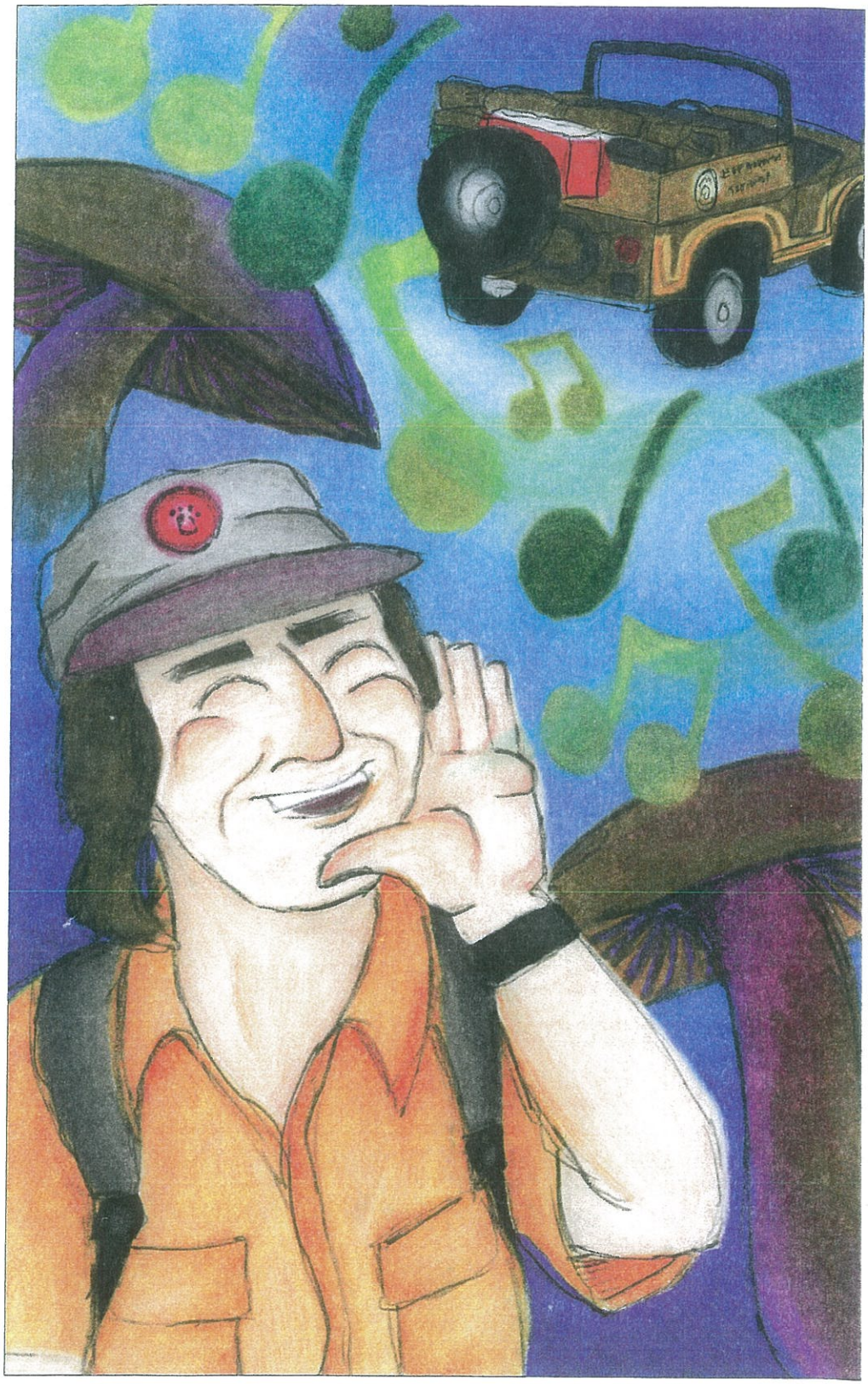
LOCAVORE

Wolf the Mushroom Man brings lucky chefs his foraged finds.



BY CARAMIE SCHNELL

Lay ee odl lay ee odl lay hee hoo.

