



Mushroom Love, Morels: Seasonality, Meditation, Celebration

by David C. Work

How I got started with mushroom love . . .

When I was a young boy growing up in the orchard town of Harvard, Massachusetts, I happened one day upon what I was to learn years later was a giant puffball (*Calvatia gigantea*). The old-timer neighbor next door told me to bring it home to my mother and to have her fry it up in some butter. Even with the limited gastronomic experience of my five- or six-year-old palate, the result was an aroma and flavor beyond anything I had yet experienced. It was wild and exciting. The texture was soft and crispy and luscious and new. This food was so different from most of the foods that my mother cooked. (Disclaimer: this is by no means a disparaging remark upon my mother's culinary abilities. She was an excellent cook.)

Thus began my burgeoning lifelong passion for finding new wild things to put in my mouth. My mother became my mentor and cohort in this. We gathered wild blueberries and Concord grapes from up the road. Blackberries, raspberries, and elderberries came from the edge of the beaver pond down below the apple orchard that surrounded our house. We gathered fiddleheads and dandelion greens, milkweed and nettles and wild asparagus, and we ate pigweed and wildflowers in our salads. Although I occasionally found morel mushrooms under the apple trees of the abandoned orchard where we lived, (I am still sorry about this) my inexperienced 10-year-old mind could not recognize them as food, and I delightedly stomped on them, imagining that they were some bizarre alien intruders or a new type of puffball I hadn't yet encountered.

As I matured, my appetite for unusual aromas, flavors and textures only intensified. Foods I discovered with which I felt a spark of spirit and deep connection found special places in my kitchen. As I prepared and thought about food when infused with this connection, it felt like meditation. I felt wholeness and a love that was irresistible. I discovered my inner palate, that part of imagination much like the artist's inner eye that allowed me to explore flavors in my mind and heart before rendering them in the kitchen.

Wild foods always rang my bell. The connection drew me on to further explorations. Mushrooms especially piqued my interest because of their very unique personalities and limited availability, and the very complicated task of identifying them for the kitchen became my passion for a long time.

It wasn't, however, until as mushroom-entranced chef feeding wild foods to my restaurant customers that I started really asking myself why I was so enamored with foraging wild food and why so many of the folks who came to eat these seasonal foods expressed so much excitement, appreciation, and love when they ate my food. The answers came: The food had spirit. They felt connection. They felt at home. They loved the seasons. They felt loved. "Amazing," I thought, "people really can taste the connection, the love." Through my foraging and cooking I was participating as an earth-connection conduit for these folks. I started thinking about this phenomenon.

As close as I can figure, among those earliest of civilized behaviors for humans, few can compare in impact on the develop-

ment of community, family and individual spirit—earth connection to the activities of gathering, storing, preparing, and sharing the harvest around the fire. Food. Sustenance for the body and soul. The rhythm of the days pulsed with the demands and rewards of the season. Religions and celebrations blossomed from people's appreciation for the mystery and magic of fertility and new life, the maturing and dying of all life. Many thousands of years since these humble beginnings much in our relationship to the harvest has not changed and much has.

What I see from a chef's perspective is that the cycle of the seasons, these rhythms that were once so integral in the flow of our lives, have become seriously disrupted in the rush toward progress, and in some cases they seem to have nearly disappeared in large swaths of our modern society with the industrialization of our food supply. Big agribusiness and constant global availability of various foods have radically altered the diversity of the foods we eat, our perception of those foods in relation to time, and the seasons and our concepts of bounty and plenty. *When anything is available anytime anywhere, for a price, the significance of Here and Now is diluted.* This divorce of ourselves from where we live, from the seasons and from the hands and faces of those who grew or gathered the food we eat results in a serious disconnect from our personal sense of center, from community, from history, from love, from God. The rites of passage celebrated by our ancestors become meaningless in the chaotic struggles of much of our daily lives. The gathering around the fire to celebrate the day gets lost in the quest for speed, and the sweet sanctity and potency of Moment is lost.

