

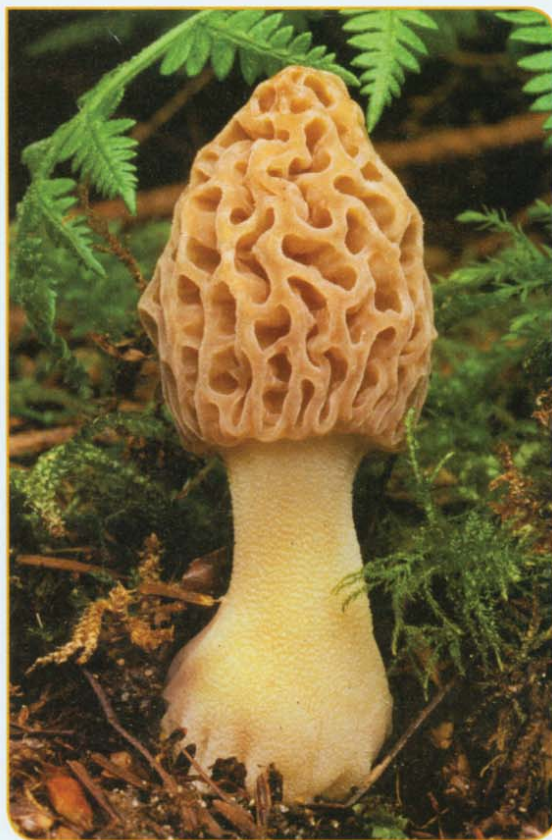
# the mysterious morel

Spring's elusive fungus | by Melody Moss

A few years ago my twentysomething nephew broke down sobbing when he discovered that, during a routine spring lawn mowing, he had inadvertently cut down morel mushrooms growing in his yard. These oddly shaped fungi were familiar to my family, as morel madness struck my corner of Michigan in full force every May, as it does here in the Northwest. But if you've never experienced this kind of mycological mania before, you may well ask yourself: What is it about this funny-looking fungus that could make a grown man cry?

The morel has been prized by chefs across the world for centuries for its unbeatable earthy and meaty flavor, al dente texture and a spongy quality unique among mushrooms. The other major draw of the morel, which my nephew is now all too familiar with, is its unpredictability. We usually expect to find these wild mushrooms only after long forays into the woods, but morels have a mind of their own when it comes to where and when they will turn up.

Paul Stamets, a mycologist who has had great success cultivating morels and many other species of wild mushrooms at his Olympia farm, says the morel's fickle behavior is due to its extreme sensitivity to the nuances of nature. Hard freezes followed by warmer temperatures are favorable to morel growth, so this season could be a good one. It's



markets in April. These mushrooms are genetically distinct from true morels, and though many people eat them with no ill effects, they can cause digestive upset, and it's best to avoid them. They can be distinguished from true morels by their caps, which are attached to the stems only at the top, and by the white fibers inside their other-

impossible to predict this with any certainty, however. "Morels march to the beat of a different drum," notes Stamets.

Morels are fond of disturbed soil: areas that have been recently landscaped, logged or burned by forest fires. This is good news for morel lovers in Seattle. On the West Coast, commercial foragers collect the mushrooms from southern Oregon to British Columbia. Because of the varied elevations in the Pacific Northwest, morels have a longer season here than in other parts of North America. The eastern slopes of the Cascades, especially in the 2,000- to 3,000-foot range, are known to be particularly fruitful.

Morel species vary most noticeably in color, with most of them ranging from pale beige to nearly black. All true morels (genus *Morchella*) have pits and ridges in their caps, are hollow inside and have their stems connected at or near the base of the caps. They can usually be found in local markets from late April through early June.

You might come across so-called early or spring morels (genus *Verpa*) in the



## Mastering Morels

**THE BEST PLACES** to find seasonal fresh morels are farmers' markets and gourmet grocery stores such as Sosio's Produce at Pike Place Market (206-622-1370). Visit [www.pugetsoundfresh.org](http://www.pugetsoundfresh.org) for farmers' market locations and times. Other local possibilities include Central Market, Larry's Markets, Madison Market, Metropolitan Market, PCC Natural Markets and Whole Foods Market.

Want to try your luck hunting morels? Contact the Puget Sound Mycological Society (206-522-6031; [www.psms.org](http://www.psms.org)). This group has more than 400 members and is one of the oldest mycological societies in the country. Monthly meetings are free and open to the public. For a \$25 annual membership fee you get access to numerous

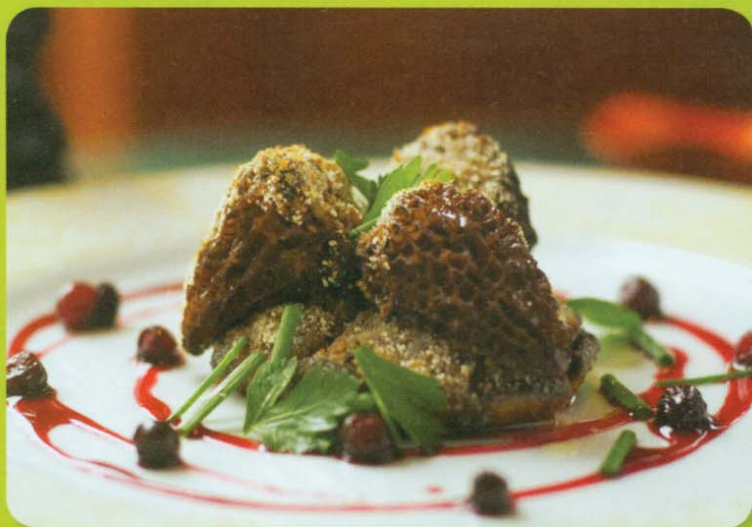
guided field trips in the spring and fall, a newsletter subscription, and free admission to the Fall Wild Mushroom Exhibit.

