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- SUMMER 2015 -

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CHASING THE WOLF

Foraging in Eagle County

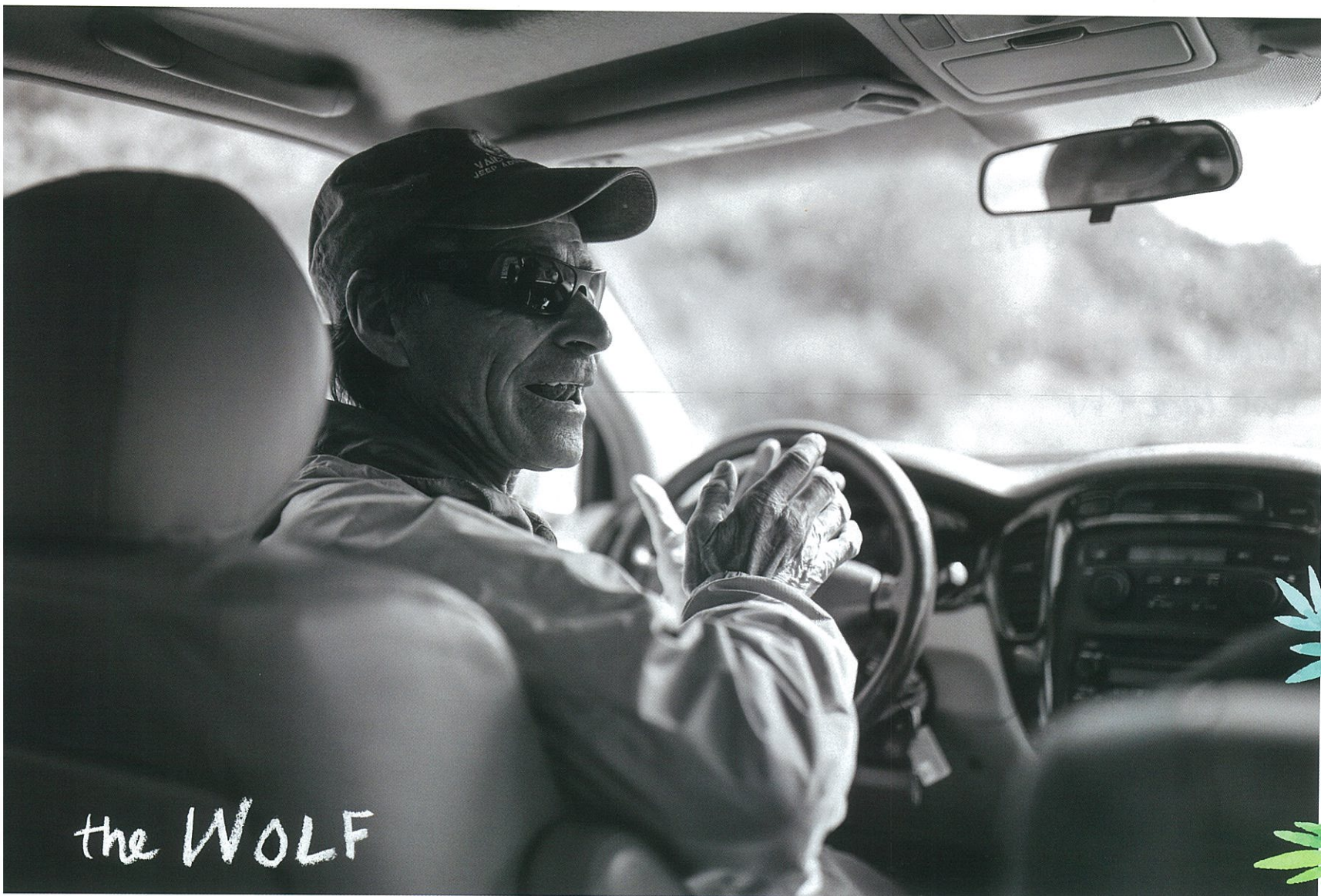


WOLFGANG ÜBERBACHER CAN EAT HIS WAY UP ONE MOUNTAIN
AND DOWN ANOTHER — AND TEACHES OTHERS TO DO THE SAME

BY TRACI J. MACNAMARA

I'm sitting in the passenger seat watching a raven arc across the sky while The Wolf, my driver and guide for the day, categorizes the multiple uses of sagebrush, the aromatic shrub that's ubiquitous here in Colorado's high mountain environment. With my window cracked, a cool morning breeze blows across my face, and along with it comes the peppery smell of *Artemisia tridentata*, the current focus of our conversation.