What I have realized is that the foraging of wild edibles is, for me, a way to fulfill the need for hunting and gathering in a society which provides too few opportunities for such primarily important work. Finding mushrooms for me is the pure celebration and witnessing of the moment; it is searching for hidden treasure. It is getting to know the world and finding pleasure in what I find there. It is contributing to family and community. It is witnessing the sacred unfolding of the process of life.

Mushrooms represent to me the embodiment of the Here and Now. They pop up only where and when they choose and only in their ideal environment. The process of foraging mushrooms makes me show up, pay attention to the world and to myself, and makes it easier for me to appreciate the moment. Some moments, of course, seem rarer than others.

With its unpredictable and quirky fruiting tendencies and seeming intentional sly nature, for me no other mushroom typifies this rare moment-quality more than the morel.

Morels

Philosophical meanderings aside, these are among some of the best and most sought after edible mushrooms on the planet. Causing palpitations of delight when found, these mushrooms still make the hair to stand up on my head, and a frisson shoots up my spine with the first find of the season. It is doubly or triply exciting when I know that if one is found, it is very rare that there are not many others in the area! (Watch where you step!) According to legend, in centuries past some German forests were burned so as to guarantee fruitful morel harvests the coming year. Thankfully for the sake of the forest, this is not the case today, but the passion inspired by these Ascomycetes is still fully alive and well today.

In the region where currently I live, the Mid-Hudson Valley of New York, morel season begins usually in late April and lasts for two or, hopefully, three weeks into mid-May. The allure of this exceptional and earliest of our edible wild mushrooms is its nearly indescribable flavor and aroma, its legendary stature among gourmands everywhere, and its often elusive nature. Morels inspire a hysteria and fervor among mycophiles with which most other mushrooms cannot compete. Unlike in some areas of the Midwest and forest fire sites in the western states where morels can be extremely abundant, our spring harvests in the Northeast some years can be extremely scarce to nonexistent. I have met older mushroomers in my area who have never found morels or who have gathered only a few dozen in their lives. Here, the morel hunt takes skill, patience, luck and often the generosity of a mentor. The ritual of the morel walk reaches the status of a sacred activity, sometimes veiled in secrecy.

My local mushroom club, the Mid-Hudson Mycological Association takes on 90% of its new members and membership renewals in the first week of May simply because our morel walks are open only to current members. Although this may seem a manipulative and greedy requirement, divulging the location of a morel territory is a gesture of extreme sacrifice, generosity, and trust that deserves honor and appreciation. Nowadays a morel walk is often introduced with a preamble requesting that participants respect the trust that is bestowed upon them and do not return to overpick the area. Too often in the days when our club welcomed nonmembers on these walks, we would stand horrified as we watched unscrupulous strangers run ahead of the group raking through the duff to gather as many morels as possible, which they then scuttled to their cars, escaping without sharing, with no thanks, leaving the rest of us mourning the violated sanctity of the communal hunt. To add insult, these were often also the same individuals who would then raid the same areas immediately before scheduled walks the next year.

The morel's aroma and flavor? It is the spring, yet it has the potential darkness and complexity requisite for fall dishes as well. It is at once wild yet stilted, woody, and aristocratic. It is nutty and complex in a most haunting, mysterious yet homey mushroomy way. Although the texture of a morel is at its most delicate when fresh, when dried it transforms in intensity of aroma and flavor, becoming even more musky and heady and dark in character. The texture of rehydrated morels is less delicate than when they are fresh (if the stem is removed and reserved for something like soup or sauces), but the heady aroma and flavor is well worth this tiny sacrifice. In years of plentiful harvest, most mushroom-obsessed gourmands I know dehydrate and hoard their morels for the lean months of winter when the pickings are slim and the heart and hearth yearn for the rebirth of springtime. The strongest flavor and aroma come from specimens mature enough to produce spores; though when you wait until maturity, they tend to break up into pieces more easily. That flavor and aroma befriend such ingredients as cream, demi glace, white wine and lighter fishes, domestic meats and game. The morel possesses handy nooks and crannies to capture sauces. Morels beg to be celebrated as royalty: piped full of scallop and lobster mouseline; braised gently in herbs, shallots, cream, wine, and cognac. Morels are a natural pair with pasta and eggs and are outstanding with light meats such as veal, veal sweetbreads, foie gras, pheas-

