

taste buds

chef Larry Janes

A fungus among us: It's morels

Morel mushrooms bring out the spring madness. Mycophiles instead of friends to guard a secret woodland cache of the preclous fungus, or pay exorbitant prices in the marketplace to take them home. Many guests will spend hours waiting in line at restaurants that will soon be offering this fleeting delight, if but for just a very short while.

If you haven't guessed it by now, morel mushrooms have defied all efforts at cultivation in captivity. The only known sources are obscure backyards, deep oak-laden woods where sunshine is filtered through pine needles and towering elms, or a lucky friend, relative or neighbor who "knows just the right spot."

"Thank God for Aunt Phyllis. She is a former Glen Lake native, now with roots Downriver. We have, on numerous occasions, set off with five-pound onion-sack bags in hand, searching for what is known as "the lobster of the mushroom kingdom."

In all honesty, many times we have returned with little more than the empty sacks, but on more than one occasion, we have gathered more than our fill of the delectable beauty. By the way, if you're waiting for me to divulge Aunt Phyllis' secret morel hide-out, forget it.

NOT ONLY WOULD I be banned from any future family culinary outings but, in all honesty, all I remember is getting in the car and driving down these dusty roads, passing cherry orchards and a cemetery with 100-year-old gravemarkers. Only then did we exit our vehicles to begin what was billed as a "Don't worry, Larry Lee. I know where we're going" hike over ridges and hills. All this without the use of a compass or hardly being able to see the sun through the towering trees. All this for a mushroom?

A morel is not just "any" mushroom. The morel is thin-fleshed; spongy, and dark-brown, yellow or off-white, shaped like a hollowed-out Christmas tree with a pitted cap that can be as small as a wild strawberry or as large as a lamb chop. The flavor varies but, personally, I liken it to warm autumn leaves, hazelnuts and nutmeg. Richly flavored beyond compare, these mushrooms should fall into the category of truffles and caviar, leaving taste to the beholder.

Mother Nature is a sly old lass and, unfortunately, has planted false morels, or Gyromitras, to evade the uninformed mycophile. False morels, unlike regular morels, have caps that look like convoluted brains and are not cone shaped. In addition, the stems are thick and chambered while true morels have straight and hollow stems.

If this is your first time for mushroom hunting of any kind, it's best to have someone along like Aunt Phyllis who knows the area and has the experience to point out real morels. To an untrained eye, it's like picking out the cubic zircons in a mound of real diamonds. Once you learn the focusing technique, spotting them gets easier. It's locating them first which is the most difficult.

Not that I've ever been in a position to pass up any morel sprouting from the earthen floor. The avid morelites should look for mushrooms that have a sweet, earthy and nutty smell. Discard sour smells and especially ones with a slight "animal aroma" (if you catch my drift).

Never drop them into a regular bag or, worse yet, plastic, as they will spoil easily. Seasoned pickers recycle, using the string-mesh sacks that potatoes and onions come in at the grocery store. I hope that every prospective morel hunter has someone like Aunt Phyllis in his or her family. It sure makes the hunting more enjoyable.

Picnicking with the Pistons

By Larry Janes
special writer

SINCE TODAY is the official start of the picnic season here in metro Detroit, isn't it fitting that we do so with the help of the World Champion Detroit Pistons and their wives?

After all, now that the basketball season is drawing to a close and we've been watching Isiah Thomas, Bill Laimbeer and the rest of the Bad Boys bring home another championship, rest assured that these guys and their wives will be picnicking up a storm real soon.

At a recent interview with members of the Pistons Women's Association, headed up by Lynne Thomas, Chris Laimbeer and Debbie Dumars, I found that these wives can't wait for the season to draw to a winning close. Once again, they can return to a lengthy summer vacation, complete with picnics, barbecues and extended rest and relaxation.

What, you ask, do the World Champions of basketball and their families do for a great picnic?

