Weather, climate factor into winemaking

By Kathryn Reed

PLACERVILLE – Like all farmers, grape growers have a precarious relationship with Mother Nature.

"In 2011 we never picked the Merlot. If the birds won't eat it, you can't make wine," Vaughn Jodar of Jodar Vineyards in Placerville told *Lake Tahoe News*. "2012 was beautiful. People are thrilled with the wines out of 2012."

Vineyard managers and winemakers can work their magic each season, but ultimately the water content of the soil, the outside temperatures once the buds break, a hard freeze when the vines are no longer dormant, or prolonged heat beating down on the grapes – these are factors that are beyond the control of those in the wine business.

And those are issues on an annual basis.

Then there are the long-term consequences of climate change.

The Sierra, in the distance, provides water for many of the El Dorado County vineyards. Photos/Kathryn Reed

With how El Dorado County is situated and its various elevations throughout the region, wineries are less worried than their brethren in lower lying areas.

Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and some other white varietals are definitely more temperamental.

Justin Boeger with Boeger Winery said an issue winemakers will have to pay attention to is whether certain varietals that have done well might not grow so well in that particular location in the future.

“Average temperature is very important. It’s very critical to grape growing,” Boeger said.

But he said it’s not something he is worried about at the 110 acres at his four vineyard sites.

Looking out at the 70 acres from where Boeger is sitting there is a 300-foot elevation difference between the varietals. This in itself gives his family winery flexibility.

Jodar said it’s counties that are warmer than El Dorado that are likely to have trouble in the future. While it may reach 90 degrees where he is, it’s not that temperature all day. It starts off relatively cool most mornings and the evenings cool down.

It’s the scorching temps throughout the day in other wine regions of California that are likely to be detrimental to certain varietals as increased temperatures become the new norm.

Buds are coming out on vines throughout El Dorado County.

When it comes to year in, year out farming, water can be an issue. In dry years sometimes drip irrigation is needed. Boeger gets its water from Eldorado Irrigation District.

Steve Grace at Grace Patriot Wines says water-stressing grapes can be a good thing. He tapped into EID’s system three times last year.

“We could go a whole season without water and produce a good fruit,” Grace said.

Being so close to the source of water also helps El Dorado County. EID gets much of its water from Desolation Wilderness, with a dam at Aloha Lake, as well as at Caples Lake on Highway 88.

And for the growers on well water, getting some snow each winter helps replenish the groundwater.

“We have everything in small blocks so the wells can handle it,” Guy Herriott of Fenton Herriott Vineyards said.

Workshop focuses on creating poetry

Do you want to write poetry, but don’t know where to start? Do you write poetry, but don’t feel you are as creative as you could be?

Learn new ways to approach language and craft in your writing of any genre in a workshop offered by Tangled Roots Writing in Truckee.

Focus on poetry through guiding prompts, readings, and discussion. Even if you don’t “get” poetry, you will come away with ideas for your writing and process.

Karen Terrey is the instructor.

Tea and chocolate are provided during the $40 workshop on May 2 from 5:30-8:30pm.

For more information, call (530) 386.3901.

Opinion: Recreation a priority in South Tahoe

By Lauren Thomaselli

South Lake Tahoe took the opportunity to sign the CPRS pledge “Parks Make Life Better” this spring.

The annual conference of the California Parks and Recreation Society in San Jose in March provided national collaboration, alignment, and built on successes to demonstrate that parks and recreation are an essential service to creating healthy prosperous communities throughout California.

By taking the pledge, South Lake Tahoe has officially adopted the philosophy that: “Parks and recreation provides access to the serenity and inspiration of nature; spaces and places for play and exercise; opportunities for directed and organized recreation; positive alternatives for youth and activities that support social connections, human development, the arts and lifelong learning.”

Moving forward it is imperative to tell our story and celebrate our success as we align programs with the CPRS pledge.

This past winter the Recreation Aquatics Department provided swim lessons to every fourth-grader in Lake Tahoe Unified School District. Our skilled instructors provided one week of swim instruction at no cost to the students or the school district.

Additionally, the aquatics division has adopted the American Red Cross Water Safety Instructor Certification Standard for all swim lesson programs; making South Lake Tahoe the only aquatics facility in the region to provide a national standardized quality swim program.

