

The Autumn Harvest

Part I – Mushrooms that stand out

By Chef Dan Leff

The bountiful fall harvest more than makes up for shorter, cooler days. Exotic mushrooms, normally among the most expensive items in the produce section, are available now at unparalleled freshness and prices.

It's time to use these beauties in a way that spotlights their appearance, flavor, and texture.

Let's focus on three types of mushrooms that aren't widely used on American tables:

Matsutake

The best of these feature large, firm caps and thick stalks. If they are too light, it means they're starting to dry out. They're a grayish-brown color. Top notch ones sell for around \$14.00 per pound – typically, half a pound of these is more than enough for most purposes.



Washing

Matsutakes should be cleaned carefully with a piece of paper towel that's been dampened with cold water. Dirt can stick to this variety tenaciously – be as aggressive as possible in cleaning them, but try to avoid damaging them.

Golden Chanterelles are prone to flecks of dirt and “no-see-ums” – annoying little insects that hide in the gills. The 3-bowl method works best: Fill three bowls with cold water, and place copious paper toweling at one end of this array. Working quickly, dunk the chanterelles into the first bowl, then the sec-

ond, then the third, and onto the towels to dry. You'll notice that the water in the first bowl will be dark with dirt, then slightly lighter in each following bowl – these mushrooms are dirtier than they look! Excess moisture harms them, so fast work is a must here.

Oyster mushrooms don't need a heavy hand in cleaning. Be sure to get inside the inner stalks, if they come in a large clump.

Preparation

Mushrooms this beautiful and distinctive shouldn't be hidden away in soup or a stew. They are best used to top off any dish where they

Golden Chanterelles

I've seen these for \$10.00 per pound locally (and nearly half that at Seattle's Pike Place Market, but I'm out of frequent flyer miles). They require some care in cleaning but they are worth the effort. They should be dry but not withered – check the caps carefully for signs of rotting, an affliction that these fragile specimens often suffer from.



can stand out – on top of a pizza, as a garnish for a filet of fresh fish, or mixed in with some top-quality sautéed vegetables. Making them the object of attention means handling them with specific care.

Matsutakes are firm and meaty. The caps can be cut into slices, then slice the stems, cutting across. Don't slice them too thick or the finished product will be too chewy! Sauté them in olive oil or butter over high heat until all the juices have rendered out and then been reabsorbed. Season them lightly with salt and pepper, then let them rest on a sheet pan.

About

Chef Dan Leff...

After graduating from the CA Culinary Academy in 1995, I've worked in venues around the Bay Area. Having worked with Bradley Ogden at the Lark Creek Inn, I specialize in Classic American cuisine, using seasonal ingredients, with a fine dining emphasis. Chef Dan Leff Catering focuses on intimate, elegant sit-down dinners and small corporate events. <http://www.chefdanleff.com>, email: ChefDanLeff@aol.com, phone: 510-530-1243



Pink and Yellow Oyster Mushroom

Again, these top out at around \$10.00 a pound. Normal (brown) Oyster mushrooms are available most of the year, but these colorful varieties are definitely seasonal specialties. They should be in firm, tight bunches, with no rotting.



Chanterelles are more delicate. Don't take a knife to them – tear them by hand into long strips. Sauté them with some minced shallots for extra flavor. They exude a lot of liquid, and require more cooking than the Matsutakes. Once the juices have reabsorbed, season them and let them rest in the same fashion.

Oyster mushrooms are not quite as fragile as Chanterelles, but they should be handled and cooked the same way. The bright colors of the pink and yellow varieties will fade somewhat with cooking, but they are still original enough to merit use as a garnish.

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