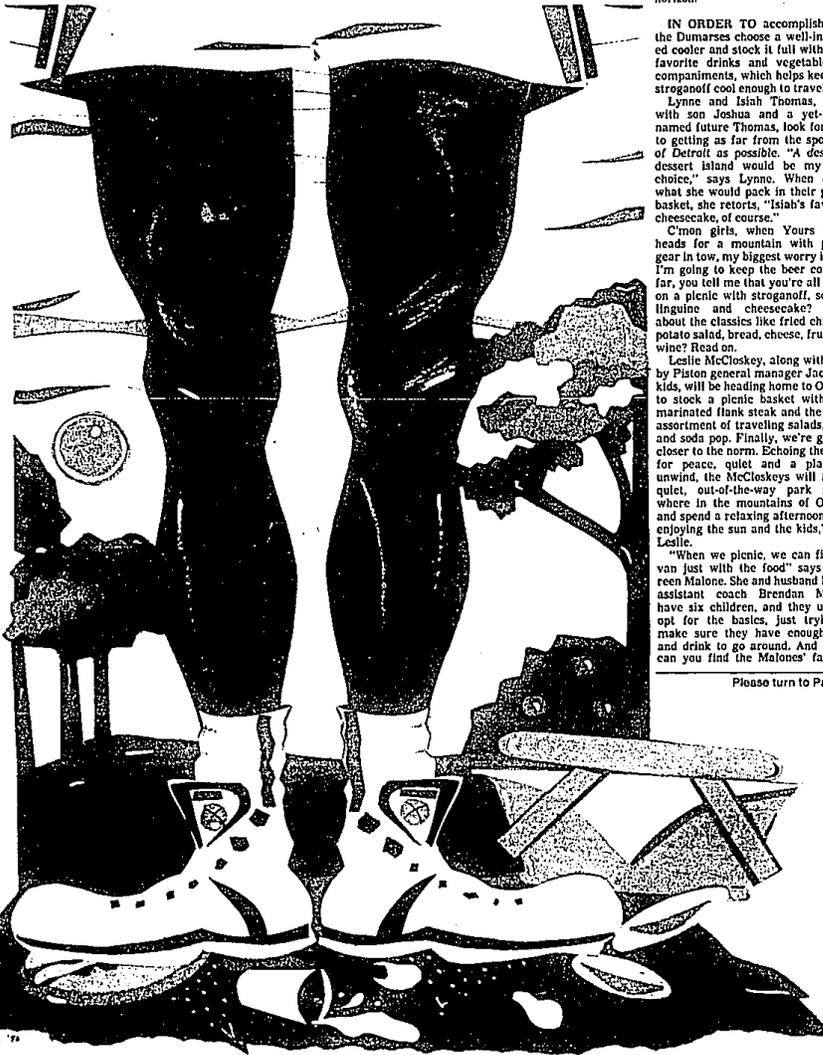
WHEN QUERIED independently, all the Piston wives could have responded in unison because the first words to echo from their mouths were about getting away from all the press, photographers and the spotlight. Seems that the players as well as their families are frequently hounded by folks like me wanting to push open that sliding glass door of personal inquiries just a little farther.

With the 1990 basketball season drawing to a close, rest assured that the picnic baskets are reeved up and raring to go.

For Chris and Bill Laimbeer, picnicing automatically means heading for the boat. With kids in tow, their picnic basket is stuffed with an assortment of cold salads and finger foods that can be plated easily and enjoyed with little fuss and bother.

During the off season, Bill likes to putter in the kitchen and whip up a favorite recipe for scallop and linguine pasta. Chris says that the pasta travels well and can be prepared "just by boiling water" which is a few choice scallops and veggies, tossed with the pasta and you have a great hot picnic entrée that just can't be beat. "Leftover pasta is easily tossed with an Italian dressing for tomorrow's cold pasta salad," says Chris.

Debbie and Joe Dumars will be heading for their favorite picnic spot in Louisiana. The Sam Houston State



THOMAS FRANKS '88

Park comes complete with secluded campsites, and all this young couple has to do is pitch a tent, start a cozy fire, pull out a pot of their favorite shrimp stroganoff from the cooler, then sit back and watch the hot Louisiana sun melt like molasses into the horizon.

IN ORDER TO accomplish this, the Dumarses choose a well-insulated cooler and stock it full with their favorite drinks and vegetable accompaniments, which helps keep the stroganoff cool enough to travel.

Lynne and Isiah Thomas, along with son Joshua and a yet-to-be-named future Thomas, look forward to getting as far from the spotlight of Detroit as possible. "A deserted desert island would be my first choice," says Lynne. When asked what she would pack in their picnic basket, she retorts, "Isiah's favorite cheesecake, of course."

