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Morels: THE EPHEMERAL DELICACY

Let's get one of the most important facts about morel mushrooms out of the way right off the bat; they are one of the tastiest fungi you will ever eat. The mystique around them has raised morels almost to the level of legend ranking just below truffles as most sought-after mushroom.

Like truffles, morels grow in wooded areas, are associated with certain trees, and are collected only during late April and May. Unlike truffles, morels don't require specially trained animals to find, just knowledge and patience—a whole lot of patience and an eagle eye. Large finds are not unheard of, but much more commonly you'll find a fewer than a dozen clustered together.

Black Morels

There are two kinds of morels. First is the black morel. They are the smaller of the two with a long, thin cone up to two inches high and one and one-half inches wide sitting on a hollow stalk two to four inches tall that can be as wide as the cap. The cap is black ribbed and the stalk whitish. This type of morel comes with a word of caution. Most wild mushrooms contain toxins that make it inadvisable to eat them raw or in large quantities. Eating them with alcoholic beverages can cause gastric distress or worse.

Yellow Morels

Second is the yellow morel. These range in color from blond to yellow-brown with caps up to two inches wide and three and one-half inches tall atop a hollow whitish stem. Picked when immature, they're called white morels. The most likely spots to find morels are in old apple orchards, burned-over areas, or in association with tulip, ash, oak, and beech maple trees, and around dead elms. These are the more prized variety and the ones you buy at your local farmers

market or grocery store. Yellow morels are considered by most to be safe but it's best to err on the side of caution and follow the safety rules I mentioned before: don't eat them raw, eat them in moderation, and don't eat them and consume alcohol.

False Morels and Rules of the Woods

There are a number of mushrooms referred to as false morels, including Elephant Ear, Snow Mushroom, Bull Nose, Brown Bonnet, Beefsteak, and red morel. To put it bluntly, these varieties can kill you ... dead. They are easily confused with true morels. So if you're considering striking out with your bucket, poking stick, and mushroom identification book, reconsider. It's best to find someone who knows what they're doing. Arrange to accompany them a number of times until they feel you are versed enough to hunt on your own.

Michael Kuo on the MushroomExpert.com website offers four cardinal rules for would-be morel hunters:

Rule Number One: When in doubt, throw it out! If you are not 100 percent sure your mushroom is a morel, why would you even think about eating it?

Rule Number Two: If it ain't hollow, don't swallow! Morels are hollow. Slice open a black, yellow, or half-free morel, and you will find only air from top to bottom (along with a bug or two if you haven't cleaned it). Slice open a false morel, and you'll find mushroom flesh. Sometimes the flesh of a false morel is interspersed with air pockets, creating a "chambered" effect—but there is flesh present. Consequently, false morels weigh more than morels. If you hear someone bragging about how much a morel weighed before he ate it, you are speaking to an idiot.

Rule Number Three: If it's wavy don't make it gravy! The caps of false morels are often wavy, rather than pitted. The pits on morels are not, on very close inspection, symmetrical, but they are very regular when compared to the lobed, wavy, brain-like structure of the false morel cap. Here, by the way, we encounter a problem with some of the common names for morels: "brain mushrooms" and "sponge mushrooms." Do not rely on what you picture from these common names! False morels are better described as "brain-like" than are morels, and either kind of mushroom could conceivably be described as "sponge-like."



Morels can range from the size of your pinky to almost as big as your hand like the one above.

Rule Number Four: If it's reddish, you could be dead-ish! False morels frequently (though not always!) have reddish-brown shades. I have seen yellow morels develop red stains, especially in age (the stain usually begins as a stripe on the stem and then grows), and when morels are growing under pine trees. So this rule might eliminate some good-eating morels. But it is more likely to eliminate false morels. Don't rely on this rule (or any of the rules, for that matter) alone!

