

## Mushrooms on the Plate and on the Planet

by Katy Budge

*Are you fungi-phile or fungi-phobic?...  
how mushrooms can save the planet ..  
natural ways to color Easter eggs ...  
YIMBY farming? ...*

Mushroom. The very word tends to set off passionate reactions, with folks either fleeing into the fungi-phile camp or the fungi-phobic contingent.

On a culinary level, mushrooms -- not to mention their truffle cousins -- provide a unique palette for the palate, with flavors and textures ranging from earthy to delicate, and able to match perfectly with wines as varied as Pinot Noir, Syrah, Tempranillo, Cabernet Franc, and Mourvèdre. As Tim French of Oak Hill Mushrooms in Atascadero also pointed out -- the exceptional candy cap mushroom can even be used to impart a distinct maple flavor to a dish, such as in a cheese-cake developed by Big Sky's pastry chef Emily Goldstein.

Through Oak Hill Mushrooms, Tim and his wife Leah Bailey offer the home chef cultivated varieties such as oysters, shiitakes, portabellas, and criminis, as well as dried mushrooms and a mushroom seasoning which is great mixed with cream cheese (shown below). Products are available by direct order (464-0293 and [www.oakhillmushrooms.com](http://www.oakhillmushrooms.com) will be live at the end of April), or at farmers' markets in Templeton, Baywood Park, and Thursday nights in San Luis Obispo. Oak Hill even sells "grow kits" -- bagged straw inoculated with mushroom spawn -- so you can harvest your own 'shrooms at home, and both the cultivated varieties and select wild mushrooms are available to commercial accounts.

From a nutritional aspect, mushrooms -- particularly Asian varieties such as shiitakes -- are an almost perfect food: low in fat and calories, high in fiber, high in protein and essential amino acids, contain a host of vitamins, and may help in combating everything from flu to cancer to high blood pressure to high cholesterol. Regardless



of all that, I know from experience that you can't convince someone who doesn't like mushrooms to eat them.

*Edible mushrooms (left) and inedible mushrooms (right)  
on display at Bedford Thompson Winery's ([www.bedfordthompsonwinery.com](http://www.bedfordthompsonwinery.com))  
annual mushroom event, KB08*

Okay, okay, so maybe the mycophobic have their point: of the over 2000 known mushroom varieties, less than 5 percent are "edible," a nice way of saying that the other 95 percent are poisonous to some degree, a fact which probably gave rise to the charming little ditty noting that "there are old mushroom hunters and bold mushroom hunters, but there are no old, bold mushroom hunters." However, even if you dis a dish of 'shrooms, you should at least respect their crucial and encompassing role in the earth's processes: where fungi act as the ultimate recyclers, contributing vital nutrients to soil, making those nutrients readily available to plants and animals, and providing a food source.

Indeed, where humans are concerned, noted mycologist Paul Stamets ([www.fungi.com](http://www.fungi.com)) points out that our species may well owe its past, present and future existence to fungi. Stamets was the lead-off speaker at the second annual Taste3 conference in 2007, and after he declared, "I have five inventions that I think can help save the world, but first I want to tell you about my hat," it was pretty clear that Taste3 wasn't going to suffer any sort of sophomore slump.

Said hat, as it turned out, was made from a type of mushroom which had made it possible for our ancient ancestors to transport fire, a convenience which certainly impacted the "evolution of humans and our survival on this planet." Perhaps the most famous evidence of this was the discovery of the "Iceman" in the Italian Alps in 1991. The Iceman died well over 5000 years ago, but his well-preserved remains indicated that he was carrying a knapsack, an ax, and two kinds of mushrooms, one of which could be used for starting fires, as a medicine to treat wounds, and made into a nutrient-rich tea. Of course, over the years, 'shrooms have also featured prominently in spiritual ceremonies, and the Egyptians thought that mushrooms offered immortality, but fungi have also proven their worth in everything from developing medicines, to producing foodstuffs such as cheese, to dyeing cloth.

