Morel Mushroom.

MAD FOR MUSHROOMS

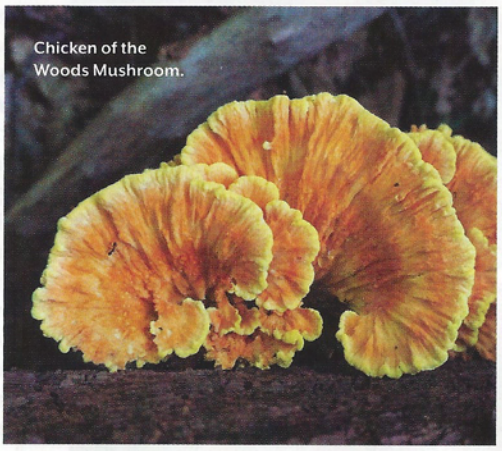
BY PATTI VERBANAS

After a heavy rain, it's a small thrill to watch mushrooms spring up—as if by magic—populating fields and forests. Spring is a marvelous time to forage for mushrooms: The concentration of finding them puts you in a state of blissful mindfulness, and the rush of discovery is one of life's purest pleasures.

Before you embark on your foraging adventure, it's important to know some fundamentals like which mushrooms are safe to eat (many edible varieties have poisonous look-alikes) and how to keep them from spoiling.

"Wildman" Steve Brill, who has been leading mushroom foraging tours for nearly four decades, recommends beginners join a field walk with a mycological association to gain expertise. (You can find a club on the North American Mycological Association website: namyco.org.) "Learn a small number of the most unmistakable species—chicken mushroom, giant puffball, morels, and chanterelle—and check with an expert prior to eating any wild mushrooms that you are unsure about," he says. The most comprehensive guide is *Mushrooms Demystified* by David Arora; *The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mushrooms* by Gary Lincoff is a portable resource to take into the field.

"Morels are considered the best-tasting mushrooms of springtime," Brill says, but notes that there are other delicious types, such as puffballs, which are white and soft inside like cream cheese, and mushrooms that can be substituted for meats due to tastes similar to their namesakes: oyster mushrooms, which have a fishy taste, and chicken mushrooms.



Chicken of the Woods Mushroom.

You can best find mushrooms a day or two after a heavy rain, on living or dead trees, and in meadows, fields, and forest floors—but not so much in sandy soil. Brill recommends foraging away from railroads and areas within 50 feet of heavy traffic or highways where mushrooms are likely to be contaminated. Bring a pocket knife to cut mushrooms cleanly and trim off the soil. Once cut, place them in separate paper or wax paper bags, grouped by type and marked accordingly; plastic can make mushrooms spoil. A basket will prevent a large collection from being crushed.

Since mushrooms are perishable, refrigerate and prepare them as soon as possible. Clean them with a soft toothbrush, using as little water as possible to minimize sogginess.

Mushrooms are delicious health powerhouses: low in calories, carbohydrates, fat, and sodium and containing important nutrients, including potassium, vitamin D, proteins, and fiber. Brill recommends that you always cook mushrooms to neutralize toxins, and simmer and steam those with a high water content instead of sautéing. One of his favorite recipes follows:

BAKED MOREL CASSEROLE

SERVES: 6
PREPARATION TIME: 20 MINUTES
COOKING TIME: 20 MINUTES

2 Tbsp. olive oil

4 cups morels or other wild or commercial mushrooms

1 bell pepper, finely chopped

1 onion, finely chopped

2 cloves of garlic, finely chopped

1¼ Tbsp. silken tofu, drained

1 Tbsp. lime juice

¼ tsp. salt, or to taste

1 Tbsp. parsley, finely chopped

¼ tsp. white pepper, ground

3½ cups mashed potatoes (cooked)

1 Tbsp. corn oil

½ Tbsp. lecithin granules

2 Tbsp. any wild onion leaves, chives, or scallions, chopped

Sauté the morels, bell pepper, onions, and garlic in olive oil 5 minutes.

Stir in silken tofu, lime juice, salt, parsley, and white pepper, reduce the heat to low, and simmer, covered, 5 minutes.

Meanwhile, mix the corn oil and lecithin granules with the potatoes and put half into an oiled baking dish.

Put the mushroom layer on top and cover with the remaining potatoes. Garnish with the wild onion leaves.

Bake, covered, in a preheated 350°F oven 20 minutes.

—Steve Brill, *The Wild Vegan Cookbook*. More recipes at www.wildmanstevebrill.com.

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