

# MUSHROOM NEWSLETTER

**August 10 2009**

The 2009 mushroom season is now definitely getting into its stride. Although I have yet to find my first parasol, this afternoon I met Phil, a local organic farmer and Shakespeare fanatic (see [www.penlanole-organics.co.uk](http://www.penlanole-organics.co.uk)) who had one of these, his favourite mushroom, for breakfast. Unfortunately I haven't yet had time to check my patch at the top of the hill, but undeterred, I have put a mouth-watering recipe for parasol tempura on the website as the recipe of the month.



*Parasols are beginning to emerge – although they generally peak in late September*

While journeying to a Norfolk holiday late last week, my 15 year-old son Jack spotted shaggy ink caps on the verge near Peterborough. Later on, it was impossible to miss a lovely ring of fairy ring champignons on the beautifully-manicured lawns at Sandringham. These lovely mushrooms need close-cropped grass so are often found in rather posh locations. My first ever find was on the fellows' lawn of Nuffield College, Oxford and last year I ran around the outfield (dropping catches) trying not to crush them at Blenheim Palace.



*Fairy rings love beautifully-tended short-grass – such as that found at Sandringham and Blenheim*

The gloriously hot summer the weather forecasters were predicting only a couple of months ago may have failed to materialise, but conditions are yet again proving perfect for chanterelles. There seems to be a new flush underway right now – at any rate I managed to pick half a kilo in a couple of hot spots yesterday. So, for those of you who have yet to find a patch, now is a really good time to look along ditches and streams in damp, scrubby, deciduous woodland – beech, hazel and birch are probably best.



*Chanterelles always grow close to the roots of trees – usually beech, oak, birch or hazel*

I also spotted a couple of brown birch boletes on the verge: prompting mixed reactions. In my book, this is Britain's most disappointing mushroom, partly because the flavour is watery and insipid (particularly when fresh), but mainly because of its superficial

resemblance to porcini. The first glimpse invariably raises the pulse of even the most experienced hunter – only to have their hopes dashed on closer inspection.

The most obvious way to tell the two apart is to glance at the stalk. The brown birch's stem is flecked with black dots, making it look almost dirty and ill-cared for. That of the porcini is far chunkier and a cleaner white or beige in tone.



*The brown birch has a thin, dirty, stalk while that of the porcini is fat and creamy*

This is not to say the brown birch is totally without merit, however. To begin with it is a precursor to its superior relation, emerging a fortnight or so earlier. Also, its flavour can be lifted somewhat by drying. Indeed, if one is a deceitful type of collector, you can always mix it with other dried boletes to make the good stuff go further. Of course if you are the person who will eventually eat the mix, then you are only conning yourself, but I'll leave it to your conscience if you intend to give it away as a gift.

By the way, commercial pickers do this too. If you are buying dried mushrooms, look carefully at the latin names on the packaging, particularly if this is vaguely labelled as something like 'wild mushrooms' or 'champignons des bois'. Almost all the flavour will come from the porcini/cepe/bay bolete content (*Boletus edulis/B. badius*), while the rest is little more than adulteration.



*Brown birch, larch- and pine boletes are frequently used to pad out superior species*

And finally, looking ahead, I was gladdened to see my first yellow swamp russulas of the season. This is often overlooked, but – as I discovered last year – is much better to eat than its write-ups often suggest. Better still, it is usually one of the first truly autumn mushrooms to emerge, so with luck it heralds the start of a good season (and Lord knows we are overdue for one!)



*With luck these yellow swamp russulas should herald a great season to come*

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