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Mushroom madness on the Central Coast

Christine Delsol, Special to SFGate



Chef Cal Stamenov has created a special menu for Marinus restaurant to showcase the versatility of mushrooms.

Here's one to file away for your pub trivia archive – or, if you're really lucky, your upcoming appearance on Jeopardy. Pennsylvania pioneered mushroom farming and remains this country's top mushroom producer (topped only by the Chinese, who came to Pennsylvania to learn how to cultivate their prized shiitakes). Who produces the second-most mushrooms in the United States? Answer: the Monterey Bay Area.

Once-exotic and maybe a little bit scary fungi such as shiitakes, portobellos, chanterelles, King Bolete and the coveted candy cap – prized for its maple syrup-like flavor – are now widely available, thanks to farming. But to a lot of people in the region where the mushroom is, if not king, at least the crown prince, there's nothing more rewarding than hunting down a delectable *Agaricus*, *Lactarius* or their kin in the wild.

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This roasted mushroom salad is one of the dishes on Stamenov's special menu.

The hunting party

Chuck Bancroft, recently retired Point Lobos State Reserve ranger, took a small group out last week on a scouting mission for **mushroom forays he will be conducting November through January for [Bernardus Lodge](#) as part of the Carmel Valley hotel's three-month tribute to the tasty fungi**. In a good year, the coast would have had enough rain by now to coax some of the little rumps up from their mycelia (not kidding – mushroom buds are called "rumps"), but this was another preternaturally warm and dry fall day. He didn't expect to find any mushrooms, and he did not.

Point Lobos is one venue Bancroft will haunt on his guided treks, which might also see guests scouring the oak-studded fields of Carmel Valley or in redwood forests just about anywhere along the Big Sur coast. He will follow the mushrooms, scouting out likely hunting grounds a couple of days before each hike. Different species need different conditions, and they come out at different times.

"Not that much rain is needed," he said, weaving the chronology of mushroom season's progression into the progress of the hike around Point Lobos. "It can be just an inch, but they also need some warmth. It usually takes a minimum of two weeks after the rain to get mushrooms. It depends on the species. Chanterelles, which grow under oaks, can take a month – they like lots of moisture to get big."

Early adapters

From October into November, *Agaricus augustus*, a.k.a. The Prince, appears under redwoods, fir and pines. The relative of the white button mushroom smells and tastes rather like almonds, and its cap grows up to eight or 12-inches wide. They are best when they are buttons, Bancroft said; they begin to taste musty with age. Its relative, *Agaricus bernardii*, is a short, dense button mushroom similar to the supermarket staple *Agaricus bisporus* but has a stronger, somewhat briny flavor – and it bleeds orange when it's cut.

As the trek reached the Caribbean-blue waters of China Cove, Bancroft looked across to the private homes on the hillside just below the Highlands Inn.

"*Agaricus liliceps* grows there around December or January, under the old-growth cypress," he said. "They are huge and meaty, like a portobello but with a meatier stem."

Passing a stand of old-growth pine, he rustled around in the duff, a blanket of fallen pine needles covering the bare soil. As expected, he came up empty. Colonies of cep, or porcini, mushroom rumps (*Boletus edulis*) have a habit of pushing up under the duff to form a hill. But then so do *Russula* mushrooms, which have disappointed many a forager who eagerly brushed the duff away to find "just another russula." While shrimp russulas, named for their coral-red color, are edible, the others are not.

Sweet treats

Late December and into January, the freakishly sweet candy cap mushroom, *Lactarius fragilis*, appears in pine forests along with huckleberries. But if Bancroft gets there first, you might never see one – he's inordinately fond of Candy Cap cookies with a dash of cashews or almonds, dipped in white chocolate.