

FUNGUS FANATICS

Mushroom hunting at the Aerie.

BY JANICE MUCALOV

FYI FOOD



In the damp forest, they hunt. Clambering over mossy logs and tossing back cedar branches, they search for their bounty. Suddenly an excited whoop pierces the air. "I've found some! Chanterelles!" A few close in, and using serrated knives they gently dig out the prized yellow mushrooms from the earth and place them in their baskets.

Every September and October, the Aerie Resort, a Relais & Châteaux property on Vancouver Island, holds Great Fall Mushroom Hunts most Saturdays. Brother Michael, a local Benedictine monk and mushroom expert, leads the half-day adventures. Later, back at the Aerie, the foragers toast their finds with mushroom martinis, then sit down to a three-course lunch made from—what else?—wild, freshly-picked mushrooms.

"Vancouver Island has a unique climate and geography that makes it ideal for many varieties of wild mushrooms," says Bill Jones, a local chef and mushroom expert who does consulting for several restaurants. "Temperate rainforests are excellent for delicacies like chanterelles, oyster mushrooms and cauliflower fungus. High plateaus and ridges are home to porcini and pine mushrooms."

Kept secret, the location of Vancouver Island's wild mushroom crops is known only to a select group of resourceful harvesters. British Columbia's wild mushroom industry is unregulated and unmonitored, but pickers honour an informal set of rules and, for the most part, respect each other's territories and livelihoods as they seek out the exotic fungi.



Pine mushroom.

PHOTO: DREAMSTIME

At least 10,000 species of mushroom are estimated to grow in North America. About 250 of these are known to be edible. There are three main species that dominate the B.C. market: chanterelles, pine mushrooms and morels.

Typically shipped to Europe, chanterelles are cherished for their slightly nutty taste and silky texture. This is especially true at the beginning of the season, when they're firm and golden and bursting with flavour, says the Aerie's executive chef, Christophe Letard. Besides turning them into mushroom spring rolls, he likes to combine them with foie gras for a mushroom ravioli appetizer. "The foie gras, which binds with the mushrooms, complements more meaty varieties like the yellow chanterelle or lobster mushrooms, which cut like a steak."

Pine mushrooms represent the province's most significant mushroom crop, with harvests in excess of 250 tons a year (valued at between \$25-million and \$45-million). In cooler weather, these large and pungent mushrooms thrive on the tree decay of second-growth forests around the Cowichan Valley, near the Aerie. But you're not likely to find them in Canadian grocery stores; most are shipped to Japan, where it is believed they boost vigour and longevity.

"I used to hate pine mushrooms because I thought they were too strong," says Letard, for whom mushrooms were a part of a childhood spent on a farm in France. "But now I've found they work really well with chicken, which has a mild flavour." His recipe? "I marinate chicken breasts in lemon- and saffron-infused white wine, sear and caramelize them just a little on the outside, then serve them with sautéed pine mushrooms."

As for morels, they bloom in the spring, often after forest fires. They're known for their rich, woodsy flavour and deep, hollow caps, which allow them to be stuffed.

So how did Brother Michael and the Aerie get involved in foraging for fungi? A long-time resident of the nearby Sole Dao Monastery, Brother Michael has supplied the Aerie and other hotels and restaurants with mushrooms and berries for years. Two years ago, the Aerie recruited Brother Michael to take weekly groups of guests into the woods to learn about local mushrooms and share the joy of hunting.

Mind you, Brother Michael has help; in total, there are usually four "shepherds" with walkie-talkies to help you select the right mushrooms and keep an eye out so you don't get lost. On a good day, six varieties might be spotted, such as chanterelle, pine, cauliflower, hedgehog, lobster (they actually look like lobster claws) and king boletus.

Finicky in nature, mushrooms (technically the fruit of fungi that live in the soil and in living and dead trees) need a good drenching of rain to sprout. Care is also required when preparing them. "Cook them as soon as they're picked, because they break down in the fridge," advises Letard. "The key is that you don't want to overcook them. I split the mushrooms into small pieces so they cook at the same time. For chanterelles, just sauté them for 30 seconds to a minute in a little olive oil, very hot, add some garlic or fresh herbs, and they're done."

Canadian palates, it seems, are becoming increasingly hooked on the rare delicacies. "Our mushrooms are exported all over the world and can be found in markets and restaurants in Paris, New York and Tokyo," says Bill Jones. "Mushroom brokers set up camp in many areas near the forest-road access points. If you ask nicely, they may even sell you some fresh fungi." Epicureans overseas are going to have to look elsewhere if we continue to be wild about our 'shrooms. ●