

Shitake, Black Truffles and Button: Here's what you need to know about mushrooms

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Mushrooms aren't a newer import to India — in fact you could forage for exotic wilder varieties of mushrooms in forest and National parks of the country — yet it makes it to the list of exotic ingredients. Yes, in most Indian homes button mushroom subzi is considered exotic, even as gourmands and food connoisseurs open up to the likes of Enoki and Chanterelle, some of the popular imported mushrooms.

We learned all this and some more when we recently came across the Mushroom Food Festival at Saptami, the multi-cuisine all day dining restaurant at Holiday Inn. Helmed by the hotel's Executive Chef Sudhir Pai, the food festival had some interesting items like the Truffle scented mushroom cappuccino topped with morel dust, Mushroom Zarina – mushroom caps filled with herb cream cheese on a bed of orange chilli glaze, and more. It was fungi exotica. A chat with chef Pai helped us demystify the mushrooming world of mushrooms.

BLACK TRUFFLES



Flavour file: Sweet, pungent and musky, occasionally with chocolate

undertones.

Dish it: Truffles can be shaved and put into a sauce, under the skin of roasting chicken, or into a plate of eggs. The flavour is strong, so you don't need very much of these pricey beauties. For example, try storing uncracked eggs with truffles for a few days, then scramble the eggs. The potent taste of the truffles actually permeates the eggshells.

MOREL



Flavour file: Morels have a deep, decaying-leaves flavour (it's better than it sounds). They taste like the ground they come out of. It's a nice, clean, undistracted flavour."

Dish it: You must cook morels, as they can be toxic when raw. Morels have little crevices that seem just made for trapping cream, so they pair up well with cream sauces. Like oyster mushrooms, morels taste better in a small amount of butter than in olive oil, but again, don't overdo it.

SHIITAKE



Flavour file: Earthy and piney, with a low water content so the flavour is concentrated.

Dish it: Shiitakes go with everything, from seafood to vegetables to red meat. Try roasting them in a spray-coated roasting pan for about 20 minutes at 400°F. Toss on a little salt after roasting and add to pasta, polenta, pizza and omelettes.

CHANTERELLE



Flavour file: Chanterelle have kind of an apricot nuance. They have a medium texture that roasts or sautés well.

Dish it: Sauté them in olive oil (no more than two teaspoons) with garlic and onions, and serve with sweet meats such as pork loin or ham. Chanterelle also go well in a stuffing with pecans and apricots.

WHITE FUNGUS



White Fungus is an edible fungus that grows on various deciduous trees in Asia. It is flavourless and has an al dente crisp texture like wood ear. Used in Chinese medicine for over 2,000 years to heal various ailments, it's usually sold in a dehydrated dried form. High quality white fungus has a light yellowish-white colour on the outside, with a hard yellow center. Ones that appear really white may have been bleached during processing.

PORCINI



Flavour file: Rich and woodsy, it goes well with all sorts of foods.

Dish it: Roast the big caps the same way as a portobello, or dice and cook with potatoes and onions. They're also great raw in salads.

ENOKI



Flavour file: Mild, with an appealing crunchy texture and vaguely fruity taste. They don't have the same earthy flavour of other mushrooms.

Dish it: Try them raw as crudité (that's French for "no cooking required") with lemon and sea salt. You can also use them to add crunch to soups or stir-fries.

OYSTER



Flavour file: Has a mild seafood taste, hence the name. Dish it: Their texture holds ups during lengthy cooking time, so try them in stews. They are also great as a quick sauté. No matter what dish you add them to, they taste better with a little butter than they do coated with olive oil.

BUTTON



Flavour file: Also known as white mushroom, they're juicy and tasty, and inexpensive, with a flavour that's only mildly mushroomy.

Dish it: You can skewer and grill them and serve over chicken or steak. You can also mix white mushrooms with the more expensive mushrooms to “extend” them.

PORTOBELLO



Flavour file: The large caps are firm, and their texture, when cooked, is meaty yet buttery soft. The taste is reminiscent of beef hot off the grill.

Dish it: You can use portobellos in place of meat; put one on a bun like you would a burger. Brush olive oil on both sides of the cap, sprinkle with salt and pepper, and place chopped garlic inside. Roast or grill with the gill side up, then flip after 10 to 15 minutes and cook through.