Recreation programming has improved through cultivating a variety of recreation partnerships. New for this summer is South Tahoe Adventure Recreation Camps (S.T.A.R.). The concept is to partner with businesses, nonprofits, and recreation experts to provide authentic Tahoe outdoor adventures such as backpacking, standup paddleboard, golf, BMX, mountain biking, waterskiing, wakeboarding, and much more.

The best way to find out about who we are and what we do is to meet our staff, instructors, leaders and recreation partners. South Lake Tahoe Parks and Recreation Division invites the community to learn more about recreation programs, sign up for swim lessons and summer camp, and tour our facility at the inaugural Spring into Summer Kick Off Party on June 1 from 10am to 2pm at the Recreation and Swim Complex at 1180 Rufus Allen Blvd.

For more information, contact the Recreation Center at (530) 542.6056.

Lauren Thomaselli is the recreation program coordinator for South Lake Tahoe.

Burned bobcat returned to wild

Chips the bobcat, whose rescue by a firefighter from the Chips Fire in Plumas County last August gained national attention, was released back into the wild Friday along with her den mate Sierra.

The juvenile cats are 8 months old.

Their other den mates, Tuffy and Sutter, are being released together in another region.


Chips is back in the wild.
Photo/Sierra Wildlife Rescue

Chips was about 4 weeks old when rescued by U.S. Forest Service firefighter Tad Hair. Chips' eyes were full of soot and ashes and her paws had second-degree burns.

The bobcat kitten, which weighed about 1.5 pounds, was taken to Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care for intensive medical treatment by veterinarians and rehabbers, and subsequently transferred to a Sierra Wildlife Rescue rehabber in Placerville to continue her recovery.

Early concerns were that she would not become wild enough to be released. However, over many months in the exclusive company of the other bobcats, she became extremely cautious of any human contact, emerging from her den only when no one was in evidence, and grew up eating, playing, wrestling and competing with her den mates, as a proper bobcat kitten should. Along with the others, she became very competent at chasing down her own food (live mice), supplemented with additional nutritious foods she will hunt in the wild.

Vail Resorts ends season with strong numbers

By Mark Harden, Denver Business Journal

With a boost from ample late-season snow, Vail Resorts said today that skier visits at its seven mountain resorts in Lake Tahoe and Colorado rose 5.5 percent for the 2012-13 ski season through April 14 over its results the previous season.

That marked a distinct improvement from the company's numbers earlier in the season. Through January, skier visits at Vail Resorts ski areas were up 2.9 percent from the same period a year earlier.

Also, lift ticket revenue – including the applicable portion of season pass revenue – was up 10.2 percent at the seven ski and snowboard areas this season.

Early snow helped California resorts like Northstar, while snow in Colorado prolonged the season there. Photo/LTN file

The figures apply to Colorado's Vail, Beaver Creek, Breckenridge and Keystone resorts and Heavenly, Northstar and Kirkwood resorts in the Lake Tahoe area.

Kirkwood was included although Vail Resorts closed on its purchase of the resort last April.

But the numbers do not include the company’s newly acquired Afton Alps resort in Minnesota and Mount Brighton in Michigan, which it bought last December.

The 2012-13 figures are through April 14 and do not include numbers from the April 19-21 period. Vail and Breckenridge were among the Colorado resorts that temporarily reopened over that period because of heavy April snow.

Other season-to-season comparisons released by Vail Resorts on April 22: Dining revenue rose 13.1 percent, ski school revenue was up 11.6 percent, and retail/rental revenue climbed 8.9 percent from the same point of last season.

Rob Katz, Vail Resorts CEO, said the company is “very pleased with the strong results this season. The growth in skier visitation continued to accelerate through Spring Break and the Easter holiday which contributed to our double-digit growth in lift ticket, dining and ski school revenues compared to the same period last year, offset by somewhat slower momentum at our Tahoe resorts and our retail business.”

Douglas County plane crash victims identified

Updated April 22, 2013:

The victims of the small plane crash that was located in Douglas County on April 18 have been identified as Cory Paul Marble, 30, of Reno and Brittney Calane Hocking-Cangemi, 21, of Gardnerville.

NTSB is still investigating the crash.

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MINDEN – Rescuers looking for a small plane that went missing after departing from North Las Vegas say they've found wreckage about 20 miles southeast of the Minden-Tahoe Airport.