*Morels*, by Michael Kuo, is a delightful read for any morel lover. Also check out Kuo's Web site, [www.mushroomexpert.com](http://www.mushroomexpert.com), which features a very active discussion forum. Other useful Web sites include [www.mykoweb.com](http://www.mykoweb.com), [www.thegreatmorel.com](http://www.thegreatmorel.com) and [www.morelheaven.com](http://www.morelheaven.com).

Paul Stamets's new book, *Mycelium Running*, offers intriguing theories about the ecological and health benefits of fungi, and includes information on cultivating morels. Stamets's mushroom company, Fungi Perfecti (800-780-9126; [www.fungi.com](http://www.fungi.com)), sells outdoor morel cultivation kits.

dish





## mushroom-stuffed mushrooms

Recipe courtesy chef Kerry Sear, Cascadia

### INGREDIENTS

- 12** large morel mushrooms  
(fresh or dried and rehydrated),  
cleaned with stems removed
- 5** portobello mushrooms,  
peeled with stems removed  
(leave four whole and chop one)
- 1** pound cremini mushrooms,  
washed and chopped
- 1/4** cup white onion, peeled and finely diced
- 1/4** cup white wine
- 1** teaspoon chopped fresh parsley
- 1** teaspoon chopped fresh thyme
- 1/2** cup bread crumbs
- 1/2** cup butter
- Salt and pepper

### GARNISH

- Chopped fresh chive  
stems and parsley  
leaves
- Diced fresh tomatoes
- 1** cup huckleberries or  
blueberries (fresh or  
frozen)
- 1** cup red wine
- 1** tablespoon sugar



### DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Sauté four whole portobello caps in  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup butter until soft and set aside. Heat a saucepan over medium heat and add remaining half of butter to melt. Add the diced onion and stir until soft, but do not brown. Add the chopped portobello and cremini mushrooms and stir well. Add the white wine and chopped herbs; season with salt and pepper to taste. Cook until the mushrooms are soft. Cool the mixture, then blend in a food processor (not too fine). Fill morel caps with mixture, through the opening in the bottom of the caps. Spread the remaining mixture on top of the whole portobello caps.

Combine the red wine and sugar in a saucepan; bring to a boil and reduce by half. Add the berries, bring to a boil and reduce by half again. Keep warm. Place the mushrooms onto a buttered baking sheet. Sprinkle with bread crumbs and season with salt. Put the sheet into the preheated oven and bake until the mushrooms are warm in the center, at least 5 minutes.

Serve the morels on top of the portobellos. For the garnish, sprinkle herbs and tomatoes on top and drizzle the warm berry/wine reduction around the mushrooms.

wise hollow interiors. If in doubt, slice one open and take a look.

Retail prices for morels fluctuate considerably due to market availability, but most often range from \$15 to \$30 per pound. Fortunately morels are lightweight, and like most mushrooms, you don't need a lot of them to add flavor and texture to a dish.

Opinions on cleaning and storing morels vary widely. You will often hear that you shouldn't wash mushrooms, but you might want to break this rule with morels. The creviced membranes and hollow interior can hide dirt, twigs or any number of critters. Depending on your tolerance for random protein sources, you can merely brush off your morels, or you can follow Cascadia chef Kerry Sear's advice and swish them gently with your hands while submerging them in water. It is essential that you dry them thoroughly afterward, as morels can rapidly become soggy. Set them on a rack that allows air to circulate around them; or blotting them with a towel will do in a pinch. Store morels dry in a loose paper bag (not plastic!) in the refrigerator. They are best if used within a couple of days of purchase. If you notice mold or a bad smell, throw the affected morels out immediately—rot spreads quickly, and one bad egg can ruin the whole lot.

Morels are very versatile—just don't eat them raw, or you may find yourself making offerings to the porcelain altar. They are fabulous in pasta, rice and egg dishes, or as an accompaniment to meat or fish. Their spongelike caps lend themselves particularly well to cream sauces, and the larger ones make excellent stuffed appetizers. To fully appreciate their subtle taste, it's best not to overwhelm them with too many other flavors. They are delicious sautéed in butter or olive oil for a few minutes until tender. If you're feeling particularly indulgent, try a popular Midwestern method and dredge them in egg and flour or crushed crackers, then fry them in copious amounts of butter until golden brown. For a healthier meal, pair morels with other regional spring crops like asparagus, fiddlehead ferns, Pacific halibut or wild salmon.

When the last of the fresh morels have disappeared from the markets in the summer, don't despair. Dried morels are your friends. Some people actually prefer the more intense flavor of the dried version. You can dry fresh morels with a food dehydrator, or purchase dried ones at gourmet food stores. They cost much more than fresh by weight (around \$10 per ounce), but since one ounce of dried morels will rehydrate to a half pound, a little bit will go a long way. Advice on the rehydrating liquid ranges from hot to cold water or milk, and recommended soaking times vary from 15 minutes to overnight. This is yet another contentious issue that may lead to fisticuffs among morel fanciers. But please—no tears. ✨