

Stalking

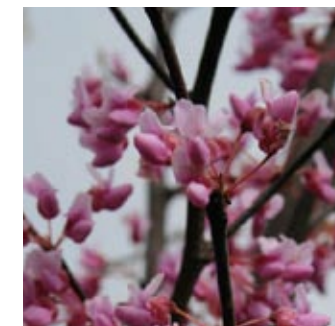
Morels

Cristina Santiestevan

Hunting for morels is actually pretty easy—literally a stroll in the springtime woods. It's **finding** the little mushrooms that's the real challenge.

When Amy Goins offered to take me hunting for morels, the caveat was that I'd need to travel blindfolded in the trunk of the car. She told me she was kidding—sort of. The truth is that avid morel hunters are fiercely protective of their favorite spots and aren't likely to reveal their secrets to anyone. "The very question will make a morel hunter as elusive as the mushroom itself," warns Goins.

Combine tight-lipped morel seekers with the shyness of their quarry, and finding morels might seem like an impossible task. But trust in patience and luck, and you'll find them. Eventually. "It took me three years to find my first morel," says Goins. "And I looked everywhere."



MORELS BY ART DRAUGUS, REDBUDS BY SAMANTHA R. P. ELLIS, TULIP POPLAR BY D. L. ENNIS

Begin with the Redbuds

The calendar can be a fickle ally. Mid-April is generally considered high season for morel hunting, but seasonal variation and local conditions affect morels' arrival dates much more than any calendar engagement. Mild springs can bring them out in mid-March, and some might still

be around toward the end of May during cold years.

Look to the trees for clues that will narrow your time frame. "I always start thinking about morel hunting as soon as the redbuds start to bloom," says Goins. If you wait until the dogwoods are done blooming, you've waited too long—morel season generally runs from the first flush of pink on the redbuds to the end of the dogwood flowers.

The Internet is another place to look. Several websites post alerts announcing morel season, and some host active forums where members share tips and swap stories. (*See sidebar.*)

Learn to Recognize a Tulip Poplar

Begin your search by looking for trees, not mushrooms. Tulip poplars are the tree of choice in the Piedmont, although hickory, sycamore, and dead or dying elms are also known to shelter

morels at their base. Learn to identify these common trees and your efforts may be rewarded with an ample harvest of morels.

Minute variations in the terrain may also be clues to finding morels. As with most mushrooms, morels prefer soil that is moist but not soaking. Stream banks can be lucrative, and depressions at the base of boulders or fallen logs may also shelter a wealth of morels.



Adopt the Proper Morel-Hunting Swagger

Before you start, it's good to know what you're looking for. Goins suggests bringing along a decoy for training purposes—a good-sized dried morel purchased from the grocery store. Prop the dried morel among the leaves and underbrush and practice *seeing* it. Challenge yourself by walking away from the decoy and then coming back to the area from a slightly different direction, or have a friend place the decoy when you aren't looking. The practice will help you find the real thing, so it's definitely worth it.

But there's more to finding morels than knowing what to look for. "There's a certain morel-hunting swagger," says Goins, who coaches novice foragers to adopt a speed-skating pose. "Lean forward about 45 degrees, clasp your arms behind your back, and look about 6 feet ahead," says Amy. "This is how you walk through the woods." Increase your chances by walking diagonally up or down hills: the change in elevation makes it easier to spot morels on the forest floor.

Of course, knowing a good place to search is essential. Individuals with forested property have it easy, but foragers without



“I always go [foraging] too early because I just get giddy. I can’t control myself.”

—morel hunter Amy Goins

Kevin Kraditor, proprietor of Sperryville’s Hopkins Ordinary Bed and Breakfast—and an experienced morel hunter—has provided these recipes and some advice. (Guests staying at the Ordinary in spring may request a morel-hunting trip.)

Unlike Goins, Kraditor cleans his morels, noting that they are easier to clean if you cut them in half lengthwise, from base to tip. Real morels have a hollow center. Discard any that do not have a hollow center—these are poisonous “false morels.”

Soak the halves in salt water, and dry thoroughly by placing them on paper towels. It is also crucial that you cook your morels, because raw morels are toxic.

