

MARTHA  
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# Living

*Thanksgiving*

PORTABLE SIDE DISHES

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GRANNY SQUARES GREAT PANTRIES





# foraging for **WILD** mushrooms

For the weekend mushroom hunter, foraging is a little like fishing or golf: a pastime whose true pleasure lies in the opportunity to reconnect with nature. Mushroom hunters are at their happiest clambering intrepidly up wooded hills, feeling the sponginess of the matted leaves underfoot, scanning the ground around a lichen-covered fallen elm for any hint of a mushroom. Few people forget the first time they find a morel tucked under a cluster of poplars—the way it just seems to materialize against its camouflage of drying leaves, as if willed into existence. And what it feels like to kneel in the damp spring earth and reach to pick the coffered cap, and then suddenly to catch sight of another morel nearby, and then another, and then another, until it seems as if mushrooms are exploding from the soil like fireworks. • Mushrooms are the spore-bearing “fruit” of a buried mesh of cottony rootlike fibers. Often, they share a symbiotic relationship with particular trees, investing the roots with a weblike wrapping, breaking down organic matter to feed the tree, and receiving water and structural support in return. Almost anywhere people live, there will be opportunities to forage for mushrooms—wild mushrooms have an extraordinary geographic range, from puffballs growing in the Western deserts to morels inside the Arctic Circle. “Mushrooms are ubiquitous,” says Steve Brill, a naturalist who leads foraging

Each wild mushroom is a small architectural triumph. A mushroom isn't an individual organism, but the fruiting body of a buried mesh of threadlike roots collectively called a mycelium. The mycelium reproduces by sending up mushrooms to release microscopic spores, which will then spread and develop into new mycelia. OPPOSITE: These gilled mushrooms include the amethyst laccaria (standing on its cap), a Turkey-tail (*Trametes versicolor*, on the branch), and a large shrimp russula mushroom. These mushrooms store their spores in the feathery gills under the cap, ready to be dislodged at the slightest jostle.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GENTL & HYERS  
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1. SHRIMP RUSSULA

2. CHANTERELLE

3. KING BOLETE

4. PIG'S EAR

5. YELLOW FOOT

6. QUEEN BOLETE

7. HEDGEHOG

8. MANZANITA BOLETE

9. BUTTER BOLETE

3. KING BOLETE

10. BLACK TRUMPET

11. FAIRY RING





excursions in and around New York City. "I collect hen-of-the-woods (maitake) every year from an old oak tree on the grounds of an elementary school across the street from my apartment building in Queens. When it rains a lot, the city parks overflow with gourmet mushrooms—and poisonous ones." In Manhattan's Central Park alone, Brill has gathered hen-of-the-woods, chicken mushrooms, honey mushrooms, meadow mushrooms, oyster mushrooms, wine-cap stropharias, pear-shaped puffballs, red-cracked boletes, two-colored boletes, and porcini, all of which are choice edibles. But he's also found deadly *Amanita* species and poisonous earthballs. That some mushrooms can kill is a fact that must never be forgotten by the mushroom hunter. And alarmingly, lethal mushrooms often mimic the appearance of edible mushrooms. Identification of wild mushrooms is a matter of life and death, and requires great expertise—a brief glance through David Arora's 960-page *Mushrooms Demystified* should be enough to drive home the complexity and importance of proper identification.

The best way to learn about mushroom foraging is the old-fashioned way—by apprenticing yourself to an expert. Connie Green, a Northern California picker and owner of Wine Forest, a company that supplies restaurants with wild mushrooms, suggests asking a mushroom-hunting friend to let you accompany him on a hunt, making a sincere promise not to poach on his patches in the future. Better yet, she says, "Seek out your regional mycological society. These are the folks who really know their stuff."

As you make your way through the forest, you'll frequently come across fellow pickers, sometimes solo, sometimes in pairs, and occasionally foraging as part of a larger, slowly scattering group. The camaraderie among mushroom hunters is an extraordinary thing: They'll share their food with you, help you push your car out of back-road mud, and let you have the last of their insect repellent. But should the talk turn to the subject of good places to pick mushrooms, they'll suddenly turn as cagey as a roomful of military attachés during the height of the cold war. Mushroomers have their secret patches—the spots to which they return every year, where the mushrooms have put down a secure underground network and where the picker is guaranteed vast armfuls of impossibly beautiful fungi. There can be no greater gesture of friendship than for one hunter to share his patches with another.

An autumn morning spent tromping through the woods can yield an extraordinary array of mushrooms. The choice of receptacle is critical. Larry Lonik, a Michigan naturalist who specializes in morels, explains that "It's necessary for spores to return to the earth to create more mushrooms, but the plastic and paper bags most people use don't let the spores out." Lonik teaches pickers to use mesh bags: The spores from the collected mushrooms fall through the mesh and are spread across the forest floor as the hunter walks. Those paper bags will be useful once you get your mushrooms home, however. Hans Johansson of Mushrooms & More, a wild-mushroom wholesaler, recommends that mushrooms be stored double-bagged in paper in the crisper bin of your refrigerator. "You can also wrap a slightly damp paper towel around them to keep them moist," he says. "Household refrigerators act as dehumidifiers and will dry out mushrooms, even in a bag." His favorite way of preserving mushrooms is to freeze them, after roasting them in the oven.

