



THE HUNT for MICHIGAN'S MIGHTY MORELS

and other *Wild Edibles*

BY DIANNA STAMPFLER

As winter succumbs to spring and the snow melts away, an amazing growth begins to take place on forest floors across Michigan. The moist ground is warmed by the sunshine and sprouts begin to push up through the dirt and dead leaves, alongside fallen elm, ash, poplar, aspen and maple trees. The harvest awaits in this wild edible marketplace, with fiddleheads, wild leeks (also known as ramps) and the elusive morel on the shopping list.

Between late April and early- to mid-May is the typical timeframe for these spring edibles, although Mother Nature makes the final determination.

There are three common varieties of morels found throughout Michigan. Black morels usually appear in late April and make a three-week appearance, before the white and yellow morels come in for their run into early June.

Camouflaged by the fallen leaves from the previous autumn, morels are not easy to spot. It takes a trained eye to catch them peeking out from beneath the groundcover. However, after you spot one it becomes easier to find the others (much like searching for Petoskey Stones along the Lake Michigan shoreline – your eyes are just drawn to them).

There is a system – or rules one would say – to the actual act of harvesting and cleaning morels.

- + Never just “pull” or “pluck” a morel from the ground as it destroys the mycelium, which affects the crop in future years. Pinch the stem just above the ground or even use a small knife or scissors to cut it.
- + Use a mesh bag – similar to what onions are sold in – to carry your morels. This allows the spores to redeposit on the ground (something that will not happen if you use a paper or plastic bag).
- + Carry a mushroom guidebook for identification purposes, unless you

are a seasoned hunter. There are countless imposters out there, many of which are poisonous. If in doubt, throw it out.

- Take time when cleaning morels. Their hollow centers often collect dirt and the occasional insect so its recommend to slice them in half the long way and soak them in salt water to remove the grit and critters.

Morels make a great addition to hollandaise sauce atop Eggs Benedict or folded into an omelet. Stems, or the less-than-perfect morels, can be cooked into delicious creamy bisque. Of course, dipping morels in an egg-wash and flour and frying them into a salty, crispy treat is also a favorite recipe. Consider an aioli dipping sauce – made with eggs, Dijon mustard, olive oil, white vinegar and lemon – to compliment them.

Often where there are morels, there are other wild edibles – such as wild leeks – or ramps as they're often referred to. A member of the lily family (just like the asparagus), ramps carpet the forest floor with their sweet garlic-onion scent between April and June.

The plant itself is green, with two or three elongated smooth leaves – almost feather-like in appearance – with a burgundy tone to the stem. Earlier in the season, the bulbs of the ramps are more slender and as they grow and mature, they become more bulbous.

There are a few differences in foraging for ramps, including:

- Hunting for ramps on state and federal grounds is legally off limits and there are fines and penalties enforced on those who do.

- When digging ramps, be sure to go all the way down to the root and harvest the entire plant. It is often easier to use a small shovel or scoop shovel to guarantee a clean harvest.

- Use a plastic bag to transport ramps, as they can fall through the mesh bags used to gather morels.

All parts of the ramp can be used in recipes. The tender fresh spring leaves can be used in salads, quiche and omelets. Ramps make a great base for pesto, combined with olive oil, kosher salt, pine nuts and parmesan cheese. Blend ramps with vinegar for dressings, marinades and sauces. Ramps can be eaten raw, grilled, roasted or sautéed, but remember they have a strong flavor – much more intense than scallions – and should be used more sparingly.

Fiddlehead greens are the premium – and lesser known – wild forage vegetable of spring. Their appearance coincides with that of wild morels and ramps. The fiddlehead resembles the curled ornamentation of a stringed instrument (such as a fiddle) and thus the name.

They should be harvested early in the season, before the frond has opened because once they open and start to grow, they become inedible. Look for a tight, dark green coil and snip it off, with scissors, just an inch or two down the stem beyond the coil.

Boasting a deliciously intense flavor, fiddleheads are reminiscent of asparagus, with an added, nutty bite. The flavor of fiddleheads goes well

with cheeses, tomato sauce and oriental cuisine. They're excellent with hollandaise sauce or marinated in oil and vinegar. Cooked to crunchy tenderness, like fried morels, they are a flavorful and versatile treat. Sautéed with garlic and bacon (everything's better with a little pork fat) they develop a more complex flavor and make a decadent side dish.

Asparagus is another widely popular spring edible. In addition to sprouting wild, it's also grown on farms across West Michigan – particularly along the shoreline where the sandy soil provides ideal growing conditions. In fact, Michigan ranks third as an asparagus producing state in the country – producing up to 25 million pounds annually on approximately 11,000 acres. Only 25 percent of the harvest is sold fresh at retail outlets and roadside markets; most is sold to processors to be frozen or canned. Oceana County itself is known as the "Asparagus Capital of the World." In fact, this region is featured in the award-winning PBS documentary called *Asparagus: Stalking the American Life*.

Other wild spring edibles worth researching include the long spiky leaves of stinging nettles – comparable to spinach or wheat grass, great for soups, purees or even pasta and dandelions – a bitter weed that can be cooked like greens, used in raw salads, added to oil and vinegar for dressings or turned into beverages such as tea or even wine.

