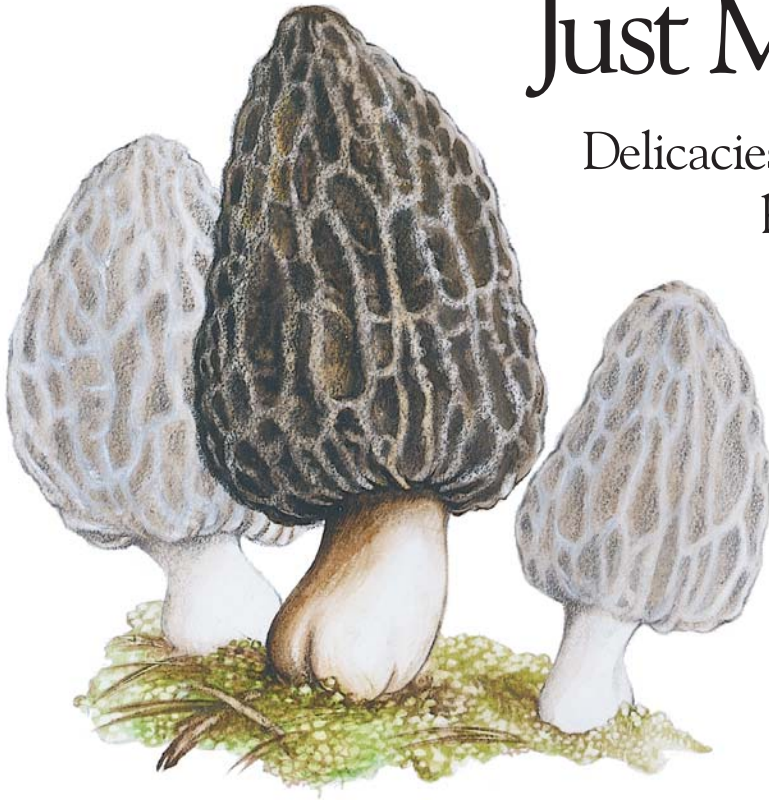


Morels—More than Just Mushrooms

Delicacies from the forest floor herald the arrival of spring

BY AMY FARGES



Sometime in sluggish, slushy March, just when I've despaired of ever going barefoot again, a "morel fax" inches its way into Aux Delices des Bois, my mushroom shop. A Michigan sighting! Cabin-fevered, I start planning the first meal: tiny, thumbnail-sized morels glossed with sweet cream butter; earthy slices of morel folded into a creamy risotto; giant morels stuffed with cheese and herbs.

This spongy, cone-shaped fungus gives gourmets a thrill and commands respect from foragers. While

mushroom gatherers may divulge the site of a chanterelle hotspot, the secret location of a morel patch is passed on only through bloodlines.

A SHORT GROWING SEASON

A morel is a hollow, ace-of-spades-shaped mushroom, full of little pits and ridges. At its opening is a narrow, tube-like stem. The rains of early spring trigger the morel season, and by mid-May the mushrooms are in full flush. Sadly, they're usually too wormy to harvest after late June. But in a good year, at the weather's whim, the morel season can stretch a month or so in each direction.

Morels thrive on misfortune and are regulars at burn sites and cemeteries—they love freshly turned earth. Morels are so sure to crop up in the ashes of a forest fire that the Oregon State Department of Agriculture auctions off the picking rights to these sites. This macabre mushroom also loves to pop up under diseased elms and in abandoned apple orchards.

But in no way does this mean that morels are easy to find. Elusive as the jackalope, the morel cleverly disguises itself in shades of brown, gray, and beige to blend in with its environment. I've never actually found a morel in the wild, but my

Plump, freshly gathered morels (like these at right) start coming to market in March and disappear again by early summer. Luckily, dried morels are available year-round.



