

Wild Thing!

by Mercedes Picot

Fun Facts on Fungi

It would be an understatement to say that my fascination with this amazing plant has mushroomed since I began researching this article. The study of mushrooms is called **Mycology** so my appreciation makes of me a **Mycophile**. Only about a dozen varieties of mushrooms are commonly used for culinary or medicinal purposes yet there are an estimated 38,000 documented species! Unbelievable! So many fungi, so little time to sample them all...



The little capped wonderkinds stand apart from other plants because they possess neither flower, leaf, roots, nor chlorophyll. Mushrooms are actually the fruit of an invisible network of filaments, the mycelium, originating from the germination of spores or spawn. Perfect little recycling plants, they draw their nourishment from a wide variety of organic matter such as rotting tree stumps or branches, decayed rags, compost, and even rusted metal! These unscrupulous guests don't waste their time waiting around for an invitation from the perfect host!

A Little Ancient History

Way back about 5000 years ago, according to ancient hieroglyphs, Egyptian Pharaohs venerated the almighty mushroom. They held the belief that consuming fungi would render them immortal and greedily kept them from mere commoners. Many ancient civilizations practiced elaborate mushroom rituals which they believed could bestow super-human strength and lead the soul to the realm of the gods.

By the reign of Louis the XIV, cultivation of mushrooms had begun. Louis, a mycophile like myself, had special caves near Paris where mushrooms were grown for the exclusive use of his court. By 1914, thanks to improved commercial production, an estimated four to five million pounds of mushrooms were grown in the U.S. alone. Today, the North American Mycological Association boasts enthusiastic members from across the land. Yet the title "Mushroom Capital" goes to Chester County in Pennsylvania. Every year in mid-September, they celebrate the almighty fungi with a Mushroom Festival. Throughout history, mushrooms of all descriptions have never lost their mystique, their legion of fans, and their enigmatic attraction.

Good Nutrition

Still growing in popularity, mushrooms deserve their place of honour in the kitchen and in Mother Nature's pharmacy. The rich, earthy flavours and subtle undertones of edible mushrooms are gifts to the most discriminating palate. Despite the fact that they are 90% water, mushrooms surprisingly contain a wealth of nutrients. They are good sources of protein, B-vitamins, vitamin C, fiber, and minerals including iron, calcium, selenium, potassium, and phosphorus. Who said that everything good in life was either sinful or fattening? Not the case with these fat-free fungi!

Purchase and Storage of Fresh Mushrooms

How do you determine whether the mushrooms in the produce section are at their succulent peak? Don't you know it... Firm and perky. Free of spots, wrinkles or slime. Sounds like good advice for just about anything! Mushrooms are fragile and some will deteriorate rather quickly after picking, so store them in a paper bag in the vegetable crisper of your refrigerator. Very delicate varieties such as Enokis should be kept refrigerated in a shallow container covered with a paper towel or cheesecloth.

Cleaning Your Fungi

Never soak these sensitive fellows as they will become waterlogged and soggy. A quick rinse under cold running water just before you use them will get rid of any grit or dirt. Pat dry with a soft cloth or paper towel, or use a special mushroom brush or sponge for this purpose. Purists would never dream of pouring water over their fungi - a gentle wipe with a soft wet cloth is what they recommend.

Medicinal Mushrooms

As new methods of cultivation bring some of the medicinal varieties out of the emperor's treasure chest and into your local Natural Food Store or Pharmacy, four major varieties of mushrooms are making exciting medical headlines: Maitake, Shiitake, Reishi, and Cordyceps. Hundreds of scientific studies have so far revealed their immune boosting and anti-tumour properties. Improved methods of production over the past 20 years have allowed for reliable availability and standardization of high quality mushroom extracts for use in the supplement industry.

Let's zero in on some of the more exotic edible fungi varieties easily available in North America so you can try them out in some tasty recipes. You'll quickly realize for yourself that there's magic in those mushrooms.

Portobellos: Among the giants of the mushrooms, Portobellos sometimes reach up to 10 inches in diameter. They have thick, sturdy stems and flat dark brown caps and both are edible. Because their surprising flavour and texture are almost steak-like, they are usually sliced and grilled or pan-fried but they can easily be chopped up and added to soups and stews.

Oyster Mushrooms or Pleurotus:

These graceful, fan-shaped, smooth caps with stubby stems grow on wood and non-fermented organic waste. Of the 35 to 40 different species of Pleurotus, most are edible and none are toxic. Good to know! They have a savoury, delicate flavour and mellow texture so use a light hand when seasoning these quick-cooking mushrooms. Cut or break into bite-size pieces and add to stir-fries or soups near the end of cooking.

