

MAGICAL MUSHROOMS (The edible ones)

Mushrooms are one of the most interesting foods that we consume. Delicious, deadly, mysterious, intoxicating, enigmatic. Throughout history mushrooms have varying reputations, considered both food and foe. Today it is easy to find safe, delicious mushrooms in the market, but it wasn't always that way. In the past reckless wild mushroom hunters threw caution to the wind with sometimes fatal results, often giving culinary mushrooms a bad reputation.

Mushrooms were long considered part of the plant kingdom. It wasn't until the mid-20th century that they were recognized as belonging to their own kingdom: Fungus (plural Fungi) and distinct from plants or animals. Fungi are among the most widely distributed organisms on Earth and are of great environmental and medical importance. Many are free-living in soil or water; others form parasitic or symbiotic relationships with plants or animals. Fungus contains more than 144,000 known species which includes yeasts, rusts, smuts, mildews, molds and our interest here - - mushrooms of which there are reportedly at least 38,000 species.

We are lucky in Sonoma county because we have access to a wide range of both cultivated and wild culinary mushrooms. Re the latter be cautious of course. Many wild mushrooms are poisonous and can be life-threatening. Best to buy your wild mushrooms from a reputable grower or grocer than hunting them yourself. If however, after that warning, you are still interested in foraging mushrooms yourself, the Sonoma County Mycological Society www.somamushrooms.org is the place to start. They offer classes and forays including their SOMA Wild Mushroom Camp in January which is taught by very knowledgeable foragers including the legendary David Arora: www.davidarora.com who has written two of the most important field guides for wild mushrooms and is a real hoot!

Up until the last few years mushrooms were considered nutritionally “deficient”. We know now that this is not the case. They are one of those “super foods” (stand aside blueberries!). Mushrooms are one of the few natural sources of vitamin D, which is essential for healthy bones and teeth. They are also a great source for B-vitamins, Riboflavin (B 2) which helps maintain healthy red blood cells plus Niacin, Pantothenic Acid (which plays a number of metabolic roles) as well as Biotin and Folate (which we know is important for pregnant women). Mushrooms are one of the richest, natural sources of selenium, an essential mineral which strengthens the immune system and may help reduce the risk of cancer and other chronic illnesses. Mushrooms are also a good source of zinc, another essential mineral which helps boost your immune system as well as your libido! A 100g serving of mushrooms contains more dietary fiber (2.5g) than 100g of celery (1.8g) or a slice of whole-wheat bread (2.0g).

Our own Gourmet Mushrooms in Sebastopol www.mycopia.com, who cultivate several exotic culinary mushrooms, also make and sell what they call “Mycobiotic Nutraceuticals” which have many healthful properties including reportedly significantly boosting the immune system.

A few interesting mushroom facts to impress friends with:

- **The largest living organism on earth is a mushroom.** Forget Blue Whales! Next time you purchase button mushrooms at the market remember they have a relative that occupies some 2,300 plus acres of soil in Oregon's Blue Mountains. This humongous fungus would encompass more than 1700 football fields, or nearly four-square miles of turf. Based on its current growth rate, it's estimated to be 2,400 years old but could be as ancient as 8,650 years, which would earn it a place among the oldest living organisms as well.
- Portabella mushrooms, button mushrooms both white and brown (cremini) are all the same mushroom at different levels of maturity.
- The Japanese have confirmed that lightning strikes can more than double some mushroom crops, both in the wild and in cultivation. They have successful ongoing experiments that are jolting fungi with electricity to increase yields.

Cleaning Mushrooms:

The conventional wisdom is that mushrooms are very porous, and you shouldn't expose them to water because it will make them soggy. We were told to wipe them off with a damp towel or worse yet buy a mushroom brush to clean them up. It's what I was taught by me by my Grandmother and Culinary School. Ain't so however and it takes forever.

Best way to clean mushrooms is with a brisk shower of water in a colander to wash off any compost (if cultivated) or dirt (if wild). Don't let them soak of course. They will absorb negligible water and still sauté or roast nicely. With wild mushrooms, which can be a little dirty or soggy if gathered after a rain, after washing place them uncovered in a single layer on a baking sheet in the refrigerator for a day or two which will dry them out. Remember that refrigerators work to remove moisture that is naturally present in the air inside of the unit.

Storing Mushrooms:

Weird to think but mushrooms are still alive and transpiring when we acquire them. Under no circumstances put them in a plastic bag which will suffocate them and eventually make them slimy, mildewed and not delicious. Best to store in a brown paper bag in the fridge until ready to use. It's OK if they dry out a bit.