Morel and Asparagus Omelets

Serves 2.

- 6 asparagus spears
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ cup fresh morels, cleaned
- 2 tablespoons chopped scallions
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 4 eggs
- 1 tablespoon heavy cream
- 1 tablespoon butter
- 3 ounces chèvre or other soft goat cheese, cut into small pieces
- 1 sprig fresh parsley, chopped

Cut the asparagus on the diagonal, into ½-inch pieces, reserving the top of each for garnish.

Heat a sauté pan over medium-high heat and add oil. When oil is hot, add asparagus and mushrooms. Sauté for 7 to 10 minutes, stirring frequently, until asparagus and mushrooms are well wilted. Add the scallions and salt and pepper to taste. Sauté 1 minute more or until there is little or no liquid in the pan. Remove from heat.

Whisk eggs, cream, a good pinch of salt, and a healthy grating of black pepper.

Heat two omelet pans over medium-high heat. Melt ½ table-spoon butter in each pan. After the butter has melted and the foam subsides, pour half the egg mixture into each pan and stir gently, from the outer edges of the pan toward the center. After about a minute or so (or when the egg has very little liquid), spoon half the asparagus-mushroom mixture onto the center of each omelet and top with half the goat cheese. Flip or fold the omelets and use two wooden spoons or heatproof rubber spatulas to tuck any loose ingredients under the body of the omelet, and cook another 30 seconds.

Slide the omelets onto warm plates and sprinkle with chopped fresh parsley and top with the reserved asparagus tips. Serve immediately.

land may need to venture farther afield. Goins suggests asking for permission if you’re foraging on private land. Some land owners might want to come along for the hunt, while others will happily accept a portion of the spoils. State and national parks and forests are also potential hunting grounds, but be sure to follow local regulations regarding mushroom collection.

You’ll need to pack some gear, such as collecting bags. Plastic and paper bags are decidedly out. Instead, use mesh bags or loosely woven baskets that allow the harvested morels to spread their spores through the forest. Goins also carries a pocketknife, which makes it easier to harvest the mushrooms. Two or three high-quality guidebooks with clear photographs are also a good idea.

While some morel hunters use walking sticks to poke among the leaves, Goins is adamantly opposed to such a practice. She considers herself a leave-no-traces morel hunter. “Morels reveal themselves when they’re ready to be found.”

And Enjoy the Harvest

Goins is very clear: “Never wash a morel. *Ever.*” Instead, clean your bounty with a gentle mushroom brush. “Morels have this wonderful nutty, but delicate, flavor,” says Goins, who believes the forest mushrooms require very little adornment in the kitchen. Simply sautéing them in butter brings out the best flavors.

Enjoy your morels year-round by drying them. You can use a dehydrator, if you have one, but air-drying is easier: simply hang the mushrooms in a dry place, such as above your oven. You’ll know they’re dry enough if they rattle when shaken in a jar. If they clunk, they need more drying time. Store dried morels in a sealed glass jar. Properly dried mushrooms will easily last until the next morel season—if you can wait that long to eat them.

The rule of thumb is the darker the morel, the stronger the flavor. And just as dried herbs are more potent than fresh, dried morels will have a more intense flavor than fresh morels.

Of course, if you’re going to eat them, first you need to find them. Luckily, finding morels is half the fun. You’ll have better luck if you wait for the redbuds to bloom, but there’s nothing wrong with trying earlier. “I always go out too early because I just get giddy,” admits Goins. “I can’t control myself.”

Cristina Santiestevan writes about nature, conservation, and green living from her home in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Don’t Be a Bold Mushroom Hunter

Many wild mushrooms are delicious, but others can be famously toxic. “This is not a hobby to take lightly,” warns Goins, who believes morels are a very safe choice for novice foragers. Here are some ways to learn about foraging for mushrooms and other wild edibles.

Join a Club

Mycological Association of Washington, D.C.
www.mawdc.org

Read Guidebooks

Be sure you choose a guidebook with high-quality photos of North American mushrooms. Goins recommends the *National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mushrooms*.

Learn More Online

- morelmania.com
- mushroomexpert.com
- morelmushroomhuntingclub.com