The Wolf tells me that sage has several medicinal uses, and it's also an effective fly and mosquito repellent. *Artemisia tridentata* can be dried and made into a tea to soothe digestive issues. When added to hot water, its vapor can be inhaled to ease lung infections and other breathing problems. Plus, the smoke from burning sage can be used to drive out evil spirits. Apparently, Native American cultures have long used sage for this purpose and for its many other benefits as well, but its effectiveness in fending off evil is my favorite among the uses for sage that Wolf has named so far.



"Can you eat this kind of sage?" I ask, thinking of the culinary sage I grew last summer in a pot on my deck. If I could just go outside of my house, pick this stuff from the nearby open space, and toss it into my omelettes, then I'd forgo growing my own.

"Yes, you can eat it, but it's bitter," Wolf says. "It won't taste nice, not like the tender variety you'd use when cooking. Maybe you could use it in a marinade or in a stuffing, but not much more than that." Oh, well. At least I can still go out and gather a bundle to burn in my home when the energy's feeling off.

LOCAL LOCAVORES

Sage is only one of the plants we've been discussing this morning on our exploration of the Vail area's wild edibles. I'm driving and hiking today with a longtime local expert: Austrian-born Wolfgang Überbacher, otherwise known as The Wolf, or The Mushroom Man, or simply Wolf. I first heard about him when questioning Chef David Walford of Beaver Creek's Splendido at the Chateau about his use of local ingredients. Walford is a passionate locavore who sources locally grown produce from the area's summer farmers' markets, and he has formed a unique partnership with Wolf, who forages for wild edibles including watercress, asparagus, mushrooms, nettles, herbs, and more.

Between Wolf and Walford, respect is mutual.





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Foraging for wild edibles is hard work, and Wolf considers himself both "a mountain man and an environmentalist." Anytime he's walking or driving through the outdoors, Wolf remains committed to Leave No Trace principles, and he's already stopped several times so far on our journey today to pick up glass bottles and other trash that's been haphazardly discarded alongside the dirt road we're driving.

The farm-to-table movement has increased awareness of the environmental and health benefits of eating locally, and foraging for wild edibles might be about as local as you can get. Sustainability concerns and an eco-conscious ethic motivate chefs like Walford to source food that isn't shipped, flown or trucked over great distances to reach consumers. That's the appeal in foraging for wild edibles, a food source that can be as close as your feet can take you.

MUTUAL RESPECT

"Chef Walford is a forerunner in the industry when it comes to using wild organics in creative ways. I have a lot of respect for his commitment to build menus around what can be found nearby," Wolf says. And while Walford likes to use the ingredients Wolf brings him, he doesn't necessarily have the time to source them himself. He's an experienced mushroom forager, however, and he also collects berries, which Wolf predicts will be bountiful this summer given early-season growth patterns. But during the summer season when his schedule is stacked, Walford appreciates the enthusiasm and expertise that Wolf brings into his kitchen.