Douglas County deputies say they found the wreckage of a Cessna 182 Thursday afternoon in the Pinenut Mountains. Officials haven't yet confirmed whether the two bodies found at the scene belong to 30-year-old missing Reno pilot Cory Marble and his 21-year-old girlfriend from Minden.

An FAA spokesman says the plane departed from the North Las Vegas Airport Sunday evening and was last detected 78 miles southeast of Reno.

The pilot's mother says her son was returning from a weekend business trip to southern Nevada.

Kay Lynn Marble says her son is an Eagle Scout and professional pilot with an air ambulance company.

– *Associated Press*

Internet sales may soon be taxed

By Jia Lynn Yang, Washington Post

The days of tax-free online shopping could finally be numbered.

The Senate is planning to vote on a bill as soon as this week that would give states the authority to collect sales taxes on all Internet purchases, handing local governments as much as $11 billion per year in added revenue that they are legally owed — but that hasn't been paid to them for years.

Since before the dawn of Internet shopping, the basic rule was that as long as a retailer didn't have a physical presence in the state where the consumer was shopping, the company wouldn't have to collect a sales tax. Technically, shoppers are supposed to track these purchases and then pay the taxes owed in their annual tax filings. Few people, however, do this or are even aware of it.

The result: Online retailers have been able to undercut the prices of their non-Internet competitors for years. Over time, shoppers learned that they could browse products in the aisles of a Best Buy, only to click "purchase" on their smartphones for a tax-free deal from an Internet retailer.

As states have become more strapped for cash since the recession, local officials have fought back. New York passed an "Amazon tax" in 2008 that forced the giant online retailer to collect sales taxes from shoppers who live in the state, even though Amazon didn't have a brick-and-mortar presence there.

Others followed suit. Nine states require Amazon to collect sales taxes, including California, Pennsylvania and Texas.

The bill introduced by Sen. Mike Enzi, R-Wyo., called the Marketplace Fairness Act, would grant all states the power to collect taxes from out-of-state vendors selling goods to their residents.

States are so eager to see the funds that some have already passed legislation that counts on Congress approving the new law.

The Maryland state legislature passed a measure this year that raises the gas tax to help pay for transportation projects. The bill calls for raising the gas tax even more – unless Congress passes some version of the Marketplace Fairness Act.

Likewise, Virginia passed a transportation funding bill that relies on money from a tax on Internet sales.

Enzi’s bill technically would not add a new tax liability because these purchases are already supposed to be taxed. It also would not require states to collect the money; it would simply give them the authority. Companies with out-of-state revenue of less than $1 million would be exempt from the provision.

The measure appears likely to win a filibuster-proof majority in the Senate because members approved the idea in March in a 75 to 24 symbolic vote.

Support does not fall along partisan lines, according to those who have followed the debate. A number of senators in both parties are former governors who understand the fiscal woes of local governments.

But there remains some resistance. Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., chairman of the Finance Committee, opposes the bill because he argues that it would force businesses to keep track of far too many different tax codes. (Montana does not have a sales tax.)

Observers say there may also be some Republican House members who balk at the idea of the government collecting more revenue. Grover Norquist, founder of Americans for Tax Reform, which is influential among Republicans, has raised concerns about the new bill, saying it essentially adds a new tax to consumers.

The legislation also seeks to simplify the process by helping states make their tax laws more uniform. Enzi argues that there’s a way to make the process easier for retailers so that the added work of collecting the tax doesn't become a costly burden.

A spokesman for Enzi pointed to the senator's recent comments on the floor of the Senate.

"Do not let the critics get away with saying this kind of simplification cannot be done," Enzi said in March. "The different tax rates and jurisdictions are no problem for today's software programs."

Enzi's bill is garnering strong support from brick-and-mortar retailers.

"The Marketplace Fairness Act is a commonsense piece of legislation necessary to modernize our federal and state understanding of sales tax laws so that they can keep current with real-world changes in the marketplace," said David French, senior vice president for government relations at the National Retail Federation, in a letter to members of the Senate last week.

The NRF represents companies such as Wal-Mart, which have lobbied for years to get a law like the one proposed by Enzi.

