

POSTED ON SEPTEMBER 25, 2008:

Foraging for fungi without fear

By Julianne Glatz



Edible sulphur shelf mushrooms are easily identified by their bright orange and yellow coloring.
HARV KOPLO

"Stop the car!" my daughter Ashley exclaimed. I hit the brakes and anxiously looked around. We'd gone to see how high the creek on the other side of our road had risen after the heavy rains that Hurricane Ike sent our way.

"I saw sulphur shelves!" Ashley said. Anticipation replaced my anxiety. Turning the car around, we crawled along until she spotted them again. I needed to start supper, and Ashley had things to do before heading to Chicago, but sulphur shelves were worth a delay. She ran into the woods and came back cradling a pile of flattish egg-sized lumps. They were sulphur yellow on the bottoms and edges, neon orange on top.

Sulphur shelves are mushrooms that appear locally in fall, especially when there's been abundant rainfall. Ashley's finds were babies — as they grow, clusters often overlap and fuse, forming a "shelf" that can measure 18 or more inches across. They're also called chicken mushrooms (they taste like mushroomy chicken, though large older ones become flavorless and inedibly tough); but I like the name that evokes their vibrant colors glowing like a beacon in a shady forest.

I've been mushroom foraging as long as I can remember, mostly for morels. When I was seven my mom gently shook me awake one spring morning just before dawn: "Get dressed," she said. "We're going hunting for sponge mushrooms before school." There were trips to the banks of the Sangamon River, and to friends' farms in the Illinois River valley. When meadow mushrooms profusely popped up on our lawn, we didn't even have to hunt — not that we minded foraging: it's as rewarding as the mushrooms themselves. We didn't have to search for giant puffballs, either, although as a child I thought their angel food cake-like texture was yucky.

Friends brought hen-of-the-woods occasionally, but my family didn't hunt for mushrooms in the fall even though that's when more edible types appear than in any other season. Locally, spring is almost exclusively morel time. My folks had a "go-with-what-you-know" policy about wild mushrooms.

UIS professor and mycology expert Jim Veselenak says most people are cautious about wild mushrooms: "We see many more potential poisonings than actual ones. Most of the time, it's immigrants, usually from Europe, who find something that looks like a mushroom they ate back home — but it's not the same."

Veselenak's words reminded me of the mushrooms I saw displayed in tiny groceries in nearby Bohemian neighborhoods when living in Oak Park. I loved exploring those quirky stores, sadly now almost extinct: their sausages, some fat, some thin, one variety coiled and pierced with a wooden skewer; and their mysterious jars of pickled vegetables, preserves and breads. In fall, there would be baskets of mushrooms with yellow spongy undersides, bits of twigs and dried leaves still clinging to them. I bought the delicious sausages and other things, including dense and chewy rye breads, but never found the courage to try the mushrooms, which was probably just as well.

When I moved back to Springfield, the woods across from us proved to be poor foraging ground for morels. During family fall walks in the woods, however, we saw lots of mushrooms of many different kinds. We bought a field guide, but still weren't comfortable about which were safe. That's why my husband and I were delighted when Dr. Veselenak offered a community education class on mushroom identification.

We learned a lot from Dr. Veselenak. We learned that while there are quite a few mushrooms that can make you sick, those that are actually fatal are rare. We learned to make spore prints and distinguish between gill attachments as well as other aids for identification. Most importantly, we learned that if we stuck to varieties that were easily identifiable and didn't have dangerous look-alikes — such as the ones above — and if we cooked them thoroughly, we could eat our fungi finds without fear.

Is there any reason for caution about the wild mushrooms that appear on so many restaurant menus and in groceries? Undoubtedly not. Restaurants would be foolish to risk poisoning customers; it's a safe bet they only buy wild mushrooms from reputable suppliers. Sadly, though, a more common factor is that most mushrooms described as "wild" are cultivated, not wild. They may be less common than good old button mushrooms, but they're no wilder. I know I'm a stickler for semantics, but it's annoying to order something with wild mushrooms and see only cremini on the plate. Don't get me wrong — I have no problem with cultivated mushrooms, button or otherwise. I routinely cook, eat and enjoy them, and I'm glad they're affordable and available. Just don't call cultivated shitake, cremini, portobello, oyster, etc. mushrooms "wild." A more accurate adjective is "exotic," although even that's become a stretch for commonplace cremini and portobellos.