If you have trouble finding wild edibles yourself, check out the Michigan-based *Earthy Delights* (Earthy.com). As America's premier supplier of specialty foods, they are the leaders in offering wild-harvested and handcrafted foods from small harvesters and growers. Their Web site also includes a wealth of recipes that inspire beginner foodies to gourmet chefs.

Once the harvest is complete (or after you've received your shipment from *Earthy.com*), it's time to head to the kitchen to whip up an impressive gourmet menu fit for a five-diamond restaurant.

For specific recipes, look to local chefs for inspiration.

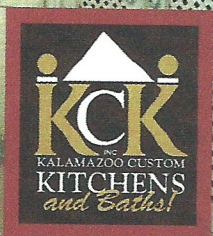
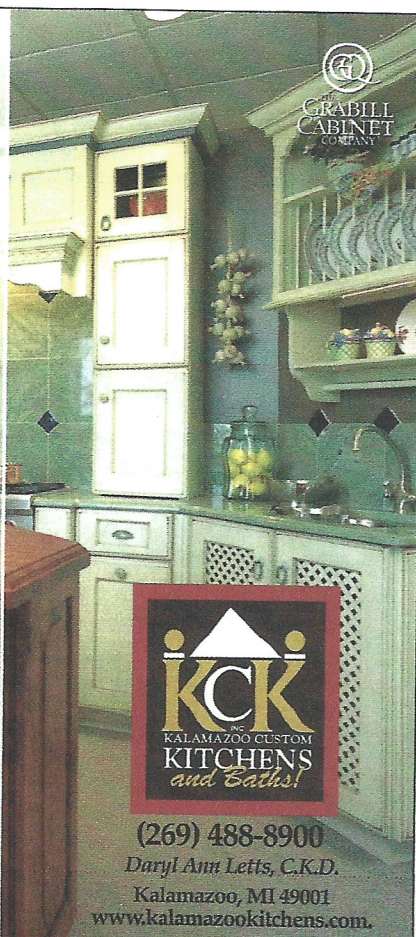
- In his award-winning cookbook "Fork in the Road," PBS-broadcasting Chef Eric Villegas features a Stinging Nettle Soup (pg. 26), Wild Ramp Quiche with Raw Milk Cheddar and Roasted Garlic (p. 28) and Strozzapreti Pasta with Morel Mushrooms and Asparagus (p. 49).

- In Matt Sutherland's cookbook "Savor Michigan" you'll find a half dozen morel recipes including two from The Rowe Inn in Ellsworth: Morel Mushroom, Wild Rice Bisque (pg. 199) and Morel & Leek Pierogi (pg. 202), as well as a recipe for Warm Asparagus Salad (pg. 205) from Latitudes in Bay Harbor.

- In the newly released "Cook's House: The Art and Soul of Local, Sustainable Cuisine" Chefs Jennifer Blakeslee and Eric Patterson feature a Stinging Nettle Soup with Horseradish Dumplings (pg. 124) and Tatsoi and Sorrel Salad with Pickled Ramps, Boiled Eggs & Tarragon (pg. 134). □



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Health Benefits of MOREL MUSHROOMS

IMPROVED CARDIOVASCULAR HEALTH

1. Morel mushrooms can improve heart conditions due to their high levels of copper, vitamin E, and potassium. A study conducted by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and published in the Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry confirmed this evidence of heart health aided by mushroom consumption.

REDUCED CANCER RISK

2. Morel mushrooms can decrease the risk of cancer, especially prostate cancer, due to their high levels of selenium and niacin. These results were noted by the Cancer Research UK study on the effects of mushrooms for cancer treatment

IDEAL FOR WEIGHT LOSS

3. Morel mushrooms are low in fat and calories, yet high in vitamins and nutrients, making them helpful for people trying to lose weight. A study conducted by the John Hopkins Weight Management Center shows that mushrooms may help with weight loss.

INCREASE IMMUNITY TO ILLNESS

4. Morel mushrooms are high in antioxidants, which boosts the immune system and help your body resist diseases and illnesses. In a study conducted by the Department of Surgical Research at the Beckman Research Institute of the City of Hope confirms that high mushroom intake may increase immunity.

AID IN DIABETES TREATMENT

5. Morel mushrooms can help lower blood sugars and keep them balanced, making Morel mushrooms helpful for treating diabetes naturally. Always check with your doctor.

Michigan's Spring Edible Festivals & Events

April 30-May 2

Forest Flavors Retreat
Presented by Learn Great Foods
Petoskey
(866) 240-1650
www.LearnGreatFoods.com

Morels & More Weekend
Springbrook Hills Resort
Walloon Lake
(231) 535-2227
www.springbrookhills.net

May 1

Dandelion Festival
Borculo
(616) 875-7501
www.borculocrc.org

May 7-9

51st Annual Mushroom Festival
Mesick
(231) 878-5204
www.mesick-mushroomfest.org

May 8

Morel Mushroom Festival
Lewiston
(989) 786-2293
www.lewistonchamber.com

May 13-16

50th Annual National Morel Mushroom Festival
Boyne City
(231) 582-6222
www.morelfest.com

May 14-16

Empire Asparagus Festival
(231) 326-5922
www.empirechamber.com

June 11-13

National Asparagus Festival
Hart
(231) 861-8110
www.nationalasparagusfestival.org