

Beyond the Bella

OPENING OUR MINDS AND KITCHENS TO THE EXCITING WORLD OF EXOTIC MUSHROOMS

Alyssa Thayer

WHILE MANY OF US DROP A PINT OR TWO OF baby bellas into our grocery basket each week, it takes a more adventurous cook to grab a meaty hunk of hen of the woods or a shaggy mass of lion's mane mushrooms.

Southeastern PA has long been regarded as a mushroom mecca, producing about half of all mushrooms consumed in the U.S. annually. The vast majority of this volume is made up of mainstream varieties, which benefit from longer staying power and a steady demand. Complementing this behemoth of a mushroom industry is a smaller artisan community of growers and foragers who are bringing unique and delicate varieties of fungi to our local markets.

One such grower is Norman Fetter, owner of **Woodland Jewel Mushrooms** in Spring City, PA. Norman found his way into this business through genuine curiosity. Growing up in the woods of Chester County, he was fascinated by the way mushrooms appeared, seemingly overnight. "You can almost watch them grow," he says with wonder.

When Norman became a vegetarian in his teen years, his interest intensified. It wasn't until he finally moved out of the city that he was finally able to scale his hobby into a full-time way of life.

He knew he could never compete with the large-scale manufacturers of Kennett Square, so he set his sights on the specialty market, and never looked back.

Today, Woodland Jewel grows all kinds of gourmet mushrooms including golden/silver oyster, shiitake, lion's mane, royal trumpets and pioppini, and sells them fresh at farmers markets, food co-ops and wholesale to restaurants. He also sells medicinal



Norman Fetter with freshly harvested golden oyster mushrooms

extracts and grow-your-own kits online. The kits are a fun kitchen science project that many embraced during the pandemic. "When restaurant demand was down, the kits actually kept us afloat," he says.

Chefs have always coveted exotic mushrooms, citing their unparalleled umami/woody flavor and unique texture, but lately Norman says he's seen a dramatic increase in demand from home cooks as well. "I've definitely seen more interest among the general public," he says.

He laughs remembering a time over the summer when he sold out of lion's mane every week at market because a well-known TikTok influencer, Tabitha Brown, shared her crabless cake recipe with the world.

Even as home chefs begin to embrace and seek out these interesting ingredients, Norman still acknowledges that seeing something that more resembles a sea monster than a vegetable on a table can be intimidating. He encourages folks to keep an open mind and palate and start simply.

"If you are trying a new mushroom, just bring it home and saute it with butter or olive oil. That way you can really taste the flavor and see what you're working with."

We've gathered a list of tips and recipes to help dispel the mystique of mushrooms and guide you towards an exciting new culinary adventure.

Now let's get cookin'.



Woodland Jewel sells Grow-Your-Own kits. Photo of Kaitlyn Ver Haar's at-home harvest

Recipes

People underestimate mushrooms as they do tofu—as blank slates to add flavor to. But these exotic and wild mushrooms have unique, savory flavors unto themselves that pair fabulously with sweet and salty Asian sauces, savory French flavors and the creamy, floral notes of fresh cheese.

Savory Mushroom Nut Loaf

This autumnal favorite has some of our favorite meatloaf qualities sans the meat. The roasted mushrooms and nuts create a nice flavor and texture that pair well with roasted root veggies and other seasonal sides.



- ½ lb. mixed mushrooms (we used oyster, shiitake and cremini)
- 1 tsp. salt
- 2 Tb. olive oil, divided
- ½ C. walnuts, chopped
- ½ C. cashews, chopped
- 1 large onion, diced
- 3 garlic cloves, chopped
- ½ tsp. pepper
- 2 C. carrot, finely diced (about 3 large carrots)
- 2 stalks celery, diced (about 1 cup)
- 2 tsp. fresh sage, chopped finely
- 2 tsp. fresh thyme, leaves only, chopped finely
- 2 tsp. fresh rosemary, minced
- ½ C. Parmesan cheese, shredded
- 1 Tb. Dijon mustard
- ⅓ C. rolled oats
- 1 Tb. tomato paste
- 2 tsp. Worcestershire sauce (more for glaze)
- 4 eggs

Glaze:

- ¼ C. ketchup
- 2 Tb. maple syrup
- 2 tsp. Worcestershire sauce

Preheat the oven to 450° F.

Chop mushrooms and tops with 1 tablespoon of olive oil and a pinch of salt. Add to a large oven-safe pan(s) making sure not to crowd them. Roast for 10–15 minutes. Pour out any extra liquid,

Mushroom Tips:

Tips, tricks and FAQs to help you navigate the fabulous frontier of fungi.

Tasting Makers — While exotic mushrooms are generally known for their savory, umami taste, different varieties run the flavor gamut. Here are a few of note: shiitake and hen of the woods tend to be very woody, oyster mushrooms tend to have a very light and mild flavor, and lion's mane has subtle briny seafood-like flavor (making it the perfect candidate for a vegan crab cake).

