

ELK AND MORELS

Eating the mountain that feeds my family. By Rick Bass

I take off one afternoon to run up one of the mountains above my home to look for the morels that sometimes grow in the burned forests up there. It's one of the mountains that feed my family, one on which we are fortunate enough some years to take an elk. And this one day, strolling through the maze of standing fire-gutted black spars, and also among the living trees that survived the fire, I'm fortunate enough to find a patch of morels. These brown-and-charcoal, thumb-sized fungi will be delicious when cooked in the same skillet as the thawed steaks of the elk, which also came from this mountain: the decomposing rock, the soil itself, bringing life to both the elk and the morel, as well as to me, so that if we are not mountains ourselves, moving and gifted briefly with life, we are always a part of these mountains, the arms and legs of these mountains, wandering here and there though returning always to the base of these mountains, which feed our bodies and our imaginations.

The last time I was up here there weren't any morels, though the spars were blackened, seeming even blacker then, in the snow, than they do now—although still, the darkened, dead tree trunks leap out amid all the emerging, amazing green. The previous November I was following the tracks of a herd of elk through that new wet snow—ash and slippery clay just beneath the snow gumming up on my boots, mixing in with all that snow—and I moved carefully, slowly, walking then stopping, trying to appear—if

glimpsed stationary by elk eyes—as vertical as any of the hundreds or I suppose thousands of spars through which the elk and I were passing.

The trail passed on through the burn and into the old forest where the burn had petered out, and then over a ridge, where the fire appeared to have stopped completely. The elk were on the other side of that ridge, a north slope, and the breeze was coming toward me. If I live to be a hundred, I hope never to tire of the thrill you get when that current of scent first drifts your way.

There is a certain recipe for preparing an elk, when you are fortunate enough to take not just an elk in autumn, but also, roughly six months later, in May, morels. You lay the slice of elk meat in the heated iron skillet, with some melted butter and a little salt and pepper, and slice in those morels, sautéing

them with the elk meat; and after only a short while, you shut the flame off and let the elk's muscle, warmed in that skillet as if back into life, continue cooking on its own.

Because there's no fat in the meat, the elk muscle conducts heat quickly, as copper wire conducts the galvanic twitchings and shudderings and pulsings of electricity; and the flavor of the morels is absorbed into that warming meat, as the elk in life once browsed on the same terrain, the same soil, upon which these morels were growing, yesterday: and in that manner, once again the meat is suffused with the flavor of the mountain, so that you are eating the mountain, eating the mountain straight from the black skillet, so delicious is it; and timing this last wave of skillet-heat, knowing when to turn the flame off and simply let the heat of the meat cook itself, is like catching a wave, a surge, and riding it in to shore. The deliciousness of such a meal is no less a miracle than a blackened field turning to green life almost overnight, the low fire beneath the skillet glimmering out, perhaps reminding the hunter of the July or August fires that spawned the grasses that fed the elk, and from whose ashes emerged the morels that fed the hunter.

The elk roaming through our chests and arms, the elk galloping in our legs, the mountain sleeping in our hearts, present always, whether we are waking or sleeping: rhythms within rhythms within rhythms, which we will never know, but can always honor. 🐃



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