

# *edible*MEMPHIS®

Celebrating the Abundance of Local Foods, Season by Season

Winter 2015 Number 32 • \$4.99



## *Growing mushrooms & farmers*

BOUQUETS OF HOPE

CHRIS VERNON'S FRIDGE

A ROCKIN' LITTLE  
CHEESE MAKER

GAME DAY RECIPES

# Mushrooms

## A Food With Ceps Appeal

Take a walk on the wild side with locally cultivated mushrooms

BY CAROL PENN-ROMINE  
PHOTOS BY MELISSA PETERSEN



Shiitake

**I** hesitate to begin talking about any food by describing something disgusting, but bear with me.

Soggy, squidgy, rubbery, dreary, insipid. Lackluster.

If this is how you describe mushrooms, then it's time to retire your can opener, back away from the papery, raw button slices on the salad bar, and delve into the world of real mushrooms. Mushrooms deserving of your love. Mushrooms worthy of a leisurely sauté in some quality butter and a sprinkling from your most prized cache of sea salt.

A good, fresh mushroom is rich, succulent, and flavorful — the opposite of all those unfortunate descriptors above. Satisfying and nutritious. But it could use some good PR. After all, it's a fungus, something that can send you to the doctor, right?

Mushrooms seem unapproachable to a lot of people, and it's no mystery why, given that many varieties have poisonous look-alikes. Unless we grew up in a family of foragers, most of us had the "don't touch those mushrooms growing in the yard" admonition drilled into us from an early age. Add that to their predilection for growing in damp, murky locales and their generally peculiar appearance and fragrance, and it's easy to see why so many people claim to dislike them.

Ben and Nichole Dickey of Dickey Farms Mushrooms in Potts Camp, Mississippi, sell a variety of mushrooms at the Memphis Farmers' Market. When they talk to people who are convinced they don't like mushrooms, Ben and Nichole find that it's usually because the person's only experience with mushrooms has been with less-than-quality product.

"When people tell us they don't like mushrooms, we ask them what kinds they've tried," says Ben. "If you've only had the slimy, canned variety or the dry, flavorless slices served raw at a salad bar, then you can hardly say you've tried mushrooms."



Nichole Dickey of Dickey Farms Mushrooms in Potts Camp, Mississippi, shows off fresh shiitakes at Memphis Farmers' Market.



**Lion's Mane**

He notes that not many people have access to locally grown mushrooms. That's a pity, because freshly harvested mushrooms have a welcoming, earthy fragrance and excellent flavor seldom found in grocery store specimens.

If there's a gateway mushroom that's sure to turn people into fans, it's the shiitake.

"The shiitake's rich flavor is so different from what most folks are used to," Ben explains. "We usually suggest shiitakes to new customers wanting to get their feet wet." Shiitakes are suited to a variety of cooking methods, too — sautéing, baking, and broiling — and are incredibly versatile.

Though it may be tempting to try your hand at a little amateur mushroom foraging, it's safest to hunt for mushrooms at the farmers' market or grocery. You can get into serious trouble picking and

munching on poisonous look-alikes you might find on a nature walk. These great imposters mimic edible varieties in appearance and can be difficult to distinguish from the safe kind if you're not a trained mycologist. All sorts of legends and tips circulate about how to tell if a mushroom is edible or poisonous, but don't buy into any of them. The price is far too high.

Ben stresses that even when you buy mushrooms, it's important to know where they came from.

"Mushrooms are highly unregulated and often incredibly polluted when shipped from other countries," he says. The smart thing to do is to find a local supplier you can trust. Not only will knowledgeable professionals help you select the right mushrooms, but they also have plenty of ideas on how best to prepare them.

Once you get the mushrooms home, be sure to store them properly. If you've ever thrown out mushrooms because of the slimy texture and foul smell they developed, it's because they can't breathe in plastic — and it's why you should avoid prepackaged mushrooms at the grocery. (We wouldn't smell too good if we were sealed in plastic either, right?) Some markets provide the option of paper or plastic for bagging your produce. If they do, go for paper. If they offer only plastic, transfer your mushrooms into a paper bag as soon as you get home so they'll keep longer, and be sure to stash them in the refrigerator. Lunch-style brown-paper bags are perfect for this job.