Cooking Morels

Whether you acquire them in the woods or at the farmers' market, you will end up with heaven on a plate. Morels, because of the ribbed caps and hollow stems, pick up dirt and tiny livestock, mostly mites. Cut the morels in halves or quarters and soak them in salty cold water for a couple of hours. Rinse well under cold running water and pat dry. To cook morels, purists simply sauté them in butter. Others swear the only way to

eat them is to dredge them in well-beaten eggs and then finely crushed cracker crumbs before sautéing. They can be sauced, creamed, and stuffed. Anything you can do with other mushrooms, you can do with morels. To store morels for a couple of days, place them in a zip lock bag with a damp paper towel. For long storage, string them on heavy thread and let them air dry or use a dehydrator or an oven set at the lowest setting. Dried, they will keep up to three years in a tightly sealed jar.

However you choose to cook them, morel mushrooms are only around for a short time so enjoy them while you can. Take the trouble to find morels at your neighborhood farmers' market and cook them in a way that appeals to you. Better yet, have a party and invite your friends to share them with you. Just don't forget the fungi.



CREAM OF MOREL SOUP(from www.thegreatmorel.com)

A heavenly soup that will make you want to get back to the woods and feed some more black flies, courtesy of David H. from Petoskey, Michigan.

- ¾ pound fresh morels, chopped (more or less to taste and depending on your hunting success)
- 1 large leek (use everything below the green leaves)
- 3 medium to small russet potatoes
- 1 cup chicken stock
- 1 cup heavy cream
- ½ cup dry white wine
- 2 tablespoons butter or mild vegetable oil
- salt and pepper to taste
- 2 cups water

Chop off dark green leek leaves and roots. Slice the stem lengthwise and rinse under cold water making sure to remove all grit trapped between layers. Peel and halve potatoes. Add stock to soup pot with the water. Boil moderately until quite tender. 20-30 min.

Heat medium-sized pan over a medium flame. Add butter, morels, and a few dashes of salt. Cook morels gently for about 15 minutes, making sure they do not dry out. Add a few splashes of wine at a time to keep moist. When nearly done, add wine, turn up flame, and continue cooking until liquid is almost gone. Add chicken stock and stir until blended.

When potatoes and leeks are tender, remove from heat and blend until smooth. Return to pot.

Add morel mix to potato/leek mixture and simmer very gently, stirring occasionally to avoid scorching. After about 5 to 10 minutes, add cream and salt and pepper to taste.

STUFFED MORELS(from www.thegreatmorel.com)

- 1 dozen medium-sized morels
- 1 can (8 ounces) flaked crabmeat
- 1 egg, beaten
- ¼ cup salad oil
- 2 tablespoons mayonnaise
- 2 tablespoons chopped sweet onions
- 2 teaspoons fresh squeezed lemon juice
- ½ cup of seasoned bread crumbs
- 2 tablespoons melted butter or margarine



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In a bowl combine crabmeat, egg, salad oil, mayonnaise, onions, lemon juice, and ¼ of bread crumbs. Wash morels under running water. Fill morel "shells" with mixture. Combine remaining ¼ cup of bread crumbs with melted butter and sprinkle over mixture. Place the stuffed morels in a pan. Bake in oven for Approximately 15 minutes at 375°F. Serve hot.



• **IF YOU GO** •

Morels are usually available at farmers' markets and specialty stores during the growing season but not with enough regularity to recommend a reliable source here. Your best bet is to watch the markets and pounce when you see them. There are also a number of websites where you can buy dried morels. The two listings below are good sources for information if you feel like trying your hand at picking them yourself.

Judy Roger, Executive Secretary
North American Mycological Association
6615 Tudor Ct.
Gladstone, OR 97027-1032
(503) 657-7358
www.namyco.org

NAMA is an organization of amateur and professional mycologists with 60 clubs nationwide offering educational experiences including regional outings.

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This site, as the name implies, is all morels all the time, including message boards for each state to get the latest information on morels your area.