At the end of a group hunt, mushroomers gather to compare their catches. It's a merry time, a moment for admiration, envy, and unrestrained braggadocio. Each mushroom is examined, each identification confirmed: When the identification is uncertain, the mushroom is discarded. The magnificence of the day's finds is surpassed only by foragers' yarns, which easily rival the best ever told by golfers in the clubhouse or fishermen around a campfire.

## mushroom <sup>glossary</sup>

Years of experience are required to distinguish edible mushrooms from poisonous ones. This glossary is not intended as a forager's guide; keep an eye out for wild mushrooms at better-food stores instead.

- 1. SHRIMP RUSSULA**—Often found under Douglas firs, these crisp, meaty mushrooms give off a strong shrimp aroma.
- 2. CHANTERELLE**—Found in the summer in the East, through fall and winter in the West.
- 3. KING BOLETE**—Also called "porcini" and "cèpe," king boletes are often found near pine trees in the West and hardwoods in the East.
- 4. PIG'S EAR**—Related to the chanterelle, but not as delicious.
- 5. YELLOW FOOT**—Also related to chanterelles, these mushrooms prefer boggy conditions.
- 6. QUEEN BOLETE**—More common in the West than the East, queen boletes prefer the company of oak trees.
- 7. HEDGEHOG**—These spicy mushrooms get their name from the hundreds of bristles clustered under their caps.
- 8. MANZANITA BOLETE**—Most frequently found under manzanita trees in the West.
- 9. BUTTER BOLETE**—These firm mushrooms crack open like a watermelon when cut.
- 10. BLACK TRUMPET**—These instrument-like black mushrooms, also called "trompette de la mort" (French for "trumpet of death"), have an intense flavor reminiscent of blue cheese.
- 11. FAIRY RING**—In summer, fairy rings are often found on lawns and in cemeteries after a good rain.
- 12. MATSUTAKE**—A tremendous delicacy in Asia, matsutake tastes of pine and cinnamon.
- 13. ZELLER'S BOLETE**—Found deep in fir forests, these mushrooms have a mild porcini flavor with a slight lemon edge.
- 14. CORAL**—Coral mushrooms come in a variety of colors; great care must be taken with identification.
- 15. WOOD BLEWIT**—These violet-colored mushrooms have a floral aroma and will turn scrambled eggs lavender.

See page 283 for numbers 12 to 15.



A full-page photograph of a woman with long blonde hair, wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt and dark pants, kneeling in a forest. She is looking down at the ground, which is covered in brown leaves and pine needles. A woven basket with a handle sits on the ground next to her. The forest is dense with tall trees and sunlight filtering through the canopy. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

When Connie Green is asked what she likes about foraging for mushrooms, she quickly turns lyrical. "It's like asking a musician what he loves about music—it's so basic to the heart that it's hard to explain." Green is always careful to arrange for permission before foraging on public or private lands.

OPPOSITE: The Northern California coast provides an ideal environment for mushrooms such as the queen bolete, Zeller's bolete, coral, and wood

blewit. Meaty matsutake mushrooms are served (top right) grilled and marinated in soy sauce, then sprinkled with bright-green scallions. Stillwater Canyon Ranch (center right) offers a welcome return after a day spent mushrooming. Green's basket (bottom center) is filled with the day's harvest.









12. MATSUTAKE



13. ZELLER'S BOLETE



14. CORAL



1. QUEEN BOLETE



15. WOOD BLEWIT





Since mushrooms are mostly water, cooking concentrates their flavor. Their high protein content gives them a meaty texture and taste, so they'll stand up well in robust dishes like these hearty crostini of toasted rustic bread, grilled goat cheese, and grilled porcini mushrooms drizzled with good olive oil. **OPPOSITE:** Combining different varieties of mushroom, as in a risotto of black trumpets, chanterelles, and pauliflower mushrooms, adds visual and textural flair.







Mushrooms have almost no fat, so they benefit greatly from the addition of butter or cream. This thick mushroom soup gets some sweetness from the addition of a splash of Madeira. To provide the soup's intense flavor base, a mixture of dried morels and chanterelles is used—dried mushrooms, particularly chanterelles and morels, are often preferable to fresh when it comes to incorporation into creams, broths, soups, and sauces. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A fifth of vodka poured over a generous cup of dried chanterelles and allowed to infuse in a cool dark place for ten days to two weeks makes a delicious amber cocktail. Their savoriness makes mushrooms particularly useful when saucing meat, as in this veal chop with mushroom sauce (an update of the perennial childhood favorite) or pasta tossed with caramelized onions, chard, and chanterelles. A mixture of wild mushrooms balances the earthiness of Yukon gold potatoes in a rich mushroom-potato pie. SEE THE RECIPES SECTION

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