C'mon girls, when Yours Truly heads for a mountain with picnic gear in tow, my biggest worry is how I'm going to keep the beer cold. So far, you tell me that you're all going on a picnic with stroganoff, scallop linguine and cheesecake? What about the classics like fried chicken, potato salad, bread, cheese, fruit and wine? Read on.

Leslie McCloskey, along with husband Piston general manager Jack and kids, will be heading home to Oregon to stock a picnic basket with cold marinated flank steak and the usual assortment of traveling salads, wine and soda pop. Finally, we're getting closer to the norm. Echoing the need for peace, quiet and a place to unwind, the McCloskeys will find a quiet, out-of-the-way park somewhere in the mountains of Oregon and spend a relaxing afternoon "just enjoying the sun and the kids," says Leslie.

"When we picnic, we can fill one van just with the food" says Maureen Malone. She and husband Piston assistant coach Brendan Malone have six children, and they usually opt for the basics, just trying to make sure they have enough food and drink to go around. And where can you find the Malones' favorite

Please turn to Page 2

New image for old Italian restaurant

John Del Signore may have hoped the adage "like father like son" would apply when his son was ready to take over his Fonte D'Amore restaurant in Livonia. It didn't. Age 25 and eager, Luciano Del Signore didn't take long to convert the sophisticated, neighborhood Italian restaurant to his own image of what it should be. Out went the mural of his father's hometown in Italy and in came the handpainted wallpaper and a brighter look. Out went the casual look of the atrium out front and in came a more cozy, formal glass-paned porch.

Out went the emphasis on traditional Italian sauces with sausages and meats and in came a health-conscious emphasis on chicken and fish. It's a new restaurant in many ways, but Fonte D'Amore still has the characteristics that have cultivated customer loyalty — an intimate setting, good food and solicitous service.

AN EMPHASIS on healthy food preparation is evident in the selection of pastas, many of which are prepared with vegetables and/or cheese, like the fettuccine al verdi prepared with broccoli mushrooms, garlic and olive oil (\$9.95). The linguini dishes feature clam sauces,



and another fettuccine dish is prepared with smoked salmon. Those who prefer the traditional sauces aren't forgotten, however. The elder Del Signore's red sauces are still available, and guests can customize their pasta entrees by ordering a tomato sauce with meat, meatballs or the delicious homemade Italian sausage. Daily specials now include a heart-healthy entree, such as Italian-style scallops, marinated in herbs and red peppers and served with

redskin potatoes, which was featured on our visit. While this entree sounded wonderful, it was not as flavorful as anticipated.

From among the house specialties, we tried the Pollo al Marsala Con Funghi, a very tasty chicken dish cooked in marsala wine with mushrooms and artichoke hearts — nicely flavored and tenderly prepared. The menu also includes a variation of this entree featuring veal instead of chicken.

Luciano Del Signore is trying to attract new customers with more contemporary entrees like wild game, appetizers of truffles and cream sauce, or sauces made with morels and other exotic mushrooms. One of the house specialties is rabbit braised in herbs and wild mushrooms and served with a red sauce, the highest-priced entree at \$16.95.

APPETIZERS RANGE from sausage or shrimp to fruit and cheese (\$4.75-\$6.95). We found the wild mushrooms in sherry cream sauce (\$8.95) very good, though the sherry made it quite sweet.

These days, the house salad comes with a choice of Italian, ranch, celery seed, raspberry vinaigrette or Weight Watchers dressing. Details: Fonte D'Amore, 32030 Plymouth Road, west of Merr-

man Road, Livonia, 422-0770. Hours: Lunch 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Friday-Saturday, Dinner 4-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 4-11 p.m.

Friday-Saturday, Closed Sunday. Prices: Lunch \$5-\$12, Dinner \$7.95-\$16.95. All major credit cards.



Chef de Cuisine Mark Jordan (left) and owner-chef Luciano Del Signore (right) with Veal Chop Amore (left), and Norwegian salmon, which may be ordered poached or sautéed. In background is cannoli dessert and antipasto salad.

JIM JACOFELD/Staff photographer