MUSHROOM PATE

Makes enough to fill a 3-cup mold or dish

The simplicity of this recipe belies its great taste. Traditionally served in a small glass jar with a bail lid. Serve with crisp little croutes, toasts or crackers of your choice and, as the French do, with some little cornichons and grainy mustard on the side.

1-ounce dried wild mushrooms such as porcini
5 tablespoons butter
1/2 cup chopped shallots or green onions (white part only)
1-1/4 pounds thickly sliced fresh wild or exotic cultivated mushrooms*
2 teaspoons finely chopped garlic
2 teaspoons curry powder or to your taste
1/2 teaspoon ground cumin
1 cup toasted, preferably unsalted cashews
2 tablespoons toasted nut oil such as walnut or olive oil
2 tablespoons finely chopped mixed herbs such as parsley, chives and/or basil
2 teaspoons finely grated lemon zest
Kosher or sea salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

Rinse the dried mushrooms quickly and let soak in warm water to cover for 15 minutes. Drain, squeeze dry and chop.

Heat the butter in a large sauté pan over moderately high heat. Add the shallots, all mushrooms, garlic, curry and cumin and sauté and stir until mixture is just beginning to brown and all liquid has evaporated.

While mushrooms are cooking add the cashews to a food processor and process till finely chopped. Add oil and continue to process to make a paste or butter. Add the mushroom mixture and process till almost smooth. Stir in the herbs and zest and season with salt and pepper to your taste and place in a 3-cup pate mold or other ceramic dish. Can be stored covered and refrigerated for up to 3 days. Allow to return to room temperature to serve.



MARINATED MUSHROOMS

Serves 6 - 8 as part of an Antipasti offering

This is so easy to do. There are lots of interesting flavored vinegars in the market which can be used here to change the flavor profile.

1/2 cup plus 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

2/3 cup white wine vinegar

2 large cloves garlic, smashed

1 tablespoon sugar

1 teaspoon salt

1/4 cup water

1 small white onion peeled and cut into 1/4-inch-thick rings

1-ounce dried porcini or morel mushrooms or a combination soaked in warm water for 20 mins

1 tablespoon finely sliced peeled shallot

2/3 pound fresh white or cremini mushrooms

In a deep bowl whisk together 1/2 cup olive oil, vinegar, garlic, sugar, salt and water. Add the onion rings and set aside.

Add the remaining 2 tablespoons oil to a sauté pan and heat over moderate heat. Drain the dried wild mushrooms and gently squeeze to remove excess water. Add the drained mushrooms and shallot and sauté for 3 – 4 minutes or until very lightly browned. Add to the bowl with the onion rings.

Trim the ends of the fresh mushrooms and wipe with a damp towel to remove any compost they were grown in. Cut in half or quarters depending on their size. Add to the onion mixture and stir gently to make sure all are well coated. Leave at room temperature for 3 – 4 hours stirring once or twice. Serve with toothpicks for spearing.



MAITAKE (HEN OF THE WOODS) TEMPURA WITH PONZU DIPPING SAUCE

Don't worry if the mushrooms break up a bit. You can fry all the little pieces which are my favorite nibbles. See comment following for tips on deep frying. If you can't get Maitake this recipe works well with other mushrooms too.

For the Ponzu Sauce:

1/2 cup fresh lime or lemon juice or a combination
2 tablespoons rice vinegar
1/3 cup Japanese soy sauce
2 tablespoons mirin

2 tablespoons light brown sugar
1/2 teaspoon Asian fish sauce (or to taste)

For the batter:

1 cups rice flour
1 egg yolk
1 cup club soda, chilled

Canola oil for frying
1-pound Maitake mushrooms, sliced into 1/4-inch slices
1 cup corn starch
Sea salt
Furikake*, optional (Japanese rice seasoning)

In separate bowls whisk the Ponzu sauce and tempura mixtures to combine. Add 2 inches of oil to a deep saucepan or Dutch oven and heat to 375 degrees.

Dust Maitake with the cornstarch shaking off any excess. Dredge them in the batter and fry until golden brown, about 3 minutes. With a slotted spoon or spider transfer to a paper lined rack to drain. Sprinkle lightly with salt and furikake if using and serve warm with the dipping sauce.



