



## THE MARVELOUS MUSHROOM



### THE FACTS ABOUT MUSHROOMS

Mushrooms are actually the fruit of a much larger being. Neither plant nor animal, mushrooms are classified as fungi. The main body is subterranean, or lives on dead trees and living tree roots and can vary in size from a few inches to several miles wide. When they absorb a large amount of water, they can grow amazingly fast. Their fruits sprout out of the ground overnight [1].

Humans and animals feed on the fruits of the mushroom body. There are over two thousand types of mushrooms, but only 2 ½ - 5 % are edible. The rest are highly poisonous and can masquerade as the edible ones. This makes foraging for mushrooms a risky and sometimes fatal business. The toxic effects of mushrooms are also elusive. Some contain enough toxins to immediately kill the person who eats them, like the Amanitas strain. Other mushroom toxins poison people with a cumulative effect, basically building up in a person's system over time. In other words, a person could eat a certain mushroom fifty times with no reaction, and then die from the fifty-first taste because the overall poison levels become overwhelming to the body [2].

The puzzling effects of eating mushrooms makes hunting them a constant Russian roulette, even for those who know what they're doing. Before there were field guides, foraging festivals, and mushroom experts, mushrooms were often considered a strange and mystical occurrence. For

instance, some mushrooms contain a chemical called luciferin, which causes the mushrooms to give off light reflected from their gills, making the ground glow in iridescent colors. This is called Foxfire. Before Anglo-Saxon Britain knew what caused this, they derided mushrooms as nothing but “toadstools.” It’s no wonder they avoided celebrating mushrooms; imagine walking through a forest glade, the ground is glowing, and there are small mushrooms growing in a ring (commonly known as a fairy ring) around you. It is always easier to discount the extraordinary than to try to understand it [3].



## HUNTING MUSHROOMS

Today, mushrooms are big business and big fun. The most commonly cultivated mushroom in the United States is the domestic field mushroom. Otherwise known as the white button mushroom, this type is relatively bland in flavor, but still retains the essence of what mushrooms taste like. On huge farms in Pennsylvania, these mushrooms are harvested in the middle of the night by gatherers who use miner’s lights for guidance. In Japan, shiitakes are farmed on hardwood logs. Perigord truffles, which defeated cultivation for hundreds of years, were mastered about 7 years ago in France. They are also being grown in North Carolina. At approximately \$1,000-\$1,500 per pound, truffles are by far the most expensive mushrooms. This is in large part thanks to the fact that truffle production has decreased worldwide over the last two centuries from 1,500-2,000 tons to roughly 120 tons annually [4]. Perhaps this is due to the secrecy surrounding truffle hunting techniques, and the difficulty of domesticating them.

Foraging for mushrooms is risky, but can result in a tasty prize. Professional foragers usually search for truffles (with pigs and dogs), but Porcinis, Morels, Matsutakes, Hen of the Woods, and many more can be spotted at local farmer’s markets and in catalogs. In Michigan and Canada, amateurs compete to find Morels at festivals that celebrate the rare jewel. There are lots of resources and field guides to help the average person hunt edible mushrooms, but “mushrooming” as it is called, is best when done with an expert.



## MEDICINAL BENEFITS OF MUSHROOMS

Mushrooms have been an essential in Chinese medicine for centuries, containing vitamins B, C and D. They are known to lower both blood pressure and serum cholesterol [5]. City of Hope (<http://www.coh.org>), a

cancer research facility, has even suggested that mushrooms may prevent cancer.

## PREPARING MUSHROOMS

To eat them, you must first clean them. Using a soft brush to rid them of dirt is the best method, because they will soak up water when you rinse them, diluting their flavor. Morels, however, should be washed just before cooking, and because they are hollow, bugs might be living inside them. They should be split and checked for unwanted stowaways. Blue Milky Caps exude a blue goo when the gills are damaged.

Mushrooms - those spongy, meaty, pungent gems - are a worthy addition to almost any savory dish. They add a powerful dimension to food that works wonders for both vegetable and meat dishes. They also make a great flavoring agent, transforming water into mushroom stock, simply through soaking them for a few minutes.



## MUSHROOM GUIDE

There are too many mushrooms to list them all, but here are some descriptions and seasons for quite a few:

### **BLACK TRUMPET**

Color can vary from purply-gray to death-like black. Lily shaped, thin flesh, delicate taste. Available fresh fall through spring.

### **BUTTONS**

Bland taste compared to other mushrooms. Available fresh year round.

### **CEPE/PORCINI**

Also called Polish, Porcini or King Bolete. Bulbous stem with brown, rounded cap. Rich, musty flavor and very perishable. Available fresh in fall, dried and frozen year round.

### **CHANTERELLE**

Curved trumpet or vase shape, color varies from bright orange to apricot gold. Some say it imparts the smell of apricots. Available fresh during fall and winter, dried year round.

### **CREMINI**

Cremini, Button and Portabellas are related. Cremini looks like a button, but is a bit larger with a brown cap. When growth is unchecked, it becomes a Portabella with more complex flavor and texture. All three are cultivated and available fresh year round.



### **ENOKI**

Dainty, Q-Tip shaped. Cultivated and available fresh year round.

### **HEDGEHOG**

Squash colored and slightly bitter tasting. Substitute for Chanterelles. Trim stems. Hedgehogs have small "teeth" on gills and break off in other foods, leaving gold flecks.

### **MATSUTAKE**

Also called Pine mushroom. Spicy, woody flavor. Available fresh in fall.

### **MOREL**

Spongy looking but hollow. Color is tan to dark brown. Intense, earthy flavor. Available fresh in spring, dried year round.

### **OYSTER**

Cultivated, fan-shaped. Color varies from light tan to gray. Mild flavor. Available fresh year round.



### **SHIITAKE**

Also called Chinese, Black Forest or Oak mushrooms. Chocolate brown, fibrous, woody stems. Available fresh and dried year round.

### **WOODEAR**

Rubbery texture, flat, woody aroma. Imported from China. Available dried year round.

### **YELLOWFOOT**

Fragrant member of Chanterelle family. Gray-brown color with muted gold stem. High water content.



## MUSHROOM RESOURCES

### FIELD GUIDE:

Mushrooms Demystified by David Arora  
(10 Speed Press – 1986)

### RECIPES:

The Mushroom Lover's Mushroom Cookbook and Primer by Amy Farges  
(Workman Publishing – 2000)  
ISBN: 076110660X

### GOURMET MUSHROOM SOURCES:

Marché Aux Delices - New York, NY  
([www.auxdelices.com/default.htm](http://www.auxdelices.com/default.htm))

**1** Samy, Aiman. "What Are Mushrooms?" Mushrooms. <http://www.allaboutmushrooms.com/mushrooms.htm>. (16 Oct. 2003).

**2** **3** Dibben, Martyn. "Mushroom Mania. Is It For You?" Milwaukee Public Museum Lore. 1984. <http://www.mpm.edu/collect/botany/mushroom.html>. (10 Oct. 2003).

**4** "Truffle History." About Truffles. 2002. <http://www.garlandtruffles.com/about.html>. (10 Oct. 2003).

**5** Law, David. "Fungi as a Platform for New Medicine." Mushrooms, Fungi & Medicine. 1997. <http://www.gmushrooms.com/HEALTH.HTM>. (10 Oct. 2003).



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