A Fungus Among Us

By: Cathy Christensen


My father is one of those rare individuals who is truly self-sufficient, a good person to have around in an emergency. A farmer, Vietnam veteran and an agriculturalist, my dad can grow anything. He sets up bizarre greenhouse contraptions around the house during the winter months, nurturing vegetables and fruits from tiny seeds, coaxing them to thrive—and they do.

This ingenuity also spills over into his mushroom hunts. I remember Mom—who grew up in urban Indianapolis—bravely cleaning, breading and frying his spoils, and, after I got over the weirdness of the fact that my dad hunts mushrooms, I tried one of the crispy delights. To this day, I crave the earthy, salty flavor of the wild mushrooms dad gathered that just melted in my mouth.

And although I have yet to encounter the same flavor anywhere else, mushrooms of many kinds are prevalent in gourmet and everyday recipes, and are now becoming commonplace in skin care treatments and products, as well.

In the kitchen

Mushrooms are the fruiting bodies of certain fungi, meaning they are the equivalent of the apples, not the tree. Fungi themselves are not actually plants, but are related to molds, mildews, rusts and yeasts. Although that doesn’t sound terribly appetizing, mushrooms are an important food source and potent medicinal for many cultures. There are approximately 10,000 mushroom species, 200 of which have been identified as having curative properties, and the most well-known include reishi, shiitake and maitake, which have immune-enhancing benefits. If you are a mushroom hunter like my dad however, be sure to educate yourself about which ones are safe to consume and which are poisonous.

These succulent morsels are a great addition to many dishes, such as the Portabella Mushroom Sandwiches offered by The Heartland Spa in Gilman, Illinois. The Portabella mushroom is also featured in the Grilled Portabella Mushroom Wrap at Sundara Inn + Spa in Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin; and Munro House B&B and Spa in Jonesville, Missouri, makes a seasonal Harvest Pumpkin Mushroom Soup. At the Lake Austin Spa Resort in Austin, Texas, mushrooms are showcased in the Mushroom Enchiladas with Avocado/Tomatillo Salsa entrée; and don’t miss the recipe for Lentil and Shiitake Roll-ups with Tomatillo Lime & Roasted Corn Salsa from Executive Chef Chad Luethje of Miraval Tucson in Catalina, Arizona.
Quick Facts: Mushrooms

- Ancient Egyptians believed mushrooms paved the way to immortality, and ancient Romans believed they were a food of the gods and gave mushrooms to warriors at special feasts to increase their strength.4
- A 14th century Chinese medical text claims shiitake mushrooms can be used to activate chi, the body’s natural life force.4
- France led the formal cultivation of mushrooms and grew them in special caves near Paris set aside for this type of agriculture.4
- Europe’s biggest mushroom was found in a Swiss national park in 2004—it is a 1,000-year-old fungus that covers an area roughly equivalent to 100 football fields.4
- Some mushrooms are bioluminescent, and the jack-o’-lantern mushroom can produce enough light to read by.4