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Mushrooms 101: The Ultimate Guide To Mushrooms

Think you know your mushrooms? To stem the tide of questions, we packed this article to the gills with everything you need to know to buy, cook, and devour your favorite fungi.

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Calling all mushroom lovers! These shade-loving fungi are truly having their day in the sun. Mushrooms seem to be sprouting up everywhere, from your grocery store to compost piles and even your **coffee cup**. Experienced mushroom experts are leading foraging expeditions into the woods to seek out wild species, while **ready-to-grow mushroom kits** help beginners start a mushroom farm on their own kitchen counter. It's a veritable cultural revolu-shroom!

The appeal is easy to understand: Mushrooms are incredibly versatile, equally happy to take a starring role in your meal or content themselves as a walk-on extra. With so many varieties, recipes, and applications to choose from, there's bound to be a recipe that will win you over to the dark side.

Mushroom Basics

First things first: No, mushrooms are not vegetables, although they typically "count" as a serving for nutritional purposes. In reality, they're neither plant nor animal: Mushrooms are a type of fungus that grows in the earth and on trees. The mushrooms that we pick and eat are technically the fruit of the fungus (known as the mycelium), which stays hidden underground or in the bark, while the edible fruits pop out above the surface.

Mushrooms are categorized as either cultivated mushrooms (i.e. grown on a farm) or wild mushrooms. Cultivated varieties, which are generally available year-round, include common cremini, oyster, shiitake, straw, and enoki mushrooms. Wild mushrooms that must be foraged include truffles, morels, chanterelles, porcini, and hen of the woods. Without cultivation, there's a more limited and seasonal harvest of these favorites, so they often sport a hefty price tag to correspond with the limited supply and high demand.

Certain varieties such as **reishi** and shiitake mushrooms have been praised for everything from anti-inflammatory properites to cancer-fighting effects. Mushrooms are also one of the few naturally occurring sources of vitamin D in food, a nutrient necessary for calcium absorption in humans. Like humans, mushrooms will develop vitamin D when exposed to sunlight — the more sunlight the mushroom gets, the higher the concentration of vitamin D.

Of course, not all mushrooms are edible! There are some poisonous varieties, several more that will give you a belly-ache if eaten, and a large number that, while safe to eat, just don't taste very good. Never pick and eat mushrooms in the wild without a confirmed identification from a skilled mycologist (that's a mushroom expert, in everyday parlance).

On that note, you should always cook mushrooms to be on the safe side — yes, even the white ones so often sliced up on top of salads. Cooking mushrooms helps to avoid a stomachache; morels and shiitakes in particular *must* be cooked before eating due to toxic substances that need to be cooked off in the morels, and the potential for a rash to develop from eating raw shiitakes.

FAQs: Buying, Storing, and Cleaning Mushrooms

What should I look for when buying mushrooms?

If you happen to stumble across mushrooms at your local farmer's market, consider yourself very fortunate, and snap them up! There's nothing quite like a freshly foraged mushroom. At the supermarket, look for bins of loose mushrooms if available. By choosing your own from a bin, you can avoid bad ones, and, if buying by weight, avoid paying for stems you don't plan to use. When selecting your mushrooms, look for ones that are firm, not slimy, and have plump, unwithered stems. Consider the size needed for your recipe: If stuffing mushrooms, for example, choose nice large caps with deep wells; use smaller mushrooms if they'll be cooked whole in stews or stir-fries.

Is it OK to buy pre-chopped mushrooms?

Sure, just keep in mind that they'll go bad more quickly than whole mushrooms, so go with whole mushrooms if you don't plan on using them within the next day or two.

How should I store my mushrooms?

Mushrooms keep best stored in the refrigerator in a paper bag (not plastic) with some air circulation to keep the mushrooms from becoming slimy. If pre-packaged, you're better off storing them in their original package, which is designed to promote airflow and retain freshness; simply reseal with plastic wrap after opening.

How long will mushrooms stay good?

Whole mushrooms stored properly can keep for up to a week; however, they'll start to decline in quality after a couple of days. Sliced mushrooms shouldn't be kept longer than 2-3 days for best quality.

What's the best way to clean mushrooms?

Clean your mushrooms right before using — cleaning ahead of time can lead to quicker deterioration. Because fresh mushrooms are porous in nature, never soak them in water (dried mushrooms are a different story!). A quick rinse in running water won't harm them, but your best bet is to simply wipe each mushroom clean with a damp paper towel or a **soft brush** for more delicate varieties.

Do I need to remove the gills? Why and how?

For mushrooms with large, thick gills, like a portabello, you'll generally want to remove them before using. They can add a somewhat unpleasant texture, strong flavor, and murky dark color if left on — but they're OK to eat, so don't worry if you don't get every last bit. Use the tip of a spoon to gently scrape out the gills, pulling toward the center of the mushrooms so as not to break the edges of the cap.