If you learn which wild mushrooms are safe and go foraging, you may find a delicious treasure. But even if you don't, it's a wonderful way to experience autumn's beauty.

Dr. Jim Veselenak no longer offers identification classes, but he welcomes calls and is always happy to help identify mushrooms. Contact him at 217-206-7346. The UIS Emiquon Field Station in Lewiston will feature a mushroom "Walk and Talk" by Dr. Veselenak at 5:30 p.m. on Sept. 30. For information, call 217-206-7339.

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I rarely make this pilaf with wild mushrooms. If I'm lucky enough to find or buy them, I usually sauté them simply in butter, to best savor a special treat. But the pilaf is great with exotic mushrooms, and something I can make frequently. On a few occasions, though, I've had enough wild mushrooms — a huge cluster of oysters, a sulphur shelf as big as a pizza, or basket-sized hen-of-the-woods — to use them in preparations such as this.

The brown rice in this recipe contributes pleasing texture and nutty flavor, but there's another reason to use it: its cooking time is the same as wild rice's, unlike white rice, which cooks in

about a third the time. That makes it possible to cook the brown and wild rice together instead of having to do it separately.

About 85 percent of wild rice consumed today, like those exotic mushrooms, isn't truly wild, but cultivated and harvested by machine. Actually wild rice isn't really even rice, but a native grass seed. Unlike mushrooms, however, "wild rice" is the accepted name for that grass seed rather than describing the way it grows or how it's obtained, so there's no point in trying to call it something else. Cultivated wild rice and "wild" wild rice are easy to distinguish: Cultivated wild rice is shorter and uniformly dark. Hand-harvested (usually by Native Americans) wild wild rice has color variations from tan to dark brown and it's also more costly.

As with the exotic mushrooms, the pilaf will be delicious with cultivated wild rice. But if you're fortunate to have both truly wild mushrooms and wild rice, you're in for an extra special epicurean experience.

WILD AND BROWN RICE PILAF WITH EXOTIC/WILD MUSHROOMS

1/2 lb. exotic mushrooms such as shitake, oyster, or cremini, OR safely edible wild mushrooms such as oyster, chanterelle, hen-of-the-woods, sulphur shelf, or morels, cleaned and torn or cut into bite-sized pieces.

1 T. extra-virgin olive oil

4 T. unsalted butter, divided

1 tsp. kosher or sea salt, plus additional

1 –2 bunches of scallions

1/2 c. wild rice

1/2 c. long-grained brown rice

1/2 c. dry white wine or dry white vermouth

4 c. unsalted chicken or vegetable stock

1 T fresh thyme leaves or 1 tsp. dried

Freshly ground pepper to taste

1/2 c. toasted, broken nuts such as walnuts or

hazelnuts, optional

Melt the olive oil and 1T. of the butter in a large skillet over high heat. Add the mushrooms, sprinkle lightly with salt, and cook, stirring constantly, until the mushrooms are cooked through and lightly browned. It's important to not overcrowd the pan; if your skillet isn't large enough, do this in batches. Cooking time will vary depending on the kind of mushrooms you are using. Remove the mushrooms from the skillet and set aside. Remove the skillet from the heat and add the wine, stirring to incorporate any browning from the bottom. Set aside.

Thinly slice the white parts of the onions. You should have about 1 1/2 c. Thinly slice enough of the green parts to measure 1 c. and set aside.

Melt the remaining butter in a heavy pan with a close-fitting lid over medium heat. Add the white scallion parts and sauté until softened and lightly browned, about 5 minutes.

Add the wild and brown rice to the pan and sauté for a few minutes more until the brown rice begins to becoming translucent. Increase the heat to high and add the wine from the mushroom skillet and the stock, teaspoon of salt, and thyme. Let come to a rolling boil, then reduce the heat until the mixture is at a bare simmer. Cover the pan and cook for 40 – 45 minutes or until the rice is cooked through but not mushy. (If the rice is done but there is still liquid in the pan, drain the rice, return the liquid to the pan, reduce the liquid to a glaze, and then return the rice to the pan). Mix in half of the sliced greens, half the nuts, if using, and the reserved mushrooms, and heat through. Season to taste with pepper and additional salt, if needed. Serve sprinkled with the remaining greens, and nuts. Serves 4-6

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