Nevada's new money not necessarily good news

By Andrew Doughman, Las Vegas Sun

CARSON CITY — Gov. Brian Sandoval might not be Santa Claus, but he does know how to give mysterious gifts.

This month, he found $25 million for education programs and even released a handy slogan: “Increasing funds for education without raising taxes: Check.”

The next day, he said he found yet another $25 million for health programs for the state’s most vulnerable populations. Then, he announced $12 million more for eliminating furloughs for state workers by mid-2015.

How, exactly, did those presents end up under Nevada’s Christmas tree?

Gov. Brian Sandoval has money to spend. Photo/LTN file

The majority of the money comes from regular state accounting adjustments, and it’s not necessarily good news. Nevada gets a portion of this new money because the federal government now projects the average American’s income will grow faster than the average Nevadan’s income.

While Democrats have called for more education spending this year, Sandoval said during his address to the Legislature that his budget will grow with the economy.

“We cannot cut our way out, we cannot tax our way out, we can only grow our way out,” he said.

But in this case, economic growth isn’t fueling increases to the budget.

Besides getting more federal money because it's getting poorer than other states, Nevada also is benefiting from revisions to the number of state residents enrolled in government health programs and a nationwide trend in lower-than-projected health care costs.

"Those are both pretty standard adjustments we'd make," said Jeff Mohlenkamp, the state's budget director. "They just happen to be working in our favor right now."

The governor did bargain one large concession from the federal government. His office negotiated with federal officials to get an extra $17.6 million as part of the state's expansion of Medicaid, a part of President Obama's health care overhaul law.

"It's a large win for the state," Mohlenkamp said.

Besides these accounting adjustments, Mohlenkamp said there are at least three other major adjustments the state will make before it finalizes its budget in June.

Some of these will reflect the state of the economy.

"I feel good," Mohlenkamp said. "I'd be surprised if it went down significantly."

Democrats welcomed the new money for the budget, saying the Republican governor is putting money toward good programs.

But Sandoval's budget still isn't big enough to mollify calls from Democrats to spend more for education and health programs that were reduced in the past few recession-era budgets.

"We should be spending more on all-day kindergarten, and we should be spending more on (English-language learners)," said Assemblywoman Maggie Carlton, D-Las Vegas, the chairwoman of the Assembly's Ways and Means committee, which manages spending bills at the Legislature. "This is basically a scratch in restoration of all the cuts that have happened.

This is a nice little baby step forward.”

Overall, the governor has added $77.7 million to the $6.5 billion general fund budget he has proposed, including $25 million for expanding English-language learner and full-day kindergarten programs.

The budget office is banking $11.4 million, hedging against further adjustments to the budget.

“It’s prudent not to spend every dime until we know what we’re up against,” Mohlenkamp said.

The final total dollar amount available won’t be known until May 1, when a bipartisan panel of economists charged with making the state’s official revenue forecasts, the Economic Forum, meets.

Some conservative-minded Republicans privately grumbled that all $77.7 million should be used to help replace budget gimmicks and tax increase extensions that Sandoval is using in his proposed budget.

Sen. Debbie Smith, D-Reno, has called for more education spending from her perch at the head of the powerful Senate Finance Committee. She was pleased with Sandoval’s amendment.

“He is funding our priorities,” she said. “That said, we will have to wait until after the Economic Forum plays out.”

Many retired Calif. execs

still in high-pay state jobs

By Jon Ortiz, Sacramento Bee

Despite the Brown administration's edict last year to sweep out nearly all retirees from the state workforce, more than two dozen departments still use them to fill some of the highest-paying positions in government, according to state data reviewed by the *Bee*.

The numbers in an internal Department of Human Resources report show a total of 75 retirees in 26 departments held "career executive assignments" in February. The positions pay the retirees from $45 per hour to $75 per hour on top of their pensions.

More than a third of those retired-annuitant executive positions were in the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

Scott Carney, administrative services director at the Department of Corrections, said using retirees at the executive level injects much-needed skill and experience into the department as it navigates a massive court-ordered downsizing, reorganizes its system of 33 prisons and shepherds a new generation of leaders.

"They have unique skill sets," Carney said.

Retired state employees are not allowed to work more than half-time hours in a given fiscal year and still draw their pensions.