ALWAYS COOK YOUR MORELS

Besides having a high-protein, low-fat profile, morels also contain very small traces of toxins. Fortunately, these trace toxins are neutralized by heat. To be safe, cook morels for a good fifteen minutes. It's also a good idea to avoid a steady diet of morels, to watch red wine intake during morel binges, and to never even taste a raw morel.

Mycologists strongly advise against eating any wild mushroom you can't positively identify. Unless you are an experienced mushroom hunter, it's best to buy your morels from reputable suppliers (see sources at right).

partner in Aux Delices des Bois did find one once in a gravelly driveway.

Where do they come from? The Pacific Northwest may well be the world's morel basket; a rollicking \$2.24 million worth of morels were shipped out of Oregon alone in 1993. This prime morel region extends east to Idaho, south to California, and as far north as Alaska, where pickers enter uncharted territory by horseback and by parachute. Others fill their saddlebags in Michigan, Maryland, and Missouri. Mexico has even offered morels in December, when the rest of us can only dream of spring.

While the morel has long been prized in Europe, environmental neglect has led to the demise of fresh morels there. Dried morels sold under French labels are usually harvested in the United States, China, or Turkey.

DELICIOUS FRESH OR DRIED

To select fresh morels, look for dry, unbroken specimens. Gray streaks in the pits usually mean mold is forming. The aroma should be of dead leaves and freshly turned soil. Any mushroom that smells dank or musty is past its prime. Sometimes fat white worms crawl out from morels, rubbing their eyes to see who disturbed their munching. Luckily, if you don't manage to pick them all out, the extra protein never did anybody any harm.

Morels make great houseguests if you treat them right. I stow them in an uncovered basket on the middle shelf in my refrigerator so that air circulates around them. They can keep this way for about a week, although fresher is better.

When morels aren't in season, it's still possible to enjoy them. While they don't freeze well raw, morels are great when sautéed first and then frozen. But the best way to enjoy morels when they're out of season is to buy dried morels. When dried, the morel's nutty, loamy flavor becomes even more intense.

In my opinion, morels reconstitute better than any other dried mushroom. They regain their firm texture without becoming chewy. Due to the water-weight loss, dried morels are pricey, at \$100 or more per pound. But take heart—a few morels will go a

long way. One ounce of dried morels will swell to about four ounces after being reconstituted.

You can dry morels yourself when the fresh crop is plentiful. I string up whole fresh morels—preferably the small ones—on fishing line. My apartment ends up looking like a laundry, with lines strung from window to bookshelf and back again. Some people strew them on window screens laid horizontally across two chairs. They'll also dry in the oven, with the temperature at the lowest setting. Drying can take a few days, depending upon the humidity. If they snap when you try to fold them, they're done. Store your dried morels in a glass jar, away from any moisture.

Reconstituting dried morels. Morels will reconstitute in about 45 minutes. Simply cover them in hot water (add a dash of cognac if you like) and give them a squeeze every few minutes to see how they're doing. Drain, press out the excess liquid, and you're all set. They'll keep another day in the refrigerator once they've been brought back to life. The reconstituting liquid, whether hot water or a higher-octane water-and-cognac combo, gives you mushroom stock. Reduced and strained, you get a concentrated mushroom *jus*.

GENUS MORCHELLA

As the season progresses, different species of morels crop up. These four *Morchella* species are edible, but watch out for the "false morel" (see below).

Morchella angusticeps is small and firm, with astonishing black ridges and neat rows of pits. This variety is so small that it's best cooked whole.

Morchella esculenta has gray-brown ridges and its pits are a bit deeper. Plump, curvaceous *esculenta* yields nice round slices that do well for interesting plate presentations.

Morchella deliciosa earns its second name. Also called the white morel, *deliciosa* is the last morel to appear. It has creamy white ridges and matching pits.

Morchella crassipes has flimsier walls with honey-colored ridges and buff-hued pits. It has a bumpy interior surface.

