

A morel to this foray

Hunting for the flavors of spring



BY AIYANNA SEZAK-BLATT

I will always remember the warm afternoon when I spotted my first morel. Last spring, two hours into scouring a trail off the Blue Ridge Parkway for the gourmet mushrooms, I was on the verge of giving up. Then, with the look of a kid who'd just found the last Easter egg, my hunting partner turned to me, and I spotted it: Camouflaged on the ground before us was a dark-brown mushroom with a honeycomb-patterned cap. Scanning the area, I realized we were surrounded by morels.

We crept through the patch, picking mushrooms till the sun sank below the horizon and darkness drove us home.

A treasured delicacy among chefs and connoisseurs around the world, morels grow wild here, typically emerging for just a few weeks in early April. "Morels are sweet, earthy and taste like the essence of the forest," says mushroom enthusiast Landis Lacey, who inspired my own quest. "There's a certain mystique behind morels," he notes. "They're hard to find and picky about where they grow," which has helped make them "a delicacy — like caviar."

When he's not working as a plant pathologist at the Mountain Horticultural Crops Research and Extension Center in Fletcher, Lacey spends hours in the woods in search of elusive fungi. The edible morel mushroom is actually the reproductive portion of a much greater organism that lives below ground, says Lacey, who holds a biology degree from UNCA. "The actual living part of the mushroom [grows] in a weblike net below the soil called the mycelium, and it's constantly searching for nutrients." The mushroom that appears each spring, he explains, "is essentially a way to disperse spores." Hundreds, perhaps thousands of them reside in a single mushroom's cap, awaiting a puff of wind or change in air pressure to release them.

"It's best not to disturb the mycelium," Lacey advises. He recommends using a knife to carefully cut the mushroom at its base, noting, "It's like picking an apple instead of pulling off the whole branch." And by carrying your finds home in a netted bag so the spores can escape,

"You actually act as a dispersal mechanism as you move through the woods, supporting future generations of morels," he points out.

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— MUSHROOM LOVER LANDIS LACEY

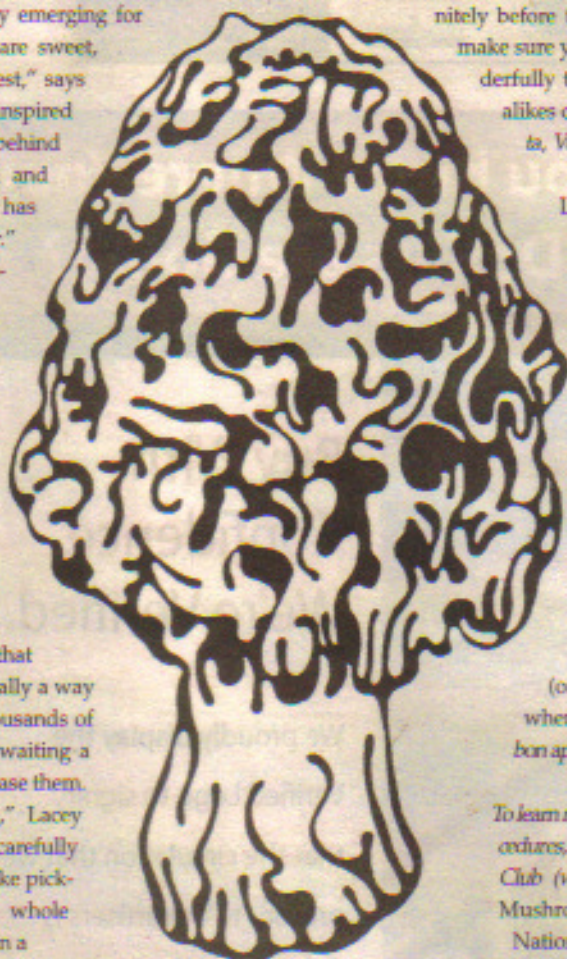
When looking for morels this spring, let North Carolina's native wildflowers and flowering trees guide you. Keep a keen eye out for tulip poplars, bloodroot and May apples: Morels are likely to grow nearby, says the mushroom hound. But they can also turn up in the oddest places. "I've read about people finding morels [growing] in charcoal grills and in potted plants. They're hard to pin down as far as what niche they fill. They grow in all kinds of unexpected places," muses Lacey.

But when gathering mushrooms of any kind — and definitely before taking even a single bite — it's important to make sure you've properly identified the species. As wonderfully tasty as morels are, there are poisonous look-alikes called "false morels," such as *Gyromitra esculenta*, *Verpa*, *Helvella* and *Disciotis*.

"*Gyromitra* looks a lot like a morel," says Lacey. "But it's red on the top, and it's not hollow in the middle [like true] morels." Worse yet, a chemical in the toxic copycat, gyromitrin, is related to one found in rocket fuel. Boil the mushroom in an attempt to remove the toxin, and the fumes can knock you out; ingesting it can cause problems ranging from nausea to liver damage, coma and death. "Never eat anything unless you are more than 100 percent positive about its identification," Lacey warns.

Even true morels must be cooked — never eat them raw. But if you're absolutely certain you've stumbled on a patch of them (or you're taking advantage of a rare occasion when they're available fresh in local stores), then bon appétit! ☒

To learn more about mushroom identification and safety procedures, try these helpful sources: the Asheville Mushroom Club (www.ashevillermushroomclub.com or 298-9988); *Mushrooms Demystified* by David Aron; and the National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mushrooms by Gary H. Lincoff.



BLACK MOREL

Morchella elata

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