Washing mushrooms waterlogs them and robs them of flavor, so leave the dirt on until you're about to use them. When it's time to clean, don't immerse the mushrooms in water or you'll wash away a lot of flavor. Just give them a light spot cleaning with a damp cloth or a mushroom brush, and you're good to go. If you must immerse them in water, blot and drain well, then spread them out on a kitchen towel to dry for a half hour while you prep other ingredients.

The stems of some varieties are good to eat, but if yours are tough (as with shiitakes), remove and save to simmer for a quick mushroom stock. You can freeze stems for later use or go ahead and make that quickie stock now, strain and freeze it, and be ready to enrich the flavor of your next soup or sauce.

Ben says the biggest misconception people have about mushrooms is that it's okay to eat them raw.

"With folks discovering the raw-food movement, we've really had issues convincing people to cook mushrooms," he explains. "Mushrooms are, without doubt, one of the most nutritious foods you can eat if they are cooked properly. Otherwise, not only will you lose their nutritional benefits, but you may very well get sick." Cooking benefits mushrooms in three ways: It renders them safe to eat; makes their nutritional value more readily available; and unlocks their flavor, which is hidden until they take on some heat.




**Clockwise from top: King Oyster, Shiitake, and Golden/Pink Oyster mushrooms from Dickey Farms.**

The subtle flavor of mushrooms varies widely by variety. Some say oyster mushrooms taste like oysters. Maybe they do subjectively, in a “tastes like chicken” way. Essentially, mushrooms are their own, er, animal. The pioppino has a soft, nutty flavor, while the chanterelle is earthy yet sweet. If you find a variety you’ve never tasted before, use this handy mycologist cooking technique: Slice the new mushrooms so they will cook faster, sauté them in a little butter, and sprinkle on a bit of salt. Then eat them with plain saltines. This way, you can evaluate the unique flavor without other, stronger flavors overpowering them.

Butter and cream complement most types of mushrooms really well and enhance their flavor, and a squeeze of lemon juice brightens their earthiness, and helps round out the flavor. Mushrooms don’t need much beyond this — along with salt and pepper and a little chopped flat-leaf parsley.

Mushrooms make great side dishes on their own and work well in combination with other ingredients in stews, soups, sauces, and casseroles. But here’s another reason to indulge in them: If Meatless Monday leaves you feeling a little hollow in the midsection, mushrooms are meaty and satisfying, so you won’t miss the heft of animal

protein quite so fiercely. If you’ve ever wondered why the portobello burger has gained traction on so many menus, just think about it. Portobellos are about the size of a thick burger patty, they take on whatever flavor you want to give them, and they’re toothsome, hearty, and satisfying.

“The flavors of all the different varieties of mushrooms vary so greatly that we believe that only after you’ve tried them all can you say you don’t like mushrooms,” Ben says. “It’s like eating tenderized steak and claiming not to like meat.” 

---

West Tennessee native Carol Penn-Romine is a chef and food writer based in Los Angeles. An MFK Fisher award recipient for excellence in culinary writing, Carol has contributed to numerous magazines, including *Gastronomica*, *Leite’s Culinary*, and several *Edible* publications.

#### **Dickey Farms Mushrooms**

Potts Camp, Mississippi

901-486-4469 • [www.dickeyfarmsmushrooms.com](http://www.dickeyfarmsmushrooms.com)

Find Dickey Farms Mushrooms at Memphis Farmers’ Market (April–October) and Cooper-Young Community Farmers’ Market (year-round).

### **Dried Mushrooms**

Dried mushrooms are about the saddest looking items in the grocery, but don’t let their looks deceive you. They are powerhouses of flavor. Rinse them first, and then place them in a bowl and cover with hot water. Depending on the thickness, they should take 15 to 20 minutes to rehydrate. Then remove from the liquid, squeeze out the excess moisture, and use them like you would fresh mushrooms. Don’t discard the soaking water, though. You’ve just created a nice quickie stock for flavoring a soup or sauce. If you don’t need the stock right away, strain and freeze it in an ice cube tray. Then store the frozen cubes in a zip-top bag in the freezer, and they’re ready when you need them.