WATCH OUT FOR THE FALSE MOREL

The black sheep of the morel family is the *gyromitre*, which looks like a small brain that suffered a meltdown. Instead of growing upright, it spreads its wrinkled mass outward, with bulging folds and lobes. It isn't considered edible by mycologists and chefs alike, and eating the *gyromitre* is playing gastronomic Russian roulette. This fungus actually produces a chemical used in rocket propellant. I'd stay away.

Amy Farges owns Aux Delices des Bois, a New York City mushroom shop, with her husband, Thierry. She is training their 16-month-old son Julien in the finer points of morel spotting.

Bring dried morels back to life. With a good soak in warm water, dried morels regain their springy texture. One ounce of dried morels will weigh four to six ounces after reconstituting, draining, and pressing.



SOURCES FOR MORELS

Morels are sold in gourmet produce markets, some supermarkets, and by mail-order suppliers.

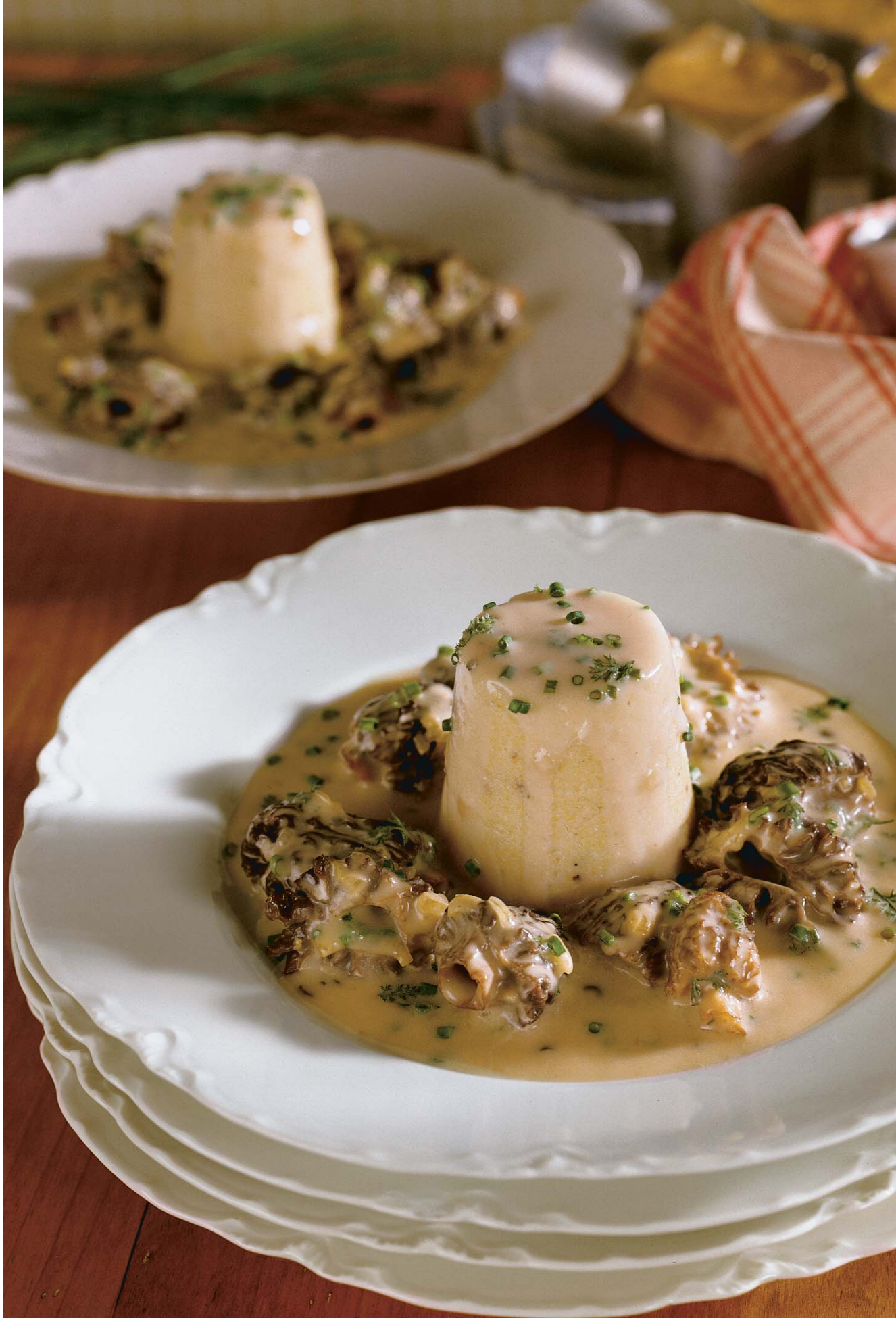
Aux Delices des Bois, 4 Leonard St., New York, NY 10013; 800/666-1232 or 212/334-1230. Dried morels; fresh when in season.

