



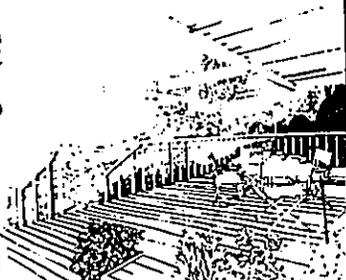
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Morel moral

Positive mushroom ID

To people who aren't afflicted by May morel madness, it must seem as if the loonies have gone to the boonies.

Think about it: thousands of otherwise normal-seeming people driving for miles for the privilege of enduring mosquito bites, wet feet and a backache from stooping and squatting to scan the forest floor. And all for the chance that they'll return home with a "mess" of mushrooms.

The objects of this quest is no ordinary mushroom. It's the morel, that stalked, spongy-topped fungus whose appearance in May is taken as justification for towns to hold festivals and mushroom hunters to flock to the woods.

Mycologist (folks who study mushrooms and other fungi) such as Everett Beneke at Michigan State University, suggest that part of the romance of the morel is its brief period of availability. Morels rarely pop up before May 1 and they're generally gone by June, so if the morel fancier wants to indulge him/herself, May is the time.

ANOTHER REASON for the popularity of the morel is that it's one of the easiest of all Michigan mushrooms to identify.

The true morel has a deeply pitted, hollow top portion that's attached at its base to the hollow stem. Other mush-

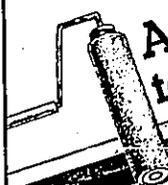
rooms with folds or gnarled caps that bear some resemblance to the morel are attached only at the top, the same way an umbrella is attached to its handle.

Morels range from creamy-white to black, but all have the deep, irregularly spaced pits in the cap, a light-colored stalk and a hollow interior. But the attachment of the bottom of the cap to the stalk is the acid test. This is why all mushroom hunters, old hands and novices alike, are advised to slice lengthwise every pitted morel they collect. While they're double-checking their identification of the mushroom as a morel, they can also clear out any millipedes or other bits of protein that may have taken up residence inside the mushrooms.

No matter where you look for morels — whether in your own backyard or most of the way across the state — the first morel is the hardest one to spot. The mushrooms blend quite nicely into the mottled browns of last year's leaves, and until your eye becomes adept at seeing the mushrooms in spite of their protective coloration, you can be literally walking on morels without spotting a one. Some veteran mushroom stalkers suggest getting as close to the ground as you can and looking toward the sky. "Doing the mushroom squat" throws morels into silhouette so they're easier to see.

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