How About Health? — Although Norman always suggests folks do their own research, he also notes that shiitakes have been an approved cancer-fighting supplement in Japan for decades. Preliminary research has pointed to oysters having cholesterol-lowering properties and lion's mane supporting brain health.

Learning Lingo — Wild, exotic and gourmet are used to describe similar varieties. While wild traditionally means foraged rather than cultivated, it's often used to talk about a medley of exotic varieties. Norman says the mushroom industry came up with the category of "exotic" to denote anything other than white, crimini or portobello, (which are actually the same at different maturities).

How Much? — Often exotic mushrooms are sold by the pound and since they're light and cook down tremendously, it's hard to know how much to grab. Norman says most people using them at home buy them in ¼ or ½ lb. quantities. That's enough to add into a dish for 2–4 servings. You'd need more if mushrooms are going to be your main dish.

Waste Not, Wash Not — Although it may be tempting to rinse before use, water adds moisture. Besides buttons, all varieties are grown on sawdust, without the use of manure or compost. Norman suggests using a stiff-bristled brush to get visible dirt off, and for shiitake, you can just snap off the stem. Others say a damp paper towel is OK too as long as the mushrooms are dry before cooking.

Storage — Anything from the fungi family is happiest in the refrigerator. Norman warns against anything air-tight, like plastic wrap or sealed containers, which cause them to go bad more quickly. A good ol' paper bag in the fridge is the best way to go.

Staying Power — Exotic mushrooms tend to be more perishable than their counterparts (with the exception of shitakes), but it depends on how recently they were harvested. If you get them from a grocer, they may have been at a distributor on the shelf. At farmers markets and small co-ops, they may be just a day or two after harvest. If fresh, they can last up to 2 weeks in the fridge.

Tackling Texture — One of the most commonly cited concerns is texture. Mushrooms' high water content makes them rubbery when cooked. To avoid this, Norman recommends sauteing (without crowding the pan) and roasting at high temperatures.

Dry Heat — If texture and chewiness are a big concern, Norman says you can start with a dry hot pan, adding fat only after the mushrooms have already begun to dry out.

Dried Goods — If you can't find fresh mushrooms, dried are also a great way to go. Because they've been dehydrated, they offer a concentrated flavor that can be rehydrated or ground up to season soups and sauces.



Box headed to Suburban in Exton

and roast for an additional 10 minutes (about 25 minutes total or until well browned and reduced in size).

When there are 10 minutes remaining, dump nuts into an oven-safe baking dish and add to oven (top shelf so they don't burn). Once cooking is done, remove both mushrooms and nuts from oven. Turn oven temp down to 375° F.

While the mushrooms are roasting, saute onion and garlic in 1 tablespoon of olive oil and remaining salt and pepper until fragrant, (5 minutes). Add carrots for another 8 minutes (or until beginning to soften). Add celery and herbs. Saute for 2–3 minutes more.

Carefully pull mushrooms from oven when finished and transfer them to the saute pan. Mix well and turn off heat.

In a food processor, pulse cooled nuts until they are a uniform breadcrumb texture. Add to a large bowl.

Pulse mushroom and vegetable mixture in the food processor until it forms a thick dough-like consistency. Transfer to bowl with nuts. Add remaining ingredients and mix well.

Prepare loaf pan by lining bottom and sides with parchment, leaving an overhang on the sides to help pull out the loaf, once cooked. Oil or butter the ends to ensure the mixture does not stick. Pour mixture into the loaf pan and gently slide spatula over top to smooth and flatten into the pan.

Whisk together glaze ingredients and spoon glaze over top, spreading evenly. Cook uncovered for 45 minutes at 350° F. Check at 30 minutes, and rotate if needed.

Allow the loaf to cool for 5–10 minutes before pulling it out. Slice into ½-inch slices and serve alongside roasted root vegetables or mashed potatoes. For winter months or holiday feasts, hold the glaze (brush top with oil to keep from drying out), and serve alongside your favorite gravy and cranberry sauce.

Serves 8.

Wild Mushroom Ricotta Crostini

Adapted from Food and Wine. An easy but elevated appetizer that pairs the woodsy richness of the mushrooms with the creamy freshness of the ricotta. You can also change it up by doing a fresh chevre instead of ricotta or a sour dough instead of the baguette.



- 1 baguette
- 1 Tb. butter
- 2 Tb. extra virgin olive oil, divided
- ½ lb. exotic mushrooms (combination of shiitake and oyster recommended)
- 2 large cloves garlic, minced
- 1 shallot, thinly sliced
- 2 tsp. tarragon, finely chopped (fresh preferred, but dried is OK)
- 1 tsp. thyme, leaves moved from stem, finely chopped
- 2 Tb. dry white wine
- 2 Tb. lemon juice
- ½ tsp. lemon zest
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 C. whole milk ricotta cheese

Slice baguette into ½-inch rounds. Brush with olive oil and place either on a hot grill pan or on a cookie sheet under a hot broiler (1 minutes each side or until desired crispiness is achieved).