East Coast Exotics, PO Box 468, Toughkenamon, PA 19374; 610/268-0771. Dried morels; fresh when in season. Checks and money orders only.

Polarica, PO Box 880204, San Francisco, CA 94188; 800/GAME-USA or 415/647-1300. Dried morels; fresh when in season.

Summerfield Farm, 10044 James Monroe Hwy., Culpeper, VA 22701; 703/547-9600. Fresh morels when in season.

Vanilla, Saffron Imports, 949 Valencia St., San Francisco, CA 94110; 415/648-8990. Dried morels. Checks and money orders only.



Morels' tiny pits and folds are perfect receptacles for creamy sauces, like in this stew served with cornmeal pudding (recipe on p. 48).

Two dishes that celebrate morels

BY SAM HAYWARD

Every spring, I look forward to cooking with morels, and I've found that certain ingredients have a natural affinity to these springtime mushrooms. Morels crave rich dairy products, including fresh cream, *mascarpone*, and cultured items such as *crème fraîche* and sour cream. Morels are sensational with feathered game, such as grouse, pheasant, and partridge. I also enjoy morels immensely with firm-textured fish and shellfish, such as shad, snapper, monkfish, sea scallops, lobster, mussels, and Louisiana crayfish. In fact, I love morels with just about anything.

Fresh morels lend themselves to sautéing but are particularly wonderful simmered in soups and sauces. Sautéing over a relatively high heat tends to keep the mushroom's flavor locked in, while slow, moist cooking will diffuse the morel's flavor and aroma throughout the dish. Large morels are best split or quartered.

Many sources recommend thoroughly cooking all wild mushrooms—to neutralize allergens and toxins that might cause reactions in some people. But there's still lots of room for creativity while heeding this caution.

Cleaning morels is a necessity, but because morels have such an irregular surface, a traditional mushroom brush is useless. I find that the best method is a gentle, cool-water rinse under the spray-hose of my kitchen sink just before cooking. Being hollow, morels will fill up with water during cleaning, and they should be drained with a gentle squeeze before cooking. There always seem to be a few stubborn spruce needles clinging to the mushroom even after spray-cleaning; these

must be removed by agile fingers or a pair of tweezers.

The morel's woody-smoky-earthy flavor begs for a wine with a similar sense of *terroir*, or the earth it comes from. One of my favorite accompaniments for morels is a deep, mature red Burgundy or a Pinot Noir from the Pacific Northwest. Dishes like this morel and mussel stew are nicely contrasted by a crisp Alsatian Riesling or a similar-style wine from California.

CREAMY MOREL STEW WITH HASTY PUDDING

Hasty pudding is the Anglo-American analog of polenta. *Serves six as an appetizer.*

FOR THE HASTY PUDDING:

1 Tbs. unsalted butter
2 Tbs. cleaned, diced leek, white part only
2 cups water
¾ cup stone-ground yellow cornmeal
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 egg white, lightly beaten
Butter for the ramekins or molds

FOR THE MORELS:

8 oz. fresh morels (or 8 oz. reconstituted dried morels, weighed after soaking and draining)
1 Tbs. unsalted butter
2 Tbs. minced shallots
1 cup dry Madeira
Few drops freshly squeezed lemon juice
1 cup *crème fraîche*
1½ cups chicken stock
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
12 green peppercorns, lightly crushed
4 Tbs. chopped chervil leaves, more for decoration
2 Tbs. snipped fresh chives, more for decoration

For the pudding—Heat the oven to 375°F.