Deep Frying

A steady diet of fried foods certainly isn't good, but I'm not about to abandon them entirely. I can't think of another technique that adds flavor and texture the way that frying does. There is shallow frying (what we do for Southern Fried Chicken) and deep frying (what we do for wings, fries, croquettes). There are three important things to think about when frying:

1. Good clean oil with a relatively high smoke point. We never want to cook with oil that has been "smoked" because its chemistry changes, and not for the good. If you smoke an oil, and we've all done it, toss it out and start over. See page 000 for the smoke points for various cooking oils. Canola is a good all-purpose oil for frying because of its relatively high smoke point and neutral flavor.

2. The right temperature. The sweet spot for frying is 350°F to 375°F. You don't want to go less than 350°F because the food tends to absorb more oil, making it greasy and laden. If you are cooking something that will take a while to cook through, such as a whole chicken, more than 375°F will tend to overcook the outside before the inside is done. Use a thermometer. There are all kinds in the market, including a laser gun that can read the surface of the oil without a probe.

3. Cold food into hot fat is best. We're often told in recipes to chill something that we've breaded or coated before frying but not told why. The "why" is that when cold food hits the hot fat, there is an immediate crisping of the surface, which helps to retard the absorption of oil. It won't make the food impervious to the oil, but it does help to make the food less greasy.

MUSHROOM SOUP WITH CRÈME FRAÎCHE

Serves 4

1-ounce dried porcini mushrooms
1 tablespoon each extra-virgin olive oil and butter
1 tablespoon minced shallot
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
10 ounces cremini mushrooms, trimmed and coarsely chopped (about 5 cups)
2 teaspoons chopped fresh thyme
1/4 cup dry sherry
3 cups or so low salt chicken or vegetable stock
1 ounce finely grated Parmigiano-Reggiano (1 cup using a microplane grater)
1/4 cup crème fraîche, sour cream, or plain Greek yogurt
1 teaspoon smoked paprika, or to taste

In a small bowl cover the dried mushrooms with hot water and soak until soft, about 10 minutes. Strain saving the soaking water, chop and set aside.

Heat the oil and butter in a 4-quart saucepan over medium heat. Add the shallot and a sprinkling of salt and pepper and cook, stirring, until beginning to brown at the edges, about 3 minutes.

Add the cremini and porcini mushrooms and cook until lightly browned and any moisture has evaporated, about 5 minutes. Add the thyme and lightly season with salt and pepper. Add the sherry and cook, stirring, until reduced by half, about 2 minutes.

Add the stock and reserved mushroom soaking water and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat and simmer for 6 - 8 minutes. Stir in Parmigiano and remove from heat and let cool slightly.

Working in batches, purée the soup in a blender until smooth or alternately use an immersion blender to puree. Return to the saucepan and reheat if necessary. Season to your taste with salt and pepper.

In a small bowl, mix the crème fraîche and smoked paprika together. Serve the soup topped with a swirl of the crème fraîche.

SOFT POLENTA WITH MIXED MUSHROOMS AND MASCARPONE

Serving 4 as a main course

Adapted from a recipe by Suzanne Goin, chef and owner of A.O.C, Lucques and Tavern restaurants in Los Angeles. The cooked polenta can be refrigerated overnight. Rewarm and whisk in a little water or stock before serving.

1 1/2 cups medium-grain polenta
Kosher salt
6 tablespoons unsalted butter
Freshly ground pepper
1/2 cup chopped flat-leaf parsley
1 teaspoon chopped garlic
1 tablespoon finely grated lemon zest
1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil
1 1/2 pounds mixed mushrooms, thickly sliced or quartered
4 ounces young greens, such as spinach, kale or pea shoots, coarsely chopped (4 cups packed)
1/2 cup mascarpone cheese

In a large deep saucepan, bring 8 cups of water to a boil. Whisk in the polenta in a slow, steady stream. Add 1 tablespoon of salt and cook over moderately low heat, whisking frequently, until the polenta is thickened and tender, about 20 minutes. Whisk in 4

tablespoons of the butter and season with salt and pepper. Press plastic wrap directly on the surface of the polenta to prevent a film from forming; cover and keep warm.

Meanwhile mince the parsley and garlic with the lemon zest. Transfer the gremolata to a small bowl and set aside.

In a large skillet, melt 1 tablespoon of the butter in 2 tablespoons of the olive oil. Add half of the mushrooms and season with salt and pepper. Cook over moderately high heat, stirring occasionally, until the mushrooms are golden and tender, about 7 minutes. Stir in half of the chopped greens and cook for 1 minute; transfer the mixture to a large bowl. Repeat with the remaining butter, oil, mushrooms and chopped greens.

