



Meet Celia & Ben Patarin.

When Celia heard morel picking in Alberta was incredible, she did not hesitate. She and her partner, Benjamin Patarin, packed up and left Quebec for the wild west of mushrooming harvesting, first in Northern Alberta then out to Vancouver Island in 2013.

The young French couple were hardly newcomers to the foraging scene. Benjamin had grown up picking nettle in the French Alps alongside his grandmother, while Celia has been plucking wild blueberries in Grenoble since the time she could walk.

"We were very surprised, when we got to the Island, to see the thousands of pounds of mushrooms growing everywhere, but few people actually picking them," says 38-year old Benjamin who has a Masters in Agro-Forestry. "We immediately saw a local market to develop."

Over the last eight years, the couple has dedicated themselves to harvesting chanterelles and morels, setting up two companies: Forest for Dinner sells fresh goods at local farmers' markets and restaurants and Wild West Foragers exports dried morels to France. But for all the work invested in picking and selling, the couple found locals hesitant to buy fresh, unprocessed mushrooms, particularly unfamiliar varieties.

Three years ago, Benjamin and Celia started experimenting with smaller batches of ready-to-eat jams and pickles from their kitchen.

"We started thinking about scaling up, but was it worth investing? Could we buy a dehydrator or a smoking machine? Could we make the contacts? Where could we find a place?" says Benjamin. "Then one day, we heard about the Food Hub project."

Forest for Dinner is one of five companies signed up to use the Alberni Valley Food Hub. Even before the Hub's opening, they attended food processing workshops.

"This Hub is an amazing opportunity for us," says 32-year old Celia, who studied business. "We can expand our projects by testing, collaborating with different people who have other expertise, building our own expertise and gaining visibility and support."

The couple also plan to help revalue mushrooms – both socially, by encouraging and purchasing from community harvesters and, personally, by continuing to educate their own children.

"It's not just about food for us," says Celia. "Our four-year old son knows 10 different species of mushrooms already. He's not allowed to pick them on his own, but it's about teaching him a larger value of becoming sensitive to the environment around him."

A Community Story from the Alberni Valley

Food Hub Provides Valuable Support for Small Scale Processors