What about the stems? Can I use those?

Soft, tender stems such as those found on button mushrooms are perfectly fine to eat: leave them on when chopping or remove and dice to mix in with stuffing or other fillings. Trim tough stem bottoms before using, and remove the stems altogether for shiitakes and portabellos, or anytime they're tough and woody. Even if your stems are too tough to eat, do save them! They make a great addition to a flavorful homemade stock.

How To Cook Mushrooms

The number of ways to prepare mushrooms is as myriad as the number of species: so go ahead and sauté, grill, roast, braise, smoke, dry, pickle, and blanch! Of course, the cooking method that you choose is partially dependent on the specific type of mushroom you're cooking. Hearty whole portobello caps lend themselves to grilling, delicate chanterelles and oyster mushrooms prefer being torn and gently sautéed, while older maitake and shiitakes make fabulous pickles. Check out some of the recipes below for specific serving suggestions. Depending on the mushroom and cooking method chosen, chop, tear, or shave your mushroom into equal size pieces before you start to ensure they'll cook at the same rate.

Cooking Basic: The Best Way To Pan Fry Mushrooms

Heat a small bit of butter and/or oil in a hot pan; using a combination of butter and oil will help keep the butter from burning. Once the butter has foamed up and the oil is shimmering, add the prepared dry mushrooms in the pan (be sure they're nice and dry so you're not adding any more liquid than necessary). As the oil is absorbed and the pan dries out, your mushrooms will start to squeak when you stir them — this is a good sign that you're doing it right! Resist the urge to add more butter to the dry pan; instead, continue cooking over medium-high heat until the mushrooms release their own liquid, the liquid cooks off, and the mushrooms become nicely browned. Feel free to finish with a little additional butter and fresh herbs at the end.

Pro Note: Master The Water Content.

The key consideration when pan-frying mushrooms is their high water content. Mushrooms give off a lot of water when cooked; therefore you can expect a significant amount of shrinkage. All this water needs somewhere to go, so it's extra important not to overcrowd the pan when cooking mushrooms. If too many mushrooms are crammed in the pan, the water will be trapped under the mushrooms, not able to evaporate, and you'll end up with steamed mushrooms instead of fried mushrooms. Even when spread out, the mushrooms won't start to brown as long as there's water in the pan, so the trick *is to keep cooking: you need to keep the mushrooms in the pan long enough for all the liquid to cook off.*

Reconstituting Dried Mushrooms

For a long time, I avoided dried mushrooms because I was intimidated by the idea of rehydrating them. I'm here to tell you that it's really not that hard! Give your mushrooms a quick rinse to clean them off, then soak them in cold water for 2 minutes, shaking gently to remove any dirt that's collected in the crevices.

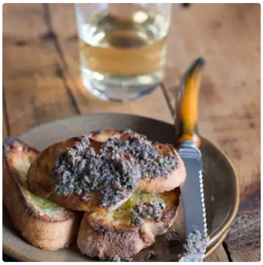
Then, soak them in a clean bowl of hot water, stock, or other liquid of your choice until soft. The hotter the water, the more quickly the mushrooms will reconstitute: Boiling water may plump up your mushrooms in a mere 10 minutes, whereas hot water can take 20-30 minutes. Either method is fine, although it's thought that a longer soak produces a better texture. Save the flavorful second soaking liquid to use in stocks or to flavor your pan sauce — just give it a quick pass through a strainer before using.

Duxelles: What are they, and what can you do with them?

I'll cut to the chase here: Duxelles are nothing more than chopped, sautéed mushrooms … but you can consider yourself quite fancy and in-the-know by saying "duxelles" instead! Typically, duxelles combine finely diced mushrooms with diced shallots or onions along with various fresh herbs like parsley, thyme, or tarragon. This mixture is then cooked slowly in butter until the mushrooms and shallots soften. Depending on how fine you chop the ingredients, you may end up with a chunky spread similar to a tapenade, or a spreadable paste closer to pâté.

If you have some mushrooms that need to be used up quickly before they go bad, whip up a batch of duxelles for later use. Once you've cooked them, you can spoon the duxelles into an ice cube tray and freeze. Just reheat in a skillet over low heat when you're ready to use them.

Once prepared, spread duxelles on toasts for a quick but elegant appetizer, dollop them on as an earthy condiment for sandwiches or burgers, or take the most iconic and impressive route and use it to make a classic beef wellington.



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Mushrooms Duxelles

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Duxelles Grilled Cheese

OH MY VEGGIES

Easy Individual Beef Wellingtons

NOT QUITE NIGELLA

★★★★★

Mushroom Duxelles-Stuffed Chicken P…

SERIOUS EATS

Want to learn more? Check out 12 Mushrooms and How To Eat Them for tips and recipes for all your favorite mushroom varieties.

Guide

Mushrooms