Pour the polenta onto a large platter; if the polenta is very thick, reheat with 1/2 cup of water before serving. Spoon the mushrooms and greens on top and garnish with the mascarpone. Sprinkle the gremolata over the polenta and serve warm.

CHAWAN MUSHI WITH BLACK TRUMPET MUSHROOMS

Serves 4

Chawan mushi is Japanese comfort food that combines eggs and dashi (the basic stock of Japan) to make a light custard and then it is steamed or baked in a hot water bath. Chicken, shrimp, mushrooms and green vegetables are typical additions, but you can add whatever you want. *Chawan* means cup or teacup, the vessel in which the custard is steamed. There are chawan mushi cups with lids sold in Japanese or Asian grocery stores. You can easily substitute heatproof ramekins or small bowls and cover them tightly with foil or plastic wrap.

2 ounces fresh or 1/2-ounce dried black trumpets, cleaned
Unsalted butter
Sea salt and freshly ground pepper (preferably white)
3 large eggs
2 cups regular or mushroom dashi (recipe follows) or chicken stock
1 teaspoon sake (optional)
4 medium shrimp (21 – 25 size), peeled and deveined
1 teaspoon Japanese soy sauce
1 teaspoon peeled and grated fresh ginger
Cilantro or mitsuba leaves*

If using dried mushrooms, soak them in hot water until softened, about 15 minutes. With either tear them in thick strips lengthwise and sauté in a little butter until just cooked thru, about 3 minutes. Season lightly with salt and pepper and set aside.

In a bowl, beat the eggs thoroughly and then stir in the dashi, salt and sake. Cut the shrimp in half lengthwise and toss them with the soy sauce. Divide shrimp and reserved mushrooms in the bottom of four 6-ounce custard cups. Gently pour the egg custard mixture equally into the 4 cups and skim off any bubbles. Cover each cup securely with foil.

Place the cups in a single layer in a steamer, partially cover and steam over moderate heat for 15 - 18 minutes or until custard is just firm. Top with a little of the ginger and a cilantro or mitsuba leaf.

*Mitsuba (aka Japanese parsley, an herb with a flavor of celery, lovage, and cedar) is available at Japanese grocery stores.

Mushroom Dashi

Traditional Dashi is made with kelp (kombu) and dried bonito flakes (smoked and dried skipjack tuna). You'll find recipes online and it could be used here. A simple alternative is to use reconstituted dried granules called *hon dashi* which you'll find in Japanese and Asian markets. For maximum mushroom flavor however a good mushroom dashi is best.

6 cups water
4 four-inch pieces of kombu seaweed*
6 medium dried shiitake mushrooms*

Place kombu in pot of water and very slowly bring to a simmer over medium high heat, but do not boil, about 10 minutes. Remove the kombu just before the pot boils and add the dried mushrooms.

Boil for 1 minute, then turn off the heat and let the pot sit, uncovered, for 30 minutes. Remove the mushrooms and store the dashi covered and refrigerated. It can be the base for a simple soup by adding a tablespoon or so of soy sauce and a sprinkling of chopped green onions.

*You can find Kombu and dried shiitake in Asian and natural foods stores.



CANDY CAP CUSTARD SAUCE FOR DESSERTS

Makes about 2-1/2 cups

Candy cap mushrooms, which are also known as maple caps, have an incredible sweet, maple/butterscotch aroma and flavor. They only grow wild and are even more potent when they are dried. Generally, they are only available from mushroom hunter friends (which is where I get mine) but occasionally you can find them online. Serve this with your favorite cake or tart. This sauce is also the basis for a wonderful ice cream.

1/4 cup dried candy cap mushrooms
2 cups light cream (half and half)
4 egg yolks, lightly beaten
1/2 cup sugar (or to taste)
Drops of fresh lemon juice

Rinse dried candy caps and place in a small saucepan with the cream. Heat slowly and bring just to the simmer. Off heat and let sit for at least 15 minutes.

Meantime in a separate bowl beat the eggs and sugar together until light and smooth. Slowly whisk in cream and return mixture to the saucepan. Over moderate heat, stirring constantly, cook sauce until it just thickens. Be careful not to overcook or eggs will scramble. Immediately remove from heat and strain into a cool bowl. Alternately you can leave mixture unstrained, add a tablespoon or two of cold cream to cool down sauce. Add drops of lemon juice to taste. Store covered in refrigerator up to 3 days.

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