

CRESCENT JUNCTION, Ore. -- Matsutake mushrooms were a fast fortune once for the many Southeast Asian immigrants who prowled the pine forests of the Oregon Cascades for the beige-white fungi.

In the early 1990s the price went crazy, at times topping \$500 a pound for sale fresh to a voracious market in Japan.

That didn't last, but in early September, when the pickers moved into the camps for the two-month season, the price was still \$28 a pound for top grade matsutakes.

Then the bottom dropped out -- to \$18 a pound, to \$8, to \$4, then to \$3.

Last Sunday, the pickers made an unprecedented move: They sold their mushrooms at the low price and went on strike, crusading for \$15 a pound for top grade matsutakes.

Instead it got worse. By Thursday night, the price was \$2 a pound.

"This year they came out of their shell for the first time, they said they believe they have freedom too," said Kuoy Loch, 44, a Cambodian native who lost a leg fighting the Khmer Rouge and came to California in 1983.

When the price tumbled, Loch helped organize a meeting of the Laotians, Cambodians, Hispanics and others staying in and near a Forest Service campground that exists mostly to house mushroom hunters.

"We became as one whole group," he said.

Picket lines went up at the clusters of white tents along the highway, with some pickers waving signs with slogans like "If you can't pay the price, get out of here."

Nearby, a few buyers with their scales waited patiently for the few pickers still out working to bring in their day's haul.

The air was heavy with the musty, earthy aroma of the mushrooms as buyers sorted them into grades for weighing.

"Two bucks," grumbled a picker who declined to give his name. "Long way from \$20 or \$30, ain't it?"

Most of the rest of the pickers went home during the strike, initially called for five days and scheduled to end Thursday.

They have agreed to come back over the weekend to decide whether to continue it.

Just where and how the price is set is hard to determine. A large share of the matsutakes

collected in Oregon are shipped to Canada for packaging and flown to Japan.

Canadian handlers blame a glut in Japan and competition from China, Korea and elsewhere for the price drop.

"I don't set it. It's the big boss, I don't know his name," said Nom Chanthala, a buyer in the nearby town of Chemult. "He calls in with the price. I just buy them. They come by and get them each night."

In Portland Friday, produce dealers who had matsutakes quoted prices in the \$30 per pound range. Pickers say the Japanese price is more than double that.

Pickers pay \$200 each for a season collecting permit and \$135 a person for a season pass to a national forest campground, plus living and travel expenses.

Many drive long distances each day and trek miles into the forests to promising matsutake grounds. Bringing in 10 to 15 pounds of mushrooms is a good day.

Pickers carry metal rings about the size of a half dollar to measure the top of the mushrooms.

They have to be at least that big to be legal, but there are no other restrictions.

Some follow wild mushroom harvests year round, chasing morels at one place at one time of year and chanterelles at another and, almost always, matsutakes in the fall in the Oregon Cascades, said to be one of the nation's prime mushrooming grounds.

It's a semi-secretive, boom-and-bust, often lonely and independent living. Harvesters are at the mercy of hunches, markets, knowledge and luck.

They also are at the mercy of the buyers.

"They lie to us," Loch claimed. "I went with my 8 pounds of mushrooms at night and they said the price was \$18 but that they couldn't buy after 10 p.m. The next day I came back with 22 pounds and they said the price was \$8. It hurt in my heart so much I didn't know what to do. I just sold my mushrooms."

"We have to eat too. The price needs to go up a little bit," added Song Thep, of Sacramento, Calif.

The handful of businesses along the mountain highway say what the pickers spend is important to a fragile local economy.

Kerry Ellington, who operates a small store that caters to pickers near the main campground, said the situation is painful to watch.

"A man was in here who was up in the woods 12 hours. He made \$12. They're cold and

Mushroom harvesters strike

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they're hungry," she said. "Some of them are trying to borrow from each other for gas money to get home. Others are buying ice like crazy to try to keep their mushrooms fresh until the price goes up.

Ellington has opened a soup kitchen of sorts and says 40 or so people a night come by.

"It was chili and rice last night, it's chicken soup tonight," she said. "A lot of pickers won't take it themselves, but they will for their children. But at least nobody has to go hungry."

Since the strike many of the buyers' tents have closed down. In others, agents sit by their scales with little to do.

Pickers say in other years Japanese buyers came and paid higher prices but no longer do.

"They used to bid for our mushrooms," said Foova Saeteurn, using downtime from his strawberry operation in Merced to harvest mushrooms. "That doesn't happen anymore."

By Joseph B. Frazier, Associated Press