Critics contend that limitation alone suggests retirees brought back as career executives couldn't be taking on the workload and responsibility to justify such a high pay rate. They say the practice breeds cronyism under the guise of filling crucial positions because the state has failed to adequately address a leadership vacuum.

The state correctional officers union, the Bureau of State Audits and several former human resources managers interviewed question whether these high-level retired annuitants are doing the work that goes with the title and the pay. How, they wonder, can a part-time or intermittent employee hold such a high-level title?

“The current setup is wildly inappropriate,” said JeVaughn Baker, spokesman for California’s state correctional officers union. “If these are mission-critical management positions, then they should be filled by full-time people invested in the long-term success of the department.”

The Department of Corrections in February accounted for 28 of the 75 retirees on the state’s roster of career executives. Most held the title chief deputy administrator, which pays $59.12 per hour – up to $56,755 annually if they work the maximum 960 hours allowed.

Full-time employees with that title are salaried deputy wardens at a prison. Retirees at that level in corrections may serve in various roles, from mentors for up-and-coming wardens to managing special projects or testifying in court cases.

“These people are in functions critical for savings and safety,” Carney said.

That distinction is key in light of the 2012-13 budget that Gov. Jerry Brown signed last year.

The measure reflected an agreement the governor reached with the state’s biggest union that required that departments ax all but the most essential of the 5,800 or so “retired annuitants” who drew $110 million in pay from the state in 2011-12, on top of their pensions.

Service Employees International Union Local 1000 said the retirees take jobs that should go to unionized full-time workers and block upward mobility. The local accepted a year of furloughs in exchange for purging annuitants in state service during that same period.

“Only those that have been deemed critical to the department’s core mission will be retained,” Brown’s budget summary said.

By January this year, the state still employed 3,940 annuitants.

The administration exempted retirees whose termination would create a void that disrupts state business to the point of failure, cause the state to lose funding or put public safety or health at risk.

Departments decide what that means. The California Department of Human Resources, which handles personnel matters for the governor, conducts a handful of agency audits each year, said department spokeswoman Pat McConahay, but it hasn’t required proof that all have followed the budget mandate.

“That would be micromanaging,” she said.

McConahay didn’t have specifics for which departments had been audited or how many retired annuitant rehires the Human Resources Department found violated the budget mandate.

The career executive jobs pay salaries from $6,200 to $13,400 per month. Many carry policy-making and leadership duties that affect hundreds or thousands of people. Creating a new career executive position requires the approval of two state agencies.

“You’d be hard-pressed to find someone at those levels who is stupid or lazy,” said former Department of Finance Director Mike Genest, who retired as a CEA 4, the second-to-highest tier.

The state is struggling to fill those upper-level positions.

Baby boomers who make up the bulk of the state’s leadership are retiring and taking their experience with them. Years of furloughs, slashed budgets and stagnant pay hastened their exit.

The pool of relatively young retired leaders can make bringing them back an attractive option, because they draw no benefits and have no civil-service or union protections – but do have years of knowledge and experience.

Genest said departments save money by bringing back retired executives but that plugging them into such important positions is “inherently a second-best solution. What you really need is a career person who will stay there year in and year out.”

Retired annuitants don’t need the work and aren’t as accountable as regular full-time employees, he said, and the here-today-gone-tomorrow nature of their appointments blunts their authority.

“You need folks in those (CEA) jobs who people are afraid of,” Genest said. “Fiscally, retirees are great, they’re a money saver. For management, maybe not.”

Roughly 120 of the state’s 150 agencies, departments, commissions and boards have no retired annuitants in career executive assignments.

Those that do must bring retirees back to a position – and pay – equal to or lower than the one they left. Under Brown’s budget, those jobs have to be mission critical, but each department applies that standard differently, since their missions vary.

The Human Resources Department, for example, brought back retiree Rayvella Zentner as a CEA 4 earning $57.34 per hour – the hourly rate for a salaried employee at the same level – to update the state’s moribund recruiting and retention programs.

Zentner, whose monthly pension is $7,150 before taxes, held a full-time career executive position a few years ago as head of a newly minted Human Resources modernization program. “HR Mod” ceased to exist and its 30 positions were eliminated in a massive government reorganization last year.

Technically, that meant the position Zentner held was eliminated as well.