ant, chicken, or even loin of doe, which has a more delicate flavor and texture than that of a buck. Morels also find partnership with the smoky essence of ham. When fresh, this quintessential seasonal harbinger's flavor is at once so delicate, so precious, so momentary and fleeting that it also welcomes the most simple pairings honoring the season's other treasures: ramps (wild garlic leeks), fiddlehead ferns (immature ostrich fern), the first fronds of late spring. One of my favorite spring treats is a tart of morels, fiddlehead ferns and ramps in a savory egg and cream custard. The epitome of spring! The quiche recipes that follow are variations of this tart recipe.

Celebration

My approach to preparing foods is to use technique with the intention to highlight and honor the innate qualities of the ingredients. This entails paying attention to the preservation and intensification of flavors, aromas, and colors; the creation and nurturing of texture; and the intentional marriage of all these aspects together, finding a balance in which each ingredient's voice is found in balance. From here, let us explore.



Quiche

Ahhh, quiche, the egg pie . . . adored, much maligned, emasculated . . . quiche is one of those fantastic foods that is at once homey and familiar and exotic and decadent. It is the perfect vehicle for many of our favorite wild mushrooms and it is relatively easy to make. Before we begin, a few words about mushrooms and quiche.

Quiche is a food that has much of its identity wrapped up in the perfection of its texture; thus any additions made to quiche must be made with texture in mind as well. Although I wouldn't want any of you to abstain from adding dried mushrooms to quiche, with a few exceptions it is only with fresh or cooked frozen mushrooms that perfection can be approached. Dried mushrooms frequently fall short, texture-wise, often producing stringy or leathery results. Exceptions to this include morels, whose flavor is intensified in dehydration and whose texture is nearly untouched in the drying process if the stem is excluded. Also keep in mind that the egg filling in a quiche is not scrambled

eggs or a soufflé, but rather savory custard; so low oven temperatures and non-vigorous mixing techniques are encouraged for a smooth rich texture.

THE RECIPES

Quiche of Morels, Caramelized Shallots, Asparagus, Goat Cheese and Chives

- 1 c. morels, dried
- 1 c. soaking water from morels, strained through coffee filter or cheesecloth
- 10 shallots, medium, sliced
- 1½ oz. olive oil
- 1 bunch asparagus, trimmed, cut into 1½" lengths on a bias (at an angle), blanched in salted boiling water and shocked immediately in ice water, and drained to preserve color

[Substitution: If available, you may substitute Fiddlehead Ferns for the asparagus, but they must be rinsed three times to remove dirt, blanched and shocked as above and thoroughly drained.]

- ½ oz. dry Vermouth
- 8 eggs, whole
- 1 c. Half & Half
- 4 oz. goat cheese, soft plain Montrachet-style fresh cheese
- To taste: salt & pepper
- 1 bunch chives, chopped into 1¼" lengths with a very sharp knife
- 1 12" pie pan lined with crust, par-baked (see recipe on next page)

Preparation: Place the dry morels in a bowl at least twice their volume in size. Add hot water and tap the mushrooms in the water to get them mostly submerged. After 5 minutes, swish the mushrooms around to dislodge any grit and mix them around a bit to get the ones that were floating on top into the water. Let them lie another 10 minutes before swishing them a last time. Lift the mushrooms out of the water with your hands and squeeze them to remove excess water. Do not dump the bowl into a strainer to get the mushrooms out. Doing this will dump the grit back onto the mushrooms, and you also want to retain the soak-



ing water for cooking later. Once the mushrooms are squeezed out, strain the soaking water through a coffee filter or cheesecloth to remove the grit and detritus. Cut the morels across the cap about 1/4" thick, forming shaggy rings. Remove the stems and reserve for mushroom stock or soup or chop them finely and add to the caps.



