

The search is on for morels

Mother Nature should give morel hunters a springtime gift — an excellent crop of delectable mushrooms that could draw 800,000 to Michigan's forests and fields in May and June, reports AAA Michigan.

Michigan's mild winter and early spring showers have provided hunters with nearly ideal conditions. Traditionally, black morels appear first in early May, followed by the whites and then the giant species in early June.

Their brief season makes them treasured by hunters from across the nation who flock to primarily the northern third of Lower Michigan to gather the delicacy.

Morels are identified by deeply pitted caps attached to the stem.

Black morels have deep dark-cream to brownish-black pitted caps. White morel tops vary from light cream to yellowish-brown.

There are "false" morels which have pitted caps, but they are attached to the top of the stem, much like a shade on lamp, and should not be eaten.

The morel's taste has been described as delicate, chewy, nut-like and reminiscent of a fine sirloin steak. Low in calories and cholesterol, morels are ideal for those watching their weight.

Morel hunters can find success in a variety of locations, including: fields; woods; near old, young and dead trees; in desolate areas; in backyards and in both sunshine and

shade. Some hunters have secret places they refuse to divulge.

Commercial morel hunters often compete with the hobbyist for choice sites. Dried morels can sell for about \$200 a pound and a fresh pound goes for about \$20.

Morels are so popular that legislation (HB-4768) has been introduced to name it Michigan's state mushroom.

Morels are the stars of festivals in Harrison (May 1-3), Mesick (May 3-9), Lewistown (May 9), Boyne City (May 9-10) and Grayling (May 9-10 and 16-17). Parades, cooking demonstrations, contests, craft fairs, and morel hunting are highlights.

Because morels are often confused with other mushrooms and

many species are toxic to humans, AAA Michigan advises that the inexperienced and children be accompanied by expert hunters.

Hunters should only pick unblemished mushrooms and not pull the mushroom from the ground. Instead, pinch or cut the base of the stem so as not to disturb the mycelium, the underground network from which more mushrooms spring.

Harvested morels should be kept in a paper or net bag, or basket. Plastic bags retard the flow of air and cause morels to decompose quickly.

Do not eat any wild mushrooms raw, including morels, as many species are indigestible and can cause gastric discomfort.

Locals qualify for new cook-off

Five local residents have qualified for the final competition in the first Frankenmuth Bavarian Inn Motor Lodge Cook-Off.

Barbara Kerrigan and Linda Hess of Livonia, Marilyn Walsh of Redford and Chris Shellers and Craig A. Hane of Farmington will compete for a weekend for two in Frankenmuth and a \$300 Frankenmuth shopping spree at the cook-off, set for May 3 and 4 at the Inn.

Kerrigan's strawberry pretzel salad, Hess' dilly broccoli salad, Walsh's sauerkraut balls, Shellers' Franklins and Hane's triple chocolate torte were chosen from among 513 recipes to compete in the final cook-off. Recipes were submitted from across Michigan and three other states.

All finalists will prepare their recipes before a live audience at the Motor Lodge.

The competition for the appetizer category will be held at 1 p.m., Sunday, May 3, while the dessert recipe judging will begin at 4 p.m. Monday's competition will begin at 10 a.m. with the salad judging. Chicken recipe judging will begin at 1 p.m.

The recipes were screened by

William "Tiny" and Dorothy Zehnder, owners of the Frankenmuth Bavarian Inn Restaurant, and Dorothy's sister, Edna Hegenauer. Entries will be judged on originality, flavor, texture and appearance.

The public may attend the competition and guests will have the chance to sample the prize-winning recipes once judging is complete. There is no admission charge to the event.

Twelve finalists will compete in each of the four categories. A first prize of a weekend for two at the Frankenmuth Bavarian Inn Motor Lodge will be awarded in each category. The runner-up will receive a \$50 gift certificate.

First-place winners will be eligible for the grand prize — a \$300 Frankenmuth shopping spree. The grand prize winner will be announced after the final judging Monday, May 4.

