

Eating Wild: More than Meets the Eye

by Aaron French

From a strictly logical viewpoint, spending your days traipsing through the woods collecting mushrooms just doesn't make any sense. Surely, there are easier ways to collect food—particularly on days when we come home with an empty basket. A quick trip to the corner store more predictably yields wild mushrooms, albeit dried and shrink-wrapped in plastic packages.

But why do we want to eat wild food anyway? For thousands of years we have tamed the wild plant and beast to conform to our schedules, to live on our terms, to nourish our bellies. The fungi, those most ancient of beings, have been more resistant to taming over the millennia, and only a relatively few varieties can be grown commercially.

This leaves us with the hundreds of edible mushrooms that haven't been taught to grow in sterile warehouse conditions for our convenience. Few of these are more prized than the beautiful spring morel. Much has been said, even in these pages, about the joys of finding your first morels of the season. It brings out our primal quest for the hunt—you know there's always the chance for the unexpected and miraculous around the next tree.

Even our vernacular for these mushroom excursions—*forays*—is also the word for a quick raid, or a sudden attack for plunder. Our ancient instincts, often hidden just beneath the surface, can fully express themselves in this context of food exploration.

But there is something more going on. Most of the wild mushrooms that we eat, including the morel, form symbiotic relationships with the plants they grow with. This is one of the primary reasons why they are difficult to cultivate, but it is also an unappreciated reason that makes eating them so important. The symbiotic nature of the mushrooms means that they directly absorb nutrients and other compounds from the plants they grow with. In turn, when we eat wild mushrooms, we are ingesting a little piece of that total environment. We are bringing into our bodies a little window of the wild lands beyond the farms and ranches that provide so much of our food.

With this in mind, I tend to cook mushrooms from two different perspectives. If I am eating mushrooms that are more ephemeral, or that I eat less often, I enjoy eating them sautéed very simply in some butter or perhaps some brandy and that's it. This is great, for example, with the sweet orange *Lactarius* or even the common but delicate *Coprinus comatus*.

Alternatively, I like to layer the flavors of a number of mushrooms in one dish. This also gives you flexibility to substitute one mushroom for another as they rotate in and out of availability. For this recipe, I chose to work with morels, hedgehogs, and then a little black truffle (in the form of truffle salt.) Depending on

where you live, the morels and hedgehogs should overlap for at least part of the season; and if you use dried morels as I do in this recipe then you have even more time to experiment.

In its most basic form, this is an extremely rustic and simple preparation—a blended tomato and mushroom sauce over pasta, with some crispy fried morels. Beautiful. In this case, however, the simplicity means that the quality and taste of each ingredient really matters. Get the sweetest tomatoes you can, make sure you caramelize the mushrooms, and roast your peppers to perfection to bring out all the possible flavor.

You might think that the flavor of the hedgehog mushrooms would disappear into the romanesco sauce, and in a sense this is true. But they infuse the sauce with flavor in the same way a practiced actor can disappear into a film role—in the process of disappearing they enhance everything around them, allowing the real star of the show—the morels in this case—to really shine.

Once you become familiar with the basic techniques I describe, throw away the recipe and let the mushrooms be your muse—I guarantee they'll take you in a new but equally delicious direction. Happy eating!



Tequila Morel Mushrooms over *pasta orecchiette* in Hedgehog Mushroom Romanesco

- 1 cup dried morel mushrooms
- 2 cups tequila
- 1 medium yellow onion
- 1 lb. *orecchiette* or shell pasta
- Parmesan* cheese of your choice (such as *Parmigiano-Reggiano*)
- 1 egg

Hedgehog Romanesco Sauce

½ lb. hedgehog mushrooms*
½ cup olive oil
2 cups dry baguette or other bread, cut into ½ inch pieces
½ cup sliced or slivered almonds, toasted
1 tsp. cayenne pepper
2 large cloves fresh garlic
2 red peppers
3 medium tomatoes
½ cup apple cider vinegar
½ cup red wine
1 tsp. truffle salt
½ tsp. thyme (or the leaves from 1 sprig fresh thyme)
1 tsp. soy sauce
1 Tbsp. honey

* For this recipe in particular, substitutions are not only allowed, but recommended, if you can't find fresh hedgehogs. Use what you gather or what looks best at your local farmers' market or specialty store. Chanterelles are a great substitute, but most other wild mushrooms would work for this preparation. Let your imagination run free.



Directions

Clean the hedgehog mushrooms by wiping them with a clean cloth. With hedgehogs in particular, I usually only have to gently wipe the cap and then perhaps break off the very bottom of the stem if it is dirty. If the spines beneath the cap are dirty, try to remove the dirt gently with a cloth or the tip of a knife. Only in rare cases would I wash a hedgehog, and then I would do so at the last possible minute and gently pat out the water with a clean cloth before it is cooked. When they are clean, slice the hedgehogs into ¼-inch slices.

Soak the morel mushrooms in the of tequila. Whenever possible, I try to avoid using water when rehydrating mushrooms; other liquids allow you to add much more flavor. Vegetable or chicken stock may be used, or red wine, or in this case tequila, which adds to the caramelization of the dish. Make sure the mushrooms are fully covered and let sit for about 15 minutes. Drain the mushrooms through a fine strainer, making sure to retain the tequila.

Peel and quarter the onion, then slice very thin. Sauté in 1 Tbsp. olive oil over high heat until soft, and then turn heat to

low and cook about 30 minutes until golden brown, stirring frequently and adding more oil if the onions start to stick. Remove from pan.

Cut the two red peppers in half and remove the stem and seeds. Place cut-side down on an oven rack broil under direct heat for about 15 minutes, until the skin is black and peels away easily.

Meanwhile, add about 2 Tbsp. of olive oil to the skillet



and heat until almost smoking. Add the sliced hedgehog mushrooms and cook on high until they are soft and have some color on both sides. Take the pan off the heat to cool.

Meanwhile, prepare the romanesco sauce and boil water for the pasta.

Place the two cups of bread pieces into a food processor and blend for several minutes. Remove from the food processor and separate the resulting crumbs in half. Retain the smaller bread crumbs that fall to the bottom for breading the morels, and return the larger crumbs to the processor for the romanesco sauce.

Add the 3 roma tomatoes in chunks, the roasted red peppers (skins removed), the cooked hedgehog mushrooms, and the rest of the ingredients and spices to the processor, and blend until smooth.

Cut the larger morel mushrooms in half, leaving the small ones whole. Prepare an egg wash by whisking one egg with 1 cup of the retained mushroom-tequila liquid. Dip the morel mushrooms into the egg wash and then coat loosely with the bread crumbs. Cook on medium heat for about 4 minutes on each side, until the morels are browned and crispy and most of the alcohol has evaporated.

Cook pasta according to directions. Add romanesco sauce to drained pasta and toss in saucepan to warm. To serve, top each portion of pasta with a spoonful of morels and caramelized onions. Finish with Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese.

[Eco-Chef Aaron French strives to combine his background in ecology with his work as a chef. More of Aaron's articles and photography can be found at www.eco-chef.com. He thanks G. B. Ratto & Co International Market in Oakland, California, for donating the mushrooms.—Ed.]