Warm butter and 1 tablespoon olive oil in a large saucepan over medium heat. Remove stems if using shiitake and chop into ¼-inch slices. Add mushrooms to warm saute pan. Depending on your pan size, you may have to cook in batches to avoid crowding. Let mushrooms brown and soften (approximately 8 minutes).

Add garlic, shallots, herbs and the additional tablespoon of olive oil and saute until soft and fragrant (another 5–7 minutes). Deglaze with wine and 1 tablespoon lemon juice. Let the alcohol simmer out and flavors meld together for an additional 2–3 minutes. Finish with a generous pinch of salt and pepper.

Prepare ricotta by mixing with the last tablespoon lemon juice, lemon zest and a pinch of ground black pepper in a small bowl.

Assemble crostini by spreading on a layer of ricotta and topping with a spoonful of the mushroom mixture.

Serves 6, appetizer portions.

Roasted Wild Mushroom Pasta

Adapted from Half-Baked Harvest. There's something luxurious and rich about this dish, which doubles down on all the best that savory has to offer—mushrooms, aromatics, herbs and cheese. Pairs perfectly with an early fall evening and a glass of light red wine.



- ¾ lb. long pasta (fettuccine or linguine work well)
- 2 Tb. extra virgin olive oil
- 1 lb. mixed wild mushrooms, thinly chopped (about 2.5–3 C.)
- ¼ tsp. salt
- ¼ tsp. pepper
- 3 Tb. butter
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 C. fresh basil, chopped
- 1 Tb. fresh thyme, minced
- 8–10 fresh sage leaves, finely chopped
- ¼ tsp. ground dried sage
- ½ C. dry white wine
- 2 Tb. fresh lemon juice
- ¼ C. Manchego cheese, shaved
- ¼ C. Parmesan cheese, grated

Boil salted water and prepare pasta according to directions.

While pasta is cooking, heat olive oil in a large thick-bottom pan. Add chopped mushrooms and a generous pinch of salt and pepper. Stir to combine, then leave over medium-high heat to brown and release liquids for 8 minutes (minimal if any stirring).

Note: Mushrooms should not be crowded. If you have more than one layer, cook in batches.

Add butter, garlic, ½ the basil, thyme, both types of sage and saute until garlic is fragrant and soft (2 minutes).

Deglaze with wine and lemon juice. Simmer for 3–5 minutes.

Take off heat. Add pasta into the mix along with Manchego cheese, half the Parmesan and the rest of basil. Toss to combine.

Divide into shallow bowls and top with remaining Parmesan and some fresh ground black pepper.

Serves 4.

Miso Mushroom Shrimp Soup

This Asian-inspired soup is light and satisfying all at the same time. You can choose to keep it simple or hearty it up with rice noodles and tofu.



- 2 Tb. coconut oil (plus 1 Tb. extra, if dry)
- 1 tsp. dark sesame oil
- ¼ lb. or 6 oz. shiitake mushrooms, thinly sliced
- 3 Tb. fresh garlic, grated
- 2 cloves garlic, finely minced
- 1 Tb. mirin or rice wine
- 1 Tb. coconut aminos (soy-free seasoning)
- 3 C. vegetable or mushroom broth
- 2 C. water
- 2 Tb. miso paste (red or white will work)
- 3 C. baby bok choy (or other dark leafy green), chopped
- 1 lb. shrimp, cleaned and peeled
- ¼ C. green onion, thinly sliced
- 3 Tb. lime juice
- ¼ C. cilantro, finely chopped

Optional: 1 tsp. tamari or soy sauce

Optional add-ins:

For extra protein – cubed tofu

For a little heat – red chili flakes or chili oil

For added starch – rice noodles

For presentation – a sprinkle of black and white sesame seeds

In a large Dutch oven, heat oils over medium-high heat. Add chopped mushrooms, mix once to coat oil and then leave to brown for 5 minutes. Add ginger and garlic and saute for an additional 3 minutes (if too dry, add an additional tablespoon of coconut oil).

Deglaze with mirin and coconut aminos. Then add broth and water. Bring to a high simmer. Ladle ½ cup of broth into a small bowl, add miso paste and whisk to dissolve. Once dissolved, pour mixture back into larger broth pot.

Add greens, shrimp and green onion to simmering broth and cook for 3 minutes or until shrimp are pink and cooked through (time depends on shrimp size).

Take off heat. Add lime juice and cilantro. Taste broth to determine if you need additional salt (tamari/soy sauce) or acid (additional lime juice), or if too salty mellow it out with additional water.

Note: It's important to taste before adding since it's easy for all these ingredients to become too salty, especially if you're using a full sodium broth.

Serve hot and enjoy!

Serves 4–6, depending on if it's a side or entree portion. ♦

Alyssa Thayer found her love of food at an early age, frolicking around her mother's organic farm and eating her weight in berries and snap peas each summer. She is a self-proclaimed urban farm girl, whose mission is to bring inspired ideas to life, passionate people together, and good food to every table.



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