The sound reverberates throughout the restaurant. Bouncing off the walls, it alerts the kitchen staff busily preparing for dinner service that the night's specials might be changing based upon whatever's in a certain small basket that's just arrived.

Grinning mischievously, Wolfgang Uberbacher yodels to announce foraged fortune. Sometimes the lithe man triumphantly carries chanterelle mushrooms, shining like golden goose eggs in his basket, other times it's hours-old watercress from a secret mountain stream "nobody knows about but me," he says.

What he carries into the few restaurants he graces with his finds changes with the seasons, but his tan face is always the same: joyful.

And the handful of valley chefs who reap his harvest mimic his smile. They call him Wolf the Mushroom Man and they treasure his carefully plucked edibles.

"It's one of those last dying arts with only a few people who know what they're doing," says Jenna Johansen, executive chef and co-owner of Dish restaurant in Edwards. "If my friends were hunting, I would never

Illustration by ALITHEA DOYLE

serve mushrooms they found in my restaurant because someone's life is at stake. But he's been doing it his whole life and his product is impeccable."

The urge to be outside, basking in nature's beauty and sometimes harvesting her bounty, is in Wolf's blood. His grandfather was an herbalist and his father was a mycologist and a nature writer — he penned a small mushroom guide prior to World War II that's still "the mushroom bible" for some old-timers in Austria, his homeland. Wolf calls himself first an environmentalist and second a naturalist. With hundreds of books lining the shelves in his home, Wolf has spent his lifetime-thus-far studying plants — something that began when he was a small child living in Austria.

Wolf was three years old when World War II broke out in Austria. His family left their tiny village, called Nieterwolc, smoldering in ruins, for the safety of the mountains. In the eastern part of the Austrian Alps his relatives built a primitive, two-story stone shelter. His family of eight lived downstairs while his uncle and his four cousins lived upstairs.

"There was no food, no electricity, no running water. There weren't even seeds to grow crops," Wolf says in his thick Austrian accent. "We survived by living off the land."

Wolf and his twin brother, Reinhold, would stay out all day and sometimes all night, choosing to sleep curled up beneath a tree in the forest rather than return home.

Even then Wolf was more at home in the wilderness than anywhere else.

More than 50 years later, not much has changed. Wolf spends most of his waking hours outside. During the winter he teaches visitors to ski and in the summer he loads them up in his Jeep Scrambler at 8 a.m. With adventurous souls in tow, he explores Horse Mountain, near Wolcott, pointing out the mountain ranges that stand sentry — the Gore, Sawatch, Ten Mile and Elk Range. Over the rumble of the engine, he details the history and uses of the surrounding flora and fauna, serenading them with the Latin names of wild edibles when they're lucky — Brassica kaber (wild mustard), Lepidium virginicum (peppergrass) and Nasturtium officinale (watercress). Sometimes he takes them up the bumpy but picturesque West Lake Trail, slowly climbing the old mining trail deep into the White River National Forest before ending at a crumbling mining site, New York Mountain towering in the background.

No matter where Wolf is, he's taking notes — be it in his mind or on paper. He keeps copious records on weather patterns, which help him predict where to find different types of mushrooms later in the season. He's also quick to make new friends, and owners of ranches and land around Colorado and even in Wyoming let him harvest on their property, likely because he's always sure to share his find.

Just don't ask Wolf to take you along.

When it comes time to forage, Wolf is a solitary soul. He doesn't even take his wife, Stephanie, though he "tries" to remember to tell her where he's heading before he leaves.

"If he doesn't show back up, I don't know where to look and I get upset, but that's my Wolf," she says. "He gets an idea in his head and he's out the door. He has the most beautiful heart and soul."

While trekking along stream banks, on old country roadsides, or straight up steep mountainsides, Wolf follows a handful of rules. Even if he stumbles upon a field full of mushrooms or a fence line teeming with asparagus, he only harvests 25 percent, gently packing the often delicate fungi or the young shoots and sprouts of wild plants — what he calls "life food, full of energy" — into his insulated backpack. He leaves the mature plants to produce fruit and seeds for the next generation of plants and pickers.

When he returns from the forest he's exuberant, ready to release a celebratory yodel and show eager chefs his finds.