

Morel Madness

Most people in southwestern Ohio know that wild turkey season has just opened but it's amazing just how few know about the "other" hunt that has started for the equally challenging and elusive morel mushroom. One can only pity those out there who turn their noses up at the mention of edible fungi but there is a silver lining...more mushrooms for me!

This desire for a plate full of sizzling morels does come with some serious considerations such as the existence of what are referred to as "false morels" or brain mushrooms which do have a slightly similar appearance to morels. The problem is that they are poisonous which does act as a deterrent to novice mushroom hunters.

In other words, know your stuff before selecting any type of wild mushroom for the table and when in doubt, don't eat it! Your public library or the Internet can provide you with all of the information you'll ever need to forage for these little treasures and survive the experience.

The next thing you will quickly discover is that those of us who love morels will normally lie to you when you ask us where we found them the last time out. Even your parents or closest friends will send you to the wrong spot when you ask. You'll soon understand that people change after tasting their first morel and some of those changes are not very pretty!

Well if you're ready to go out and look "on your own" you'll need to know some of the characteristics of this mushroom and where they have a tendency of growing. First they grow primarily in sandy soil, never clay, unless there is a lot of organic matter, decomposed leaves and such, near the surface. They're normally happy near tall, large leafed trees where the surface of the soil is undisturbed and since they like sandy soil, sites near a river or stream can be very productive.

Your next consideration will be timing. These little guys begin to appear 6 to 8 weeks after the ground thaws. If you've gotten a fair amount of rain, it will cause your mushrooms to appear nearer the 6-week mark. A dry spell will slow down their appearance. For this reason, seasoned morel hunters like to get out the day after a rain to hit their favorite sites.

Morel mushrooms vary in color from off white to almost black and typically range from 2 inches tall to over 9 inches. The ridges along the cap of the mushroom remind us of cone shaped brain surface on a smooth stem. You'll want to look at pictures before your first hunt and be very comfortable with what you are seeking. The poisonous brain mushrooms do look different than the true morel in many ways that are obvious when you look at pictures of each.

One last point is a subtle reminder that you can do a lot to make sure future morel hunters find what they seek. When you pick your own morels, place them in a net style bag to

carry home and this will allow the spores in the mushroom to escape. In 5 years many of those spores could be the morels that will tickle the tastebuds of a lucky hunter!

There are many treasured recipes for morels, many of which are complex and anything but simple to prepare. Given how wonderful the taste of the morel is, we will opt to suggest some simple preparation ideas beginning with a favorite from *The Curious Morel*:

Morels & Bacon

Proportions of ingredients will be based around the amount of morels you are preparing. Use $\frac{1}{4}$ the weight of the morels in bacon (1 lb. Morels = $\frac{1}{4}$ lb. bacon).

Cut your bacon into small $\frac{1}{2}$ inch pieces and fry them until they would normally be ready to be removed from the pan and eaten. Leave them in the pan. Do not drain the grease.

Add your cleaned morel mushrooms, which have been split lengthwise. As you cook them over medium high heat the moisture from the mushrooms will make the mixture slightly soupy and you will; notice a light “popping” sound. That same moisture from the morels will keep the already cooked bacon from being overcooked.

Serve immediately!

Another favorite preparation technique is even simpler:

Fried Morels

Clean and split your morels lengthwise and prepare:

One bowl with 3 large eggs whipped to a smooth consistency. Another bowl with 1 cup all-purpose flour, 2 teaspoons good quality yellow cornmeal and fresh ground pepper to taste.

Dredge your mushrooms in the egg bowl first; allow to drain, then through the flour mix. Place breaded morels in hot peanut oil in a heavy skillet. Oil should be hot enough that crumbs of breading dropped in will immediately begin bubbling. Quickly fry each mushroom then remove to paper towels to drain.

Some of my morel-eating friends also enjoy squeezing a little fresh lemon juice over their fried morels before serving.

Morels taste of the woods where they are found and that earthy character is pure heaven to those of us addicted to them. In choosing a wine to compliment your morels, this is a characteristic found in certain wines also. Wine geeks often refer to this as “terroir,” or the taste of the earth the grapes are grown in.

Our first choice is a Louis Bernard 2000 Grande Réserve Côtes-du-Rhône which is crafted from 100% Syrah grapes by a winemaker who is “on a roll!” The wines of Bernard are consistently well made and this one is really superb. Big, rich chewy fruit with size and dimension to stand up to the most complex foods, this 2000 CdR was made for serious red wine lovers.

California has also been birthing some terrific Syrahs and the people at Cartlidge & Brown have a real dandy in their 2002 release. The fruit-forward style is really attractive to American palates and it should drink really well for years to come. The “dark fruit” concentration of black cherry with hints of bramble and cinnamon along with a rich, lush finish give this wine real character.

I hope you will take some time to get out and enjoy the woods this spring. You’ll find that the experience is something you’ll want to repeat even if you don’t find those precious morels! But if you do...wow!

We always invite your comments and questions at 888-288-0668. Cheers!