

Half-frees and Wannabes: Springtime Edible Mushrooms... and MORE

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With the return of spring comes yet another much-anticipated start to the mushroom season. And it all begins with the morels. If you're like me and going stir-crazy indoors, waiting for the snow to melt and the soil temperature to warm up to fifty degrees, you will probably log onto the Internet looking for images of morels or seek discussions about them on the FUNGI Facebook page and other social sites. (If I can't find morels, at least I'm going to talk about finding them.) And probably everyone can spot a black or yellow morel; everyone knows where and when to look for them. (If you don't, you need to revisit FUNGI, 2010, volume 3, no.2.)

Often overlooked—or maybe many foragers just don't know—is that there are several other species of edible mushrooms out at the same time as morels. Several additional springtime mushrooms, while not edible (or suspect at the very least), are more than worthwhile as quarry for their beauty. So, don't leave your camera at home when hitting the woods this spring.

Of the springtime mushrooms, many are Ascomycetes and relatives of *Morchella* species (the morels). These include species of *Verpa*, *Gyromitra*, *Helvella*, *Sarcoscypha*, *Scutellinia*, and *Peziza* (see FUNGI vol 3 no.2). Some, like *Verpa* (known as “thimble caps”), are classified within the morel family (Morchellaceae) while others are in related families. *Verpa* species are considered edible by many and are probably safe for most, but gastrointestinal upset has been frequently reported. Often times they're found just before true morels (indeed, in some places *Verpas* are known as “early morels”) and many people throw them into the basket with any morels they find. “False morels” (*Gyromitra* spp.) can be large and numerous during morel season. Although well-known to contain toxins that may be cooked off during preparation, most guidebooks caution against eating them. Nevertheless, they are a very popular foraged mushroom worldwide; in North America they're known as “red morels,” “beefsteak morels,” and in the South, simply called “big reds.” Either way, they're very photogenic. Also photogenic is the “devil's urn,” *Urnula craterium*. This ascomycete is pretty common but often well camouflaged beneath fallen leaves. It fruits singly or many at a time on rotting sticks and small branches. I have heard reports of it being edible but am satisfied to get nice photos of it.

The final springtime ascomycete that I'd like to mention is a true morel, albeit an often maligned or overlooked species: the half-free morel. Formerly known by the European name *Morchella semilibera*, the half-free morel is very frequently seen (though much less frequently collected, given its diminutive size) over much of eastern North America and from parts of the West Coast (from Oregon down to northern California). Recently, much has been learned about this third group of morels. Firstly, it's a close cousin to the black morels and this seems reasonable as blacks have a “cap” that comes down below the point of attachment on the stalk; with half-frees, the small cap hangs loose well below the point of attachment. Secondly, the two separate populations are now thought to be separate species; the more common eastern half-free is now named *Morchella punctipes* and



Gyromitra caroliniana. Photo courtesy of J. Justice.



Verpa conica. Photo courtesy of J. McFarland.

the much less common western is called *M. populiphila*. Every year people send me questions about half-free morels: what is it? Is it really a morel? Can you eat it? Yes, yes, and yes, but be able to distinguish it from a *Verpa*. All morels including half-frees are hollow throughout their entire length. *Verpas* are hollow, but their sidewalls are very thick; the interior often is stuffed with a cottony material. False morels have hollow pits but are not hollow throughout their entire length. Mushroom hunters who collect half-free morels, usually just chop them up and add to whatever dish they're preparing; or dry and powder them, using the powder as a flavoring and thickener.

Now let us examine some springtime Basidiomycetes. If you're in the woods in the early spring seeking out morels, you have no doubt encountered these mushrooms. When looking for big yellow morels in the Midwest, most head straight to elm groves—if you find a big American or slippery elm that died the previous year, it's likely to host a mother lode of "sponges" on the ground surrounding the dead host tree. But check out the trees themselves. I mean on the trees. Just about any dead tree in the early spring can play host to some very common edible wood rotters: the velvet foot, *Flammulina velutipes*, and the dryad's saddle (aka "pheasant's back"), *Polyporus squamosus*. You may not see the latter in the West, but you can certainly find *Flammulina*

Urnula craterium. Photo courtesy of J. McFarland



Half-free morels.



