



**"I am...a
mushroom on
whom the dew
of heaven
drops now and
then"**

**--John Ford,
The Broken
Heart (1633)**

**"Life is too
short to stuff a
mushroom"**

**--Shirley
Conran,
Superwoman**

**Out mushroom
hunting--
dangerously
close to
caught in
late autumn
showers**

**--Matsua
Basho (1644-
1694), from
Haiku**

**"Mushrooms
are like men--
the bad most
closely
counterfeit the
good."**

--Gavarni

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Mushrooms

Thousands of years ago, Egyptian Pharaohs declared mushrooms sacred and reserved them for their own godly use. They were also called "the food of the gods" by Romans--and even today *psylocybe* species of the mushroom are sacred to some Indians in Mexico, South America, and the North America southwest, where they are used to induce religious trances and hallucinations. Carlos Casteneda's *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yacqui Way of Knowledge* recounts his experiences with this sacred mushroom, administered to him by the Shaman Don Juan.

As an organism, mushrooms are among the most primitive of man's foodstuffs. They are related to the molds and the yeasts, and are saprophytic--that is, they are unable to photosynthesize sugars and must live on the decaying remains of other organisms.

Many edible mushrooms are found only in symbiosis with the roots of trees; the fungus extracts sugars from the roots and, in exchange, gives them soil minerals.

We eat the product of just one stage in the fungus' life: the fruiting body put forth by the fine, cottony mycelium for the purpose of making and disseminating spores.

Collecting mushrooms in the wild, of course, is a wonderful and sometimes deadly sport. Consider the reminiscences of Vladimir Nabokov, brilliant 20th century novelist who fled Soviet Russia as a young man: "Rainy weather would bring out these beautiful plants in profusion under the firs, birches and aspens in our park, especially in its older part, east of the carriage road that divided the park in two. Its shady recesses would then harbor that special boletic reek which makes a Russian's nostrils dilate--a dark, dank, satisfying blend of damp moss, rich earth, rotting leaves. But one had to poke and peer for a goodish while among the wet underwood before something really nice, such as a family of bonneted baby *edulis* or the marbled variety of *scaber*, could be discovered and carefully teased out of the soil."

**"Nature alone
is antique, and
the oldest art a
mushroom."**

--Thomas
Carlyle

**"To dream of
mushrooms
denotes
fleeting
happiness, to
dream you are
gathering
them,
fickleness in a
lover or
consort."**

--Richard
Folkard in
Plant Lore
(1884)

**"Whatever
dressing one
gives to
mushrooms, to
whatever
sauces our
Apiciuses put
them, they are
not really good
but to be sent
back to the
dungheap
where they are
born."**

--Denis Diderot
in
L'Encyclopedie
(1728)

"...And you,

Or consider the amusing and somehow meaning-fraught story told by Alice B. Toklas about her take-charge lover Gertrude Stein: "We were seduced at once by the little town, the hotel, and the forest. We not only ordered lunch but engaged rooms to spend the night. While waiting for lunch to be cooked, we walked in the forest where Gertrude Stein, who had a good nose for mushrooms, found quantities of them. The cook would be able to tell us if they were edible. Once more a woman was presiding in the kitchen. She smiled when she saw what Gertrude Stein brought for her inspection and pointed to a large basket of them on the kitchen table, but said she would use those Gertrude Stein had found for what she was preparing for our lunch."

The commercial cultivation of mushrooms probably began in France during the reign of Louis IV and boomed during the Napoleonic era. Today we find mostly white mushrooms in the stores--*Agaricus campestris*--a descendent of the common field mushroom.

**NOTE: Unless you are making a very delicate
consomme, look in the market for the older, drier
white mushrooms--with browned caps and dark gills.
The flavor of the mushroom is concentrated in these
dark gills. Often, these mushrooms will be bagged in
bulk and sold for a song on the reduced price rack of
the produce department. Great for duxelle-based
stocks and soups.**

More and more, other more flavorful varieties are finding their way to the produce gourmet section--and also to the foreign food section in dried form:

- **Cepes:** also known as *steinpilz* in German; *porcini* in Italy; *stensopp* in Danish
- **Morels.** French king Louis XIII was so partial to them that he threaded a basket of them to be dried while he was on his deathbed.
- **Chanterelles:** also known as *pfefferling* in German. They have been described so: "a fresh Chanterelle is solid and meaty with a pronounced aroma of apricots. The flesh is white and fibrous, looking exactly like cooked white meat of turkey. Raw, it tastes peppery, but when slowly simmered in butter and its own juices, perhaps with a touch of sherry and

*whose pastime/
Is to make
midnight
mushrooms..."*
--Prospero, in
Shakespeare's
The Tempest,
V, 1

"I desired to know what Mushrooms they had in the Market. I found but few, at which I was surpris'd, for I have all my Life been very Curious and inquisitive about this kind of Plant, but I was absolutely astonish'd to find, that as for Champignons, and Moriglio's, they were as great strangers to 'em as if they had been bred in Japan."
--William King's *Journey to London*, 1699, demonstrating the continuing English suspicion of fungi..

herbs, it achieves culinary distinction worthy of the finest table."

- *Shi-i-take, oyster, enoki, and straw mushrooms*
- *Portobellos: which are actually just great big fat field mushrooms*

Dried versions are also handy and versatile. They can be softened in hot water, chopped for the soup, and their hydrating water used in the soup stock. They can also be macerated in a good quality oil for a few months to produce a distinctive flavored oil.

In general, mushrooms are fat free and very low in calories (1 cup weighs in at a mere 20 calories). At the same time, they are rich in minerals like potassium, calcium, and selenium and contain some niacin and vitamin C. Recent Japanese studies show that their high glutamic acid content may boost a body's immune function--with potential benefits in fighting cancer, infections, rheumatoid arthritis, and lupus.

THE MUSHROOMS GO TO WAR

"*Borovik*, mushroom white,
Colonel of the mushroom might,
Sitting under a large oak
Looking at his mushroom folk
Summoned them, ordered them
To go to war.

We can't go, said the *ink-caps*,
Our foot's too small for the steps
We don't have to go to war.

We can't go, said the *belianki*,
We are noble white dvorianki,
We don't have to go to war.

We can't go, said the toadstools,
We are brigands, we are crooks
We don't have to go to war.

I can't go, said the *morel*
I am too old and not too well
I don't have to go to war.

**Said the russet *ryzhiki*,
We are simple muzhiki
We don't have to go to war.**

**We'll go, cried the *groozd*,
We are brave and willing
We shall go to war
And make a great killing.**

--This old Russian nursery rhyme, freely translated, describes the edible varieties. *Danseur* and choreographer George Balanchine particularly favored the last umbrella cap, which he said "we used to put in a barrel with salt and pepper (no vinegar), bay leaf, and a little onion, and just leave them there for a while. When the time is right--in 2 weeks to a month--you take a mushroom in hand, put a large spoonful of sour cream on it, and eat."