickled chanterelles and rehydrated shiitakes seasoned with soy, ginger and apple cider vinegar spoke of autumn.

Soon, large platters of freshly shucked Willapa Bay oysters arrived — briny and pungent under a punch of mignonette — and the crowd turned ravenous. Looking down into the water surrounding the dock, you could see there were plenty more to be had.

"They are mother nature's gift to us," Jones said. "They are packed with so many great flavors and also they are super healthy and very abundant."

But this was October in the Pacific Northwest, when the wild mushroom is king. Following the luxury of eating oysters on the dock, the remaining courses would be vegan and prominently feature mushrooms, each attached to its own wine pairing prepared by Jones, who was the evening's sommelier, having won multiple awards at a winery before moving to Astoria.

"Personally, I'm a meat eater," said Jordan Probasco, a longtime friend of Nevitt's and a chiropractor in Astoria. "I was a little skeptical about a completely vegan meal coming at me and making my tummy tickle with excitement, but it did. Literally everything they put in front of us was epic. I tend to be a picky eater, but remained open to whatever came my way that night. And I'm glad I did. It was phenomenal."

The first soup of the night arrived and set a high bar. Thai red curry paste and coconut milk were blended with five pounds of lobster mushrooms and a kelp dashi. The flavor was intense with just an edge of heat.

Next, thick slabs of matsutake mushrooms were grilled and served with a



Fresh oysters are prepared with a mignonette sauce.

crispy chili garlic oil on top of a spindle of old man's beard, a stringy type of lichen that's high in Vitamin C.

Perhaps the most playful dish of the evening was the wild mushroom congee with porcini mushrooms and wild sea spinach. Congee is a savory Chinese rice porridge that Booth often likes to include on his menus. Here, considering the significance porcini mushrooms play in many Italian risottos, this was kind of a cross between the two — it had the creamy base of a congee and the toothiness of a risotto. The wild sea spinach was certainly not the same leafy green one finds at the grocery store and added a nice color and a hint of salinity to the dish.

Anyone who has eaten at Būsu knows that Booth is a master of a steaming bowl of ramen, and the kare miso ramen he served on the dock as the last rays of sunlight faded was nothing short of phenomenal. The depth of flavor achieved in a broth consisting of

miso, hedgehog, chanterelle and maitake mushrooms filled the soul with earthy gulps of umami between slurps of slick noodles.

The last main course was also a mainstay of Būsu's menu — a vegan wild mushroom okonomiyaki, which is an Osaka-style savory pancake. Stuffed with cabbage, braised chanterelles and tofu, Booth employed a doctored-up vegenaïse instead of the traditional Japanese mayonnaise to keep with the theme of the night.

Dessert was provided by Nevitt: a coconut and huckleberry pudding with chia seeds — a nice, soft landing after so many wonderful, eccentric, filling courses.

No one walked away from the dock hungry, kitchen staff included, as some turned in early and others kept the momentum going at the waterfront. Around fire pits and with an acoustic guitar played by Probasco, who had also played at Nevitt's wedding, the good vibes carried deeper into the night.



Wild mushrooms top off a dish at Būsu. The restaurant is donation-based, with hours and menus updated online.

Goodbyes

The boat arrived at the dock the next morning and the foragers, now including the kitchen staff, piled aboard for one last hunt. The Serenity, piloted by Capt. Chuck Stepp and his dog, is an old converted houseboat that Stepp, a mechanic who lives down the waterway from Wild Foragers headquarters, has been fixing up for years.

A 20-minute boat ride would reveal one of Nevitt's most private patches. Across the bay rang out the shotgun blasts of duck hunters.


Up a rocky incline, the land evened out into a grassy field before spilling down into the woods. Right in the middle of the field stood a fairy ring of porcini — a natural formation mushrooms sometimes take, where they grow in a near-perfect circle, almost reminiscent of Stonehenge in England. While a magical sight, the porcini were too buggy to pick.

"I haven't said anything like this over the weekend," Nevitt said to the group. "But foraging patches are special places. Some are passed down over generations. If any of you want to come back to these places, please let me know first. And maybe someday you can show me yours."

There was a decent haul that morning, but not as fruitful as the day before. Back on the dock, the crew communally split up their gathered bounty and decamped back toward their real lives with a bag full of treasures and at least a few new friends.

Miraculously, the weather had held through the entire weekend, but as Pagán Malavé pointed out, it was the people that made the experience so successful. Nevitt hinted with the success of this weekend plans are already in the works for another culinary adventure next autumn and those interested can get on the wait list by reaching out to him on Instagram.

Before the group departed, one participant, Alex Brodeur, of Portland, mentioned he would really like to try another oyster plucked right out of the shadow of the dock.

Nevitt obliged. Down at the shoreline, he looked at the water level. The tide was too high. Not missing a beat, Nevitt took off his boots and waded in deep, dunking underwater, gathering bivalves, so everyone could have one last treat. 



Wild Foragers

Follow Matt Nevitt at @ForagerBox on Facebook or @wild.foragers on Instagram



Matt Nevitt, left, of Wild Foragers, and Kenneth Booth, center, welcome guests to dinner at Nevitt's property in Raymond, Washington, and preview the courses they've prepared.



Evening light at the Wild Foragers property in Raymond, where dinner was followed by coconut and huckleberry pudding for dessert.

Foraging patches are special places. Some are passed down over generations.