"Wolf knows a hundred times more than I'll ever know about the herbs and



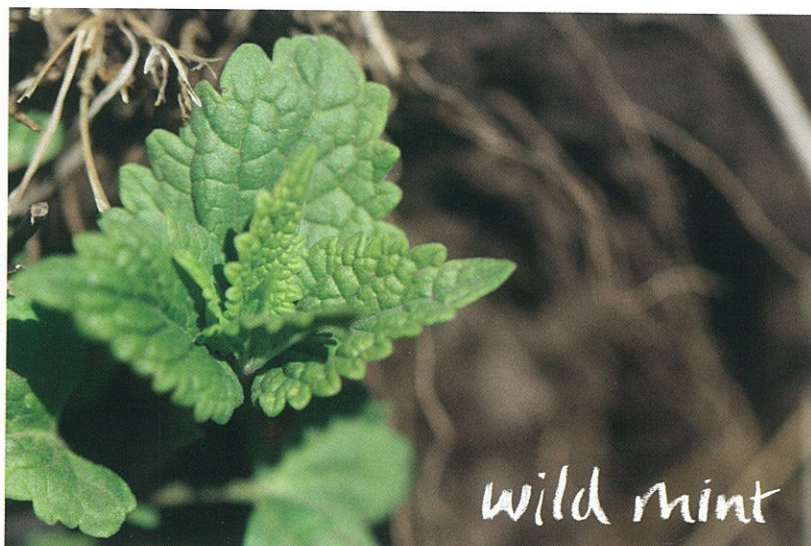
plants growing out in the hills just near our homes," Walford says. "He has the skills to find what I love sharing with others, but he's also concerned with sustainability and caring for the land in the process." Walford highlights Wolf's experience and skill in identifying wild edibles, which is definitely important when it comes to eating anything found in a forest. Mistakes in plant and fungi identification can be fatal, so it's essential to take the time to build expertise.

EARLY TRAINING

I'm walking with Wolf alongside a stream when I ask him about how he learned so much about plants. He explains how both plant identification and survival are in his genes. His father was a mycologist who wrote a book about mushrooms, and his grandfather was a homeopath who was well versed in the medicinal uses of plants. When Wolf's family was displaced from their Austrian home during World War II, they fled into the



Juniper berry



wild mint



rosehip



wild onion

mountains, where they built a stone shelter and lived off of the land.

This early training shaped Wolf's knowledge and environmental ethos, but he has evolved into a lifelong naturalist who has traveled around the world teaching survival courses and guiding others in natural settings from Europe to Vail, Colorado. As a tour guide with his company Mountain Wolf Jeep Adventures, Inc., Wolf is committed to helping others learn more about nature and about how to preserve natural spaces. Correctly identifying plants and cultivating them once kept his family alive, but now Wolf shares the joy of eating wild edibles with others, and that extends well beyond the survival uses of what he finds.

Collecting fraises des bois, or wild strawberries, for example, is a labor- and time-intensive process. But the flavor power in these tiny strawberries that are barely the size of a fingernail adorn desserts in area restaurants. And while mushrooms pop up alongside easy-access hiking trails throughout the summer following rainy spells, most of them aren't edible. Wolf knows where to find coveted chanterelle and porcini mushrooms, two types of mushrooms that he regularly shares with local chefs.

PLENTY BEFORE THE BOUNTY

But there aren't any mushrooms out on the trail we're hiking today. It's too early in the season, and most of the plants around us are just coming back to life after a cold and snowy winter. Even at a time of the year when we wouldn't expect to find the bounty of midsummer, Wolf has delivered on his promise of identifying at least 50 plants and animals on our morning trip. Marmots, magpies, red tailed hawks, sagebrush, bluebells, chokecherry and the toxic death camas all make my list, as do a host of other alpine plants, herbs and wild animals.



If you want to experience your own wild edible adventure, you can take an educational jeep tour with Wolf, The Mushroom Man, himself, who owns and operates Mountain Wolf Jeep Adventures, Inc. Wolf tailors his summer jeep trips based on requests from his guests, so whether you want to learn how to yodel or how to forage locally for wild mushrooms, Wolf can be your guide.

Mountain Wolf Jeep Adventures, Inc.

www.mountainwolfjeepadventures.com
970.926.WOLF

After munching on edible plants such as wild anise, mint and tender nettles that lack the stinging qualities of their grown-up counterparts, Wolf and I began the drive back into town. Along the way, he continues to identify plants and animals in staccato-like succession: flame willow, serviceberry, turkey vulture, an unexpected agave.

While the sheer quantity of plants I've seen in the past few hours is impressive, I'm more impressed with how a little practice has improved my field of vision. My eyes might finally see those chanterelles I've been dreaming about stumbling upon in the backcountry. But if I do find my dream mushrooms this summer, I probably won't tell you where. Instead, I'll give you some vague clues like the ones Wolf gave me, and I'll wish you the best on your wild edible adventure.