

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding several Morel mushrooms. The mushrooms are dark brown with their characteristic honeycomb-like caps. The background is a soft-focus forest scene with green foliage and tree trunks. The text is overlaid on the image in white, with the title in a large, bold font.

a guide to

# Morel Mushrooms

Foraging, Storing, and Cooking

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# The Hunt

I had been wandering around the woods for the past 20 minutes without finding one. I was starting to feel dejected, worried that there were no more mushrooms in the area. My eyes scanned the horizon for that familiar shape, but to no avail. Suddenly, about 5 meters away, I spotted it. I cried out to my partner "I found one!" and ran forward. There, popping out of the ground was a perfect morel mushroom. I took my knife and separated the fruiting body from its stem. The morel was fresh, firm, and had a wonderful earthy aroma. I gently placed the mushroom in my sack and continued my search. The excitement of finding that morel would carry me for at least another 20 minutes until I found another.

Morel hunting is a wonderfully rewarding outdoor activity. Even if you don't find any mushrooms, you have still spent a beautiful spring day out in the woods getting some exercise. If you do find morels, you have acquired a delicious and valuable treat! The environmental conditions in which morels grow is mysterious, therefore they are not commercially grown. Because morels can only be hand harvested in the wild, they are extremely valuable and can cost upward of \$20 per pound (fresh). Morels are also valued for their superior taste and texture. These mushrooms have an earthy, nutty flavor that is not overpowering. Their texture is not slimy or chewy like some other mushrooms. They are considered a delicacy in fine dining establishments, particularly in French cuisine.

My personal experience with morels has been hunting them in the forests of Northeast Oregon. Due to my efforts each spring, my freezer is always stocked with 3 to 4 gallon sized ziplock bags of dried morels. I hope to share my expertise so that you may have your own successful mushroom hunting season.

## Where Can I Find Morels?

As I mentioned, morels are mysterious. You can follow all the best advice, but there is no guarantee that mushrooms will be present. I have had some days with little to no success and some days where I have picked 30 pounds in one area. Production in an area can vary from year to year. That being said, in the Pacific Northwest, morels can be found in coniferous forests. A morel mushroom is just the reproductive fruiting body of a much larger organism, called the mycelium, living under the soil. Mycelium has a symbiotic relationship with tree roots, so morels seem to grow near firs, larch, aspen, and sometimes pines. The mycelium taps into a tree's roots to obtain nutrients and provides the tree with minerals. Morels grow well in disturbed areas. When a tree dies, the mycelium is stressed from losing its food source, so it produces fruiting bodies in an attempt to spread its spores to a more hospitable place. The best place to find morels is a year or two after a forest fire. You may also look for them where logging has taken place or elk and livestock have disturbed the ground. Another great sign is the calypso orchid, as I often see morels when I see calypsos blooming.

Morel season is in the spring, usually from late April to early June. You should start hunting when the daily high and low temperatures add up to 100 degrees (40°F at night and 60°F in the day). Morels need moisture so warm weather combined with rain is a great time to start looking. The morel season shifts with changes in elevation. Lower elevations will see morels earlier in the year, and higher elevations will see morels pop out later.

Photo: The two largest morels I have ever seen!



## What Do Morels Look Like?

Morels are one of the easier mushrooms to identify as they have a very distinct appearance. They range from blond to dark brown or black with a white stem. Most morels are shaped like a triangle with rounded corners and from a distance they look like a pinecone sticking straight up in the air. They have a honeycomb texture with pits and grooves and can be the size of your thumb to the size of your hand.



## Beware of False Morels

There are several species of mushrooms that are somewhat similar in appearance to true morels (genus *Morchella*). These mushrooms are poisonous, and if consumed, symptoms range from nausea and diarrhea to (in some cases) death. The early morel (*Verpa bohemica*) is distinguished by its longer stem and a cap that does not touch the stem on the side like a lampshade (bottom center). The false morel (*Gyromitra esculenta*) has a cap that looks like a wrinkly brain (bottom right). True morels (bottom left) are hollow inside and false morels are not.



# **Additional Hunting Tips**

## **Cover Ground**

I often find myself walking slowly through the woods trying to scan everything so that I don't miss a mushroom. This is fairly inefficient. If you want to maximize your efforts, it is best to walk at a quicker pace so as to cover more ground.

## **Look Out at the Horizon**

Looking down at the ground near your feet limits you to viewing a small area. Morels have a very distinct shape, much like a pinecone sticking up in the air. If you look out in front of you, scanning for that shape instead of looking down, you will cover more ground, see more mushrooms, and be more efficient.

## **Check Behind You**

Every once in a while, it is a good practice to turn around and scan the area that you just searched. I find that getting a different angle can reveal mushrooms that I have missed.

## **Use a knife**

Cut the fruiting body from the stem with a knife. Pulling on the mushroom with your hand can damage the mycelium beneath the soil.

## **Use a Mesh Sack**

Carry your mushrooms in a mesh bag or basket with holes. This allows for the spores to fall from the morels and spread.

## **Don't Overstuff**

Avoid overfilling your bag so as not to crush the bottom layer of mushrooms. Bring multiple bags with you on a hunt.

# Storing

Once back in your home, rinse your mushrooms in lukewarm water to get off any dirt or insects. If you want to eat your morels fresh, you have about 5 days to do so before they go bad. Store them dry in your refrigerator in a paper bag.

## Drying Morels



There are several ways to dry mushrooms. If you have a food dehydrator with temperature control, you can set it to 110°F for about 10 hours. Drying them outside on racks in the sun works, but in my experience, can lead to a lot of mushrooms blown across the yard. My favorite method is to spread them out whole on the counter or on a cooling rack and point a box fan at them for 2-3 days. When the mushrooms are brittle, they are ready. Once they are dry you can store them in ziplock bags in the freezer. They will keep for years and taste excellent when rehydrated!

# Cooking

Never eat raw morels! The mushroom is thought to contain the toxin hydrazine, which in small doses, can cause gastrointestinal distress. Hydrazine is destroyed during the cooking process, so be sure to thoroughly cook your mushrooms. Some people can have allergic reactions to morels, so only eat a small amount if it is your first time trying them.

Dried morels are very easy to reconstitute. Simply place the desired amount in hot tap water and let them soak for 4-5 minutes or until soft. Remember, the mushrooms will expand quite a bit so be sure not to rehydrate more than you need.

Morels are meaty in texture and full bodied in flavor. They are an excellent addition to any meal. My favorite way to enjoy morels is sautéed in butter with some garlic and onions. The butter brings out the nutty flavor of the mushrooms, and they are excellent topped on a steak or burger. I also like to add morels to pasta, particularly with a cream or white wine sauce. Another popular appetizer is breaded and fried morels. Morels make any meal special so I like to save them for fancier meals and occasions. However you chose to enjoy them, there is something extremely satisfying about eating food you harvested yourself. Good luck hunting!

For my favorite morel recipe, look for the PDF titled Morel Mushroom Pasta!