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all across North America. Dryad's saddle is edible and although I pooh-poohed it most of my life, several skilled cooks have impressed me with its palatability of late. But you have to get very small, tender specimens; mature mushrooms can be enormous and become as rubbery-tough as car tire. They're easy to spot, easy to ID, and not really confused with anything else.

The velvet foot (or "velvet shank") certainly can be mistaken for a number of other mushrooms, including the deadly galerina (*Galerina marginata*), a small brown wood rot mushroom that is ubiquitous across the continent year round. How to tell them apart? For starters, *Galerina* species have a rust brown spore print,

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Morchella punctipes. Photo courtesy of N. Siegel.



Morchella punctipes (x sect). Photo courtesy of P. Harvey.



Morchella punctipes. Photo courtesy of B. Bomanz.

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Top Left – *Morchella populiphila*.

Photo courtesy of T. Moshier. Above Left – *Morchella punctipes* (hollow). Photo courtesy of J. Rapp. Above Right – *Polyporus squamosus*. Photo courtesy of E. Smith.



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Flammulina spp. have white. And yes, domesticated *Flammulina velutipes* looks much different and goes by the name enokitake.

I repeat: Do NOT accidentally mistake a deadly galerina for an edible mushroom. What they lack in size, they make up in toxicity, possessing some of the same toxins as deadly *Amanita* mushrooms. Deadly galerinas are always found on rotting wood but the wood can be buried or all but unnoticeable. Note the striate margin (denoted by its name) on the brown cap. This species was formerly known as *Galerina autumnalis* and although they can be found just about any time of the year, you're most likely to see them in the fall and spring after overwintering.

Two other early season saprobic mushrooms to watch for, and both edibles, are the fawn mushroom, *Pluteus cervinus* and similar species, and even some inky caps, including *Coprinellus* (= *Coprinus*) *micaceus*. Neither is worth a hill of beans as far as edibility goes, but reliably found; they're more photogenic than palatable. As the gills of *Pluteus* mature they become salmon pink, indicative of the spore color; all the inkies will give black spore prints.

And one more edible to be on the lookout for this spring, same time as morels. No, it's no mushroom, but mushroomers collect it



Pluteus cervinus. Photo courtesy of J. McFarland.

while foraging for morels. If you guessed stinging nettles, that's a good guess, they can be delicious. As can garlic mustard (collect all you can of this horribly invasive weed!). But to me, one of the most prized wild edibles of the entire year is the wild ramp, *Allium tricoccum*. Ramps are a wild leek and arguably the best flavored of all the members of the onion genus (*Allium*); the entire plant is edible. In Appalachia they are highly revered, with numerous ramp festivals in the spring. Likewise, they are abundant in the Midwest; the city of Chicago gets its name from the Native American word *shikaakwa* (*chicagou*), for the abundant ramps that grew in the area near Lake Michigan. What do they go with in the kitchen? Like morels, wild ramps are great in just about any dish. But be very mindful of how and where you collect. Ramps take something on the order of seven years to set seed. Thus they can and have been overharvested from many locations, especially in the Northeast. It's most sustainable to take only the tender savory leaves which won't likely kill the plant. If you do dig the bulbs (they're very tough to excavate), do so here and there so that you won't wipe out an entire population. Better yet, try growing them at home. Commercial growers are now growing them, and so can you.

See you in the woods this spring ... but hopefully nowhere near my morel patch! ♡



Coprinellus micaceus. Photo courtesy of J. McFarland.



Above – *Flammulina velutipes*. Photo courtesy of J. McFarland. Top Right – *Galerina marginata*. Photo courtesy of W. Sturgeon. Bottom Right – Wild ramps. Photo courtesy of M. Smiley.

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