In addition to the competition, the cook-off also will include demonstrations by members of the Frankenmuth Bavarian Inn staff, including candy making, torte decorating, cookie baking, artistic vegetable cutting and non-alcoholic beverage sampling.

Mushrooms

Morels make a tasty addition to any meal

Once morels have been harvested, they should be processed as soon as possible by freezing, drying, canning or cooking. No wild mushrooms, even morels, should be eaten raw, according to AAA Michigan.

Cooked morels make a tasty addition to almost any dish — meat loaf, spaghetti sauce, poultry, stuffing, scrambled eggs, quiche, soups and salads.

Freezing is the easiest way to preserve morels. Air drying often leaves the mushrooms susceptible to dust or insects and canning requires special equipment and proper timing.

To freeze morels, cut them in half lengthwise and rinse. Cook the morels until covered in their own juices. Air cool or set pan in cold water. Pack the mushrooms in their juice in containers, leaving about one-half inch of space on top. Seal and freeze.

When using frozen morels in cooking, add them directly to the dish without thawing. They tend to get rubbery, although the texture does not affect the taste.

The following are recipes from "The Curious Morel" by Larry Lonik.

BASIC BACON AND MORELS

Use any amount of morels and one-fourth as much bacon. Cut bacon into small pieces. Fry until done, but leave in pan. Do not drain grease. Add clean, split morels. Liquid will become soupy. Cook until grease clarifies. Mixture will make slight popping noise. Drain. Eat or use in other recipes.

MOREL BUTTER

Makes about 1/2 lb.

1/4 lb. fresh morels
2 tbsp. butter
1 tsp. chives
1/4 lb. butter at room temperature

Finely chop morels by hand or in food processor. Melt 2 tbsp. butter in large skillet. Add morels and saute for 5 minutes. Cool thoroughly. Whip butter until fluffy. Blend in cooled morels and chives. Use as spread or add to cooked vegetables or baked potatoes. Keeps well in refrigerator for a week in tightly covered container.

MOREL SAUCE FOR PASTA

Makes 2-3 servings

1/4 lb. morels, sliced
2 tbsp. lemon juice
1 small onion or shallot, chopped
4 tbsp. butter
4 tbsp. olive oil
1 bunch parsley, chopped
Salt, pepper
Cooked pasta for 2-3
1 large clove garlic, chopped

Sprinkle morels with lemon juice. Cook onion or shallot and garlic gently in butter and oil until they soften, without browning. Add morels and parsley, raising the heat slightly, and cook 10 minutes more. Season to

taste with salt and pepper. Serve over cooked pasta.

HOPE BAY TROUT STUFFED WITH MORELS

6 trout, small, heads on
1 pkg. dry stuffing mix
8 tbsp. butter, divided
1 lb. morels
1 tsp. fresh parsley, chopped
Salt, pepper

Prepare dry stuffing mix as directed. Saute morels in 4 tbsp. butter for minutes. Mix with stuffing; add

parsley. Pre-heat oven to 350°. Wash trout in cold water. Pat dry. Lightly salt and pepper cavity. Stuff with mixture. Place trout side by side in shallow, buttered baking dish, melt remainder of butter and pour over fish. Add 1 tsp. water and bake 15 minutes. Baste with more melted butter and bake another 10-15 minutes. Fish should flake easily with a fork when done.

BOULLION MOREL SOUP

1/4 cup onion, chopped
1/4 cup butter or margarine

1 lb. morels, sliced
1 tsp. all-purpose flour
1 dash bottled hot pepper sauce
1/4 cup water
1 chicken bouillon cube
1/4 tsp. salt
1/4 tsp. basil, crushed

Cook onion in butter until tender but not brown. Add morels and flour, toss to coat. Stir in water, bouillon cube, salt, basil and hot pepper sauce. Cook, stirring constantly, until mixture boils. Simmer 8-10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Serve piping hot.



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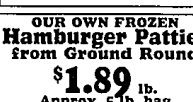
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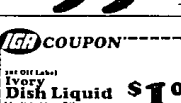
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