Enokis: These delicate-tasting fine stalks are also called “velvet shanks”. They naturally grow in tiny white capped clusters up to 4 inches high on dead or living tree trunks, roots or fallen branches. Cultivated Enokis usually grown on wood chips or stumps. Their mild flavour and slightly citrus fragrance is highly prized in Asian cuisine. Trim off the base and rinse gently and add them raw to a sandwich or salad. In cooked dishes, add them at the last minute.

Shiitakes: These prized oriental mushrooms have a firm, meaty texture and a sweet subtle flavour. Shiitake mushrooms, which grow on wood, have a large dark cap on a slim stem and are judiciously used in fine Oriental cuisine. Because they are rich in vitamins and enzymes, they are highly acclaimed for their medicinal value. Fresh Shiitakes can be found in better food markets or you can buy them dried in oriental markets or natural food stores. Reconstitute dried Shiitakes in warm water for at least 30 minutes. The soaking water may be added to soups or sauces.

Boletus or Porcinis: Primarily imported from Europe, where they appear in birch and aspen forests, these large mushrooms are usually sold dried. They can be rehydrated by soaking in warm water for 20 minutes. They have thick, club-like stems with flat or domed caps that can reach up to 10 inches in diameter. Their rich, earthy flavour makes them great added to soups or casseroles and in Italian risottos and pasta dishes.

Morels: This peculiar-looking honeycombed capped fungus grows in temperate regions in the springtime. Although the cap comes in many earthy tones in more than 20 species, the darker cap is most valued. It measures from 1 inch to 5 inches tall. To the amateur mushroom picker, this is probably the most easily identifiable but rare wild mushroom. Your hunter-gatherer instincts will be well rewarded by finding a patch of these tasty treasures. Quickly rinse and carefully dry fresh morels checking for debris hiding in the grooves. Dried morels should be soaked in warm water for about 5 minutes, then rinsed and soaked a second time in fresh water for 10 minutes. Add to pasta or rice dishes, sauces, soups or stews. Morels should always be eaten well cooked as they can cause stomach irritation when eaten raw!

Chanterelles: These highly-prized wild mushrooms are usually gathered in the coniferous and deciduous forests of the Pacific North-west & East Coast or in Europe. The golden trumpet caps have wavy, rolled edges with wrinkled undersides on firm stalks. The cap ranges from under one inch to 4 inches across. Enjoy their unique flavour lightly grilled, sautéed or added to soups, sauces, omelets, or rice dishes.

Beware: Chanterelles which have turned translucent are poisonous!



Mushroom Recipes

BROILED PORTOBELLOS

Serves 4

1 Tbs. dark Barley Miso
1 Tbs. Balsamic vinegar
2 Tbs. vegetable broth or water
2 large Portobello mushrooms (about 6 inches diam.), cleaned
Extra-virgin olive oil
Fresh parsley, finely chopped

Whisk together miso, vinegar, and broth in a mixing bowl and set aside. Separate mushroom stems from caps and slice both into slices about ¼ inch thick. Brush with oil and broil or grill for about 5 minutes. Turn and brush with miso-vinegar mixture and continue cooking for about 5 minutes, basting occasionally. Serve warm, garnished with parsley.

SHIITAKE & WILD RICE PILAF

Serves 4

4 fresh Shiitake mushrooms, sliced
2 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
1 clove garlic, minced
2 cups of cooked wild rice
½ cup walnut pieces, toasted
¼ cup green onions, sliced
1 Tbs. grated lemon peel
salt & pepper to taste

In a large skillet or wok, sauté mushrooms and garlic in olive oil for 1-2 minutes, until tender. Add cooked wild rice, walnut pieces, green onion, and grated lemon peel. Blend ingredients and season to taste. Warm through and serve.

GOURMET MUSHROOM FETTUCCHINI

Serves 6

1 lb. fettuccini noodles
3 Tbs. Extra-virgin olive oil
3 cloves garlic, minced
4 oz. fresh mixed mushrooms (oyster, enoki, shiitake), cleaned and chopped
1/3 cup Pine nuts
3 oz. sun dried tomatoes, softened & chopped
Freshly grated Parmesan cheese to taste

Cook fettuccini according to package directions. In a medium saucepan, heat oil and sauté garlic, mushrooms, pine nuts, and tomatoes for 2-3 minutes. Drain cooked noodles and toss with warm mushroom mixture. Top with freshly grated Parmesan cheese.

MARINATED MUSHROOM APPETIZER

Serves 8

1 cup extra-virgin olive oil
1/3 cup Balsamic vinegar
2 garlic cloves, minced
½ tsp. dry mustard powder
2 green onions, sliced
¼ cup fresh parsley or cilantro, finely chopped
1 lb. small mushrooms or
large mushrooms cut in half

Whisk together oil, vinegar, garlic, and mustard in a large mixing bowl. Stir in onion slices and chopped fresh herbs. Add mushrooms. Let stand for at least 30 minutes, stirring occasionally or cover and refrigerate for up to 2 days.