But the program’s goals still exist. So after another manager moved on, Human Resources Director Julie Chapman brought Zentner back. She has focused on overhauling the state personnel system and “mentoring staff so they can take over these critical duties,” department spokeswoman McConahay said.

Zentner is training a full-time employee recently hired to take over the job in the near future, McConahay said.

Some retirees have held top-level state jobs for years.

The chief counsel for the California Unemployment Insurance Appeals Board, Ralph Hilton III, retired in 2009 and draws a $9,041 pension each month.

He kept the chief counsel title he has held since 2001, preparing arguments for cases that go to court and dispensing legal advice to the board for $73.15 per hour, up to a maximum $70,224 per year.

Bob Dresser, whom the governor appointed as board chairman in 2011, said he considered replacing Hilton with a full-time employee two years ago.

But the department was in disarray, he said, having fallen well below federal standards for turning around unemployment benefits appeals in a timely manner.

“My thought was that he has so much institutional knowledge and that to train someone in that kind of chaotic situation … it would have taken me months,” Dresser said. “In my view, he’s mission critical.”

Now that the board is emerging from federal oversight to improve its performance, Dresser said he plans to hire a full-time chief counsel.

Hilton could stay on, Dresser said, “but only as a full-time employee.”

Like Hilton, retiree Diane Cummins brings years of experience and expertise to her $60.21-per-hour executive position at the Department of Finance. Her state pension pays another $12,709 gross per month.

Finance Department spokesman H.D. Palmer said that Cummins played a role in developing the plan to downsize the state’s prison population, and has held high-level positions working for Democratic as well as Republican leaders.

And although she’s paid only up to the 960-hour annual maximum for retired annuitants, Cummins “has been working in the office on a full-time basis since her return, … so it’s essentially one dollar of pay for two dollars’ worth of work,” Palmer said.

“I’d make the strong argument that the state’s return for her services is definitely higher than two-to-one.”

The Department of Developmental Services had nine retirees listed as career executives, including an acting executive director at the Sonoma Developmental Center, a statewide system education administrator, policy advisers and a management investigator.

Spokeswoman Nancy Lungren said the department deemed the employees “mission critical under the criteria established by the governor’s order,” but did not elaborate.

State oversight of those determinations is so thin that State Auditor Elaine Howle in 2011 urged a sweeping review of retirees holding leadership titles and suggested that in some instances they were overpaid.

"(I)t appears that some retired annuitants did not return to the same position," Howle said in a letter to Brown, "yet may have been or are being paid at the same rate as when they were employed in the leadership position."

Leaving the "mission critical" decisions to departments opens the opportunity for abuse, said Norma Suave, who retired last year after a 36-year state career in labor relations and human resources.

"Anytime you delegate this stuff out, you need to have a strong audit function," Suave said. "But with retired-annuitant CEAs, right now it's a fox guarding the henhouse."

K's Kitchen: Creamy mushroom pasta

By Kathryn Reed

I'm still trying to understand what, "It's a little too mushroomy" means.

"Too mushroomy" is like a foreign language to me with no English translation.

While at first the phrase uttered by Sue bothered me, it didn't take me long to realize that meant I didn't have to share my mushrooms. That, to me, was the best part of the conversation.

I came up with the recipe below as a way to use up some ingredients I had in the fridge from other dishes.

I used whole wheat pasta for the first time. It's probably a good choice for this recipe if only to help with the nutritional value.

The amount of pasta really depends on the number of servings and how much sauce you like compared to pasta. I used half a 13.25-ounce box.

For the mushrooms, I used half a "container" of the presliced ones from Safeway.

Creamy Mushroom-Asparagus Pasta (serves 4)

Whole wheat pasta

2 T unsalted butter

4 ounces portabella mushrooms, chopped in bite-size pieces

½ bunch asparagus, chopped in bite-size pieces

1 C (heaping) Fontina cheese, shredded

½ C heavy whipping cream

1 T fresh tarragon, minced

Salt and pepper

Cook pasta according to package directions.

Melt butter over medium-high heat. Add asparagus. Cook a few minutes until tender. Add mushrooms. Cook until tender. Add cream. Turn heat down to avoid scorching. Add cheese. Stir until melted. Add tarragon. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Make sure the mixture is hot and then serve over pasta – to people who like mushroomy dishes.