The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Autumn's Mushroom Bounty: Forager's Fusilli

A walk in the forest produces a warming, woodsy dinner.

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October 16, 2021



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Mushroom season is in full swing, and this year is a doozy: a wet, humid summer followed by a balmy autumn has yielded a bumper crop of fungi in the woods near our house. Each morning, we come across a new crop of mushrooms, many of them already claimed by the industrious squirrels, who pick them, turn them over, and leave them to dry in the sun, before carrying them back to their dens.

But alas, I seem to be married to the only Russian on the planet who isn't a committed mycophile 2-14 the kind who learned his toxics from his edibles from toddlerhood under the tutelage of an experienced grandparent.

"That could change," I suggested as we examined a particularly toothsome looking patch of

mushrooms. They were, as of that moment, untouched, but I could sense the squirrels watching us from a nearby tree branch, ready to pounce as soon as we moved on. “Surely you could become a mushroom expert. Isn’t there an app for that?”

My husband merely shrugged a classic Slavic shrug, that single gesture that not only conveys a crippling world weariness but also the understanding that nothing from the App Store could ever hope to replace millennia of knowledge and expertise of Russian foragers.

“But don’t you want mushroom soup with noodles?” I asked.

“Not as much as I want to remain alive,” he said.

“Fair enough,” I said, casting a last longing look at what I was sure were oyster mushrooms.

In the end, I downloaded an app myself, took a lot of pictures and tumbled headlong into the exhaustive trove of online information about mushroom foraging. I joined three Facebook groups, immediately left two, but in the congenial company of the members of the third eventually absorbed enough information to feel confident about identifying a stupendous hen-of-the-forest (*Grifola frondosa* for those of you who care about the Latin names), which as its name suggests is edible. After a keen mushroom forager friend confirmed the ID, we decided the risk was minimal, the rewards spectacular and marched into the woods with a basket to harvest the hen.

When I say “basket” don’t imagine a charming wicker French thing; think laundry basket. This hen-of-the-forest would be more aptly named “ostrich-of-the-forest,” that’s how big it was. I have to feel that the tree we hacked it off now feels immense relief to be quit of the thing. It took me a good 90 minutes to carve the mushroom into manageable portions, and wash and dry them. Because fridge space is always at a premium, I sautéed most of the raw mushrooms to reduce their considerable volume.

And then came the fun part: deciding how to use this boletic bounty. I will certainly stock the freezer with several kinds of mushroom soup, and a portion of the sautéed trove will go towards making mushroom duxelles to fill a savory mushroom babka and piroshki, but the first order of business was to celebrate our harvest with a dish that in our family we call Forager’s Fusilli.

This is not so much a recipe as my go-to method for pulling together a quick but delicious pasta dish with anything I have lying around. I’ve made it with fish, left over grilled meat and vegetables, tinned seafood, roasted peppers and artichoke hearts, olives, and capers, and, of course, sautéed mushrooms.

If you’ve already prepared the mushrooms, Forager’s Fusilli will come together in under 15 minutes and make the perfect quick, but very satisfying lunch or dinner. I like to use short pasta for this method, because it is easier to handle during the only tricky moment, which is blending the cheese and pasta water, but if you only have linguine or spaghetti at home, don’t worry — it will taste just as good. Make this recipe vegetarian by eliminating the pancetta, though those little nuggets of salty pork provide an excellent contrast to the silky mushroomy sauce.

Whether you forage your fungi in the forest or the fridge, this dish is an ace in the hole when you are short on time or simply crave some carbs with your mushrooms. Enjoy.

Ingredients

- ⅔ cup (100 grams) pancetta, cut into a fine dice
- 1 medium-sized shallot, finely chopped
- 4 cups (1 liter) fresh mushrooms, cleaned and roughly chopped
- ½ tsp nutmeg (freshly ground if possible)
- 1 tsp salt
- ½ tsp freshly ground black pepper
- ¼ cup Marsala or white wine
- 2 Tbsp butter
- 1 16-oz (450 grams) packet of short pasta such as fusilli
- ¼ cup (60 ml) heavy cream
- ½ cup (125 ml) grated hard Italian cheese such as Parmesan, Pecorino Romano, or Asiago
- 8 whole sage leaves
- 2 Tbsp fresh thyme, finely minced
- Olive oil for finishing

Instructions

Prepare the mushrooms

- Melt the butter over medium heat in a large sauté pan with a lid. When the butter is foaming, add the mushrooms. Increase the heat to medium high and sauté the mushrooms until they leach their liquid. Cover the pan and cook for 10-15 minutes until the mushrooms have reabsorbed their liquid, and the pan is almost dry.
- Lower the heat to medium low, add the Marsala, nutmeg, salt and pepper and sauté until the alcohol has absorbed and the mushrooms begin to brown. Keep a close eye that they do not burn. Continue to cook until the mushrooms are just browned. Set the mushrooms aside until you are ready to add them to the pasta. If you are not using these right away, cool to room temperature and store in a non-reactive, air-tight container in the refrigerator for up to a week.

Make the pasta

- Bring a large pot of well-salted water to a boil. While the water is boiling, brown the pancetta in a small frying pan until crisp. Tip the pancetta out on to a plate lined with paper towel to drain. Remove all but 1 tablespoon of the rendered fat from the pan. Sauté the shallots over medium heat in the remaining fat until they are limp and slightly browned. Set aside.
- Cook the pasta in the boiling water one minute less than package instructions. Before draining, decant one cup of the pasta water. Drain the pasta but do not rinse it.
- Return the pasta to the pot and place over medium low heat. Add the grated cheese in small increments, followed by a splash of the pasta water, tossing vigorously until the cheese and water combine to coat the pasta. Add the cream at the end to pull the whole thing together.

- Fold the pancetta, shallots, and prepared mushrooms into the pasta. Garnish with chopped sage and thyme and drizzle with a bit of olive oil to finish. If you have truffle flavored oil, this is certainly the moment to crack it open. Serve immediately.

Recipe Note

If you do not have an enormous number of mushrooms lying around, use dried mushrooms, which will give the pasta a lovely deep umami flavor. Rehydrate the mushrooms in boiling water, chop roughly and add them in — you don't need to sauté them.

You can add lots of other vegetables to this pasta if you wish: caramelized leeks work well in the place of the shallots, as do sautéed spinach, zucchini, and scallions.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/10/16/autumns-mushroom-bounty-foragers-fusilli-a75311