Note: When using dry morels, make sure to reserve the liquid left from rehydration, but filter it through cheesecloth or a coffee filter before using it in stocks, sauces etc. Morels are, as with most edible mushrooms, partially indigestible or toxic when raw, so it is essential to thoroughly cook both the mushrooms and any soaking liquid you may use in a dish. This essence of flavor can lend a subtle layer of *umami* to

stocks and sauces. (More on *umami* and mushrooms in a future article.)

Preheat the oven to 450° F. In a 12" skillet, heat half the oil over medium heat and add the sliced shallots. Allow the shallots to sweat down a little bit and brown on the bottom before flipping them. Adding a tiny bit of salt can help caramelize them as it draws out the juices onto the hot pan. When the shallots are soft and the edges show some color, remove them from the pan and add the rest of the oil to the pan. Add the morels and toss them in the oil so that they are coated. Allow them to brown slightly before stirring them around. Raise the heat and add a half cup of the soaking liquid to the pan and cover, allowing the asparagus



and morels to cook in this liquid for 4–5 minutes. Remove the cover and allow the liquid to reduce to almost nothing (*au sec*). Remove the pan from the heat and sprinkle the contents with the chopped chives and a little bit of salt and pepper to taste. Sprinkle with the Vermouth or another dry white wine. If you have no Vermouth or prefer not to use wine, sprinkle with the juice of

half a lemon. Acid helps to bring out the flavors on the palate and helps balance the fats on the tongue. Allow to cool for 5 minutes.

Meanwhile, combine the eggs with the Half & Half and a pinch of salt and pepper. (Note: If using a whisk, try not to incorporate too much air into the mixture or your final savory custard will soufflé in the oven, and the end product will be texturally less smooth than desired.)

Line the pie crust with the mushroom mixture leaving as much of the pan juice in the pan as possible. With your fingers break off small knobs of the goat cheese and intersperse them with the mushrooms. Pour the egg mixture into the pie shell, just covering the cheese and mushrooms. Some of the chives will float up. Don't worry, it's all part of the process.



Baking: Place the uncooked quiche into the 450° oven for 10 minutes to brown the pastry, then reduce the oven temperature to 350°. Keep close tabs on the quiche. Depending on the construction of the pan, your oven, and the temperature of the ingredients when they went in the pan, the time it will take for the custard to set could vary quite a bit. Also note that if the pan is still hot from blind-baking the crust, the custard may set more quickly.

When checking the quiche for doneness, very gently bump the pan to see how much jiggle you have. The center of the pan will always be the last part of the quiche to set. Once the center is just barely set (jiggly but certainly not sloshy), you can remove the pan from the oven to the counter to cool. The cooking process will carry over for several minutes after the quiche is removed from the pan from the residual heat/thermal mass.

Overcooking the egg mixture by leaving the quiche in the oven until entirely firm will cause the delicate matrix of egg protein strands to contract, squeezing the liquids out of the matrix, the end result being a watery yet mealy dry texture to the custard.

Allow to cool for 10–15 minutes before serving. Quiche can also be precooked, cooled, and stored for later consumption or even frozen and brought out for that special occasion. Just reheat in a low oven until warmed through.