As to the future significance of fungi to the human race, consider the work of Stamets. Just his recent efforts alone have resulted in the following patents, products, and/or processes:

- 1) mycoremediation and mycofiltration, the use of fungi mycelium to remove chemical and/or biological elements from the environment, such as oil (reportedly, Stamets provided mycelium that helped clean up the recent spill in San Francisco) and even agents as toxic as VX nerve gas,
- 2) highly effective and environmentally-friendly pest controls, which "could replace all chemical pesticides" (Stamets successfully combated an invasion of carpenter ants in his house with mycelium),
- 3) pox vaccines (created from mushrooms specifically found in old growth forests), [listen to the NPR interview - <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4783951>]
- 4) "Life Boxes:" cardboard boxes containing vegetable seeds and fungi which enhance plant growth; water the cardboard, place some of it in soil, and wait for the harvest,
- 5) and last, but certainly not least given recent headlines ... ethanol!!

Love 'em or hate 'em on your plate, it's possible that the lowly mushroom and their attendant fungal systems may be able to help us save the planet, especially in terms of mycelium's remarkable ability to quickly adapt to almost any circumstance. As Stamets noted, "we have the power and wisdom of Nature behind us" ... if only we can realize it in time.

### About mushrooms

... including how to clean them, cook with them, and a guide to the most common edible varieties. [http://starchefs.com/features/mushrooms/html/more\\_mushrooms.shtml](http://starchefs.com/features/mushrooms/html/more_mushrooms.shtml)

### Natural Egg Coloring

With Easter just around the corner, here are some natural alternatives to egg coloring from Whole Foods: Ground Cinnamon--light brown, Paprika--light orange, Tumeric--bright gold, Black tea--reddish tan, Ground coffee--creamy brown, Blueberries--deep blue, Blackberries--plum, Concord grape juice--lavender, Spinach--soft green, Carrot tops--pale gold, Yellow apple skins--lavender, Chopped beets--dark pink, Beet root--reddish brown, Red cabbage--midnight blue or teal, Onion skins--yellow or brown (the longer skins are simmered, the darker the color)

Instructions:

Place a single layer of uncooked, white eggs in a small saucepan

Add fresh dye material (2 cups shredded produce or spices; 1 cup chopped, dried plants; 1/2 cup ground herbs)

Barely cover eggs with tepid water

Add 2 tablespoons of white vinegar to water to set the color

Bring water to a gentle boil

Reduce heat and simmer for 15 minutes

Carefully remove eggs from the dye bath

Rinse with cold water

Air dry

### YIMBY Farming?

From the Portland Tribune

[http://www.portlandtribune.com/sustainable/story.php?story\\_id=117346673927891500](http://www.portlandtribune.com/sustainable/story.php?story_id=117346673927891500)

Farming in the Suburbs & City, on Other Peoples Land

Talk about growing food locally -- What about raising it in peoples own back yards?

Two very creative and talented start-up farmers from Portland, OR, discourage with the prospect of buying or renting farmland for a vegetable operation (CSA -- Community Supported Agriculture), put the feelers out in the community to see if people were willing to pay them to grow food on the resident's own backyard. The interest was strong and immediate. Last year they tended almost 50 gardens on a weekly basis, doing the planting, weeding and harvesting, leaving the picked vegetables in a basket at the homeowner's back door.

They charge an average of \$40 per family, per week. I'll let you do the math. It has been ages since a start-up farmer has been able to make that kind of money. To me, these women (that's right, it is two women farmers) are prime examples of a permaculture approach to farming. They are transforming barren back yards into vegetable production, sequestering more rain water, harvesting more sun, educating their customers about how to grow their own food, supplying wholesome-organic food, reducing transportation and packaging costs/pollution, and building community. Care of People -- Care of Earth -- Share the Surplus: the permaculture ethic in action.