Melt the butter in saucepan. Gently sauté the leeks in the butter for 2 min. to soften. Add the water and bring to a boil. Slowly stir in the cornmeal. Reduce the heat and simmer 2 min., or until thickened. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Cool slightly and stir in the egg white.

Divide the mixture among six 4-oz. buttered ovenproof ramekins or molds. Put the ramekins in a shallow baking pan and pour enough boiling water in the pan to come halfway up the sides of the molds. Bake about 25 min., until set but tender. (A knife

inserted into the middle will come out almost clean.) Set the molds aside and keep warm.

For the morels—Cut large morels into smaller pieces. Melt the butter in a sauté pan over moderate heat. When the foam subsides, add the morels and sauté until soft but not browned, about 3 min. Add the shallots and cook for another minute. Add the Madeira and lemon juice. Cook over high heat until liquid is reduced by half. Add the chicken stock and again reduce by half. Add the *crème fraîche* and reduce over high heat until the sauce coats the back of a spoon. Season with salt, pepper, and green peppercorns. Stir in the chervil and chives. Taste and correct seasoning. Unmold the hasty puddings and nap with the morel stew. Decorate with more chives and chervil.

MORELS & MUSSELS WITH SAFFRON CREAM

I prefer to use farm-raised mussels rather than wild ones in this soup, as they give the broth a cleaner taste and they naturally pick up less sand. *Serves six as an appetizer.*

3 lb. mussels in their shells
2 Tbs. olive oil
1 medium carrot, diced
2 ribs celery, diced
2 medium leeks, white and green parts separated, cleaned, and diced
3 cloves garlic
12 black peppercorns, crushed
4 cups hard cider (or 3 cups dry white wine plus 1 cup apple juice)
A bouquet of fresh herbs: sprigs of thyme, bay leaf, rosemary, savory, and tarragon
1 lb. fresh morels (or 1 lb. reconstituted dried morels, weighed after soaking and draining)
1 tsp. saffron threads
1 cup heavy cream
Salt
Pinch cayenne
¼ cup snipped fresh chives

Wash the mussels carefully, discarding any dead (open) ones and any that feel exceptionally heavy. In a large, nonreactive stockpot or Dutch oven, put 1 Tbs. of the olive oil, the carrot, celery, green parts of leeks, garlic, and peppercorns. Cook over medium heat, stirring frequently, for 4 min. without browning. Add the hard cider and the bouquet of herbs and bring to a rolling boil. Add the cleaned mussels. Cover the pot and cook for

An extraordinary soup. Tender morels and succulent mussels are suspended in a rich, creamy broth scented with saffron.



5 min., timing from the point when boiling begins again.

Meanwhile, sauté the morels and the white parts of the leeks in a skillet with the remaining 1 Tbs. olive oil for about 4 min. without browning.

Strain the mussel broth through a mesh strainer or colander set over another nonreactive pot or saucepan. Gently crumble the saffron between

your fingers and add it to the strained liquid. Add the cream, sautéed morels, and leeks and simmer until reduced to 4 cups. Meanwhile, pick the mussels from their opened shells, removing the mussels' "beards" as you go.

Add the picked mussels to the soup and season with salt and a pinch of cayenne. Remove the skillet from the heat, divide the soup

among six soup plates, and decorate with some snipped chives.

Sam Hayward is the executive chef at the Harraseeket Inn in Freeport, Maine. An amateur mushroom hunter, he looks forward to spring's first morel harvest all winter long. ♦