Quiche of Morels with Ham, Spring Onions and Emmenthaler Cheese

- 1 c. morels, dried
- 1 c. soaking water from morels, strained through coffee filter or cheesecloth
- 1 slice ham, ½" thick, cubed (if very salty ham, soak in water first to reduce salt)
- 1½ oz. olive oil
- 1 bunch spring onions/scallions, trimmed, cut into 1½" lengths at a bias (angle)

[*Substitution: A nice seasonal treat in the early spring in much of the eastern United States are ramps, also known as wild garlic leeks. These could easily take the place of the scallions in this dish. Reduce the volume used when including ramps because they are pretty potent. You will also want to cook them a little bit while sautéing the morels to reduce the garlicky bite of this marvelous wild edible.*]

- ½ oz. dry Vermouth
- 8 eggs, whole
- 1 c. Half & Half
- 4 oz. Emmenthaler cheese, shredded
- To taste: salt & pepper
- 4 sprigs fresh thyme, woody stem removed
- 1 12" pie pan lined with crust, par-baked (see recipe below)

Preparation: Use the same method for cleaning and slicing the mushrooms and preparing the egg mixture as for the above recipe.

For cooking the mushrooms, use similar principles as for the previous recipe only change the order a little bit, first adding the ham to the hot oil in the skillet on medium heat, allowing the edges to brown before adding the morels. Let the morels brown slightly before pouring in a half cup of the soaking liquid, raise the heat and cover, allowing the mushrooms to simmer for 4 to 5 minutes. Uncover and allow the liquid to evaporate *au sec*. Just before removing the pan from the heat, add the chopped scallions and stir them into the mix. Once off of the heat, sprinkle half of the thyme, salt and pepper to taste and the Vermouth (or juice of half of a lemon) and allow to cool for 5 minutes.

Assembly: To assemble the quiche, place a third of the cheese at the bottom of the par-baked crust and add an even layer of the morel/ham/scallion mixture, a third more cheese, more mushroom mixture and the last of the cheese. Pour the egg mixture



into the shell, just covering most everything. Sprinkle the top with the remaining thyme leaves.

Baking: Place the quiche into the oven, following the baking instructions for the first quiche.

Crust

Sometimes people get scared of pastry crust, so I am including here the simple one I used for the quiches in the photos for this article. This will be enough dough for two 12" quiches plus a little more in case things get ugly and you need to patch holes.

- 3 c. all-purpose or pastry flour, plus a little extra for the rolling
- ½ lb. unsalted butter, (two sticks) softened slightly, broken into pieces

1 pinch salt

As needed: ice water

[*Note: The difference between pastry flour and all-purpose flour is that AP flour has more of the proteins glutenin and gliadin which, when combined in water and agitated, form long elastic strands known as gluten. This gluten production is highly desirable when creating thick, crusted, chewy breads, but is terrible when you are aiming for light flaky pastry. It is very important then, not to overwork pastry doughs.*]

Method: Combine the flour, butter, and salt in a mixing bowl, or in the food processor if using a machine. If using your hands, rub the butter and flour together between your palms and fingers until the mixture looks like clumpy, store-bought Parmesan cheese. Drizzle ice water into the mixture a tablespoon at a time, using your hands or a wooden spoon to gently turn over the



contents of the bowl. Adding the water and forming the dough should be done by hand with as little stirring and kneading as possible—just enough to form a ball that will not fall apart. The more water is added to the dough, the greater care must be taken not to overwork the dough. Divide the

dough into two flat balls and, if they are very soft from working with the hands, place them covered in the fridge for 15 minutes to firm them up again. Otherwise, go onto the next step.

Rolling and par-baking: On a floured surface, roll one of the dough balls to a rough circle about an ⅛" thick, or thicker if you like a thick crust. Roll the dough onto the rolling pin to transfer it to the pie pan (see photo) and gently press the dough into the pan. Cut or pinch the dough about a ½" from the lip of the pan, crimping the edge slightly over the lip so that the dough won't fall into the pan in the oven. Poke a few tiny holes in the dough with a fork here and there (this is called docking) so that expanding trapped air won't balloon the dough. Place in the 450° F oven for 5 minutes and remove. If there are any strange expansions in the crust, you can usually press them down without damage in the first few seconds while the crust is still soft. You are now ready for the next steps of assembly.