

Mushroom Newsletter

10 March 2012

The first mushrooms of the year should emerge any day now, although I have yet to find anything of any real note. I have, however, been busy researching my next book and in the process I came across a mildly bonkers American title devoted to morels [Morel Hunting: How to Find, Preserve, Care for, and Prepare the Wild Mushrooms](#) by John and Theresa Maybrier). This is slightly obsessive, with the authors confessing to following the retreating 'morel line' north from the southern states to Canada every spring, but it is interesting nevertheless.

Now I can't claim to be an expert on these strange – but delicious – spring fungi because they only grow in alkaline regions and such ground is in very short supply in Upland Wales. Nevertheless, I have found them in the past in Norfolk and at the excellent Uzumlu Morel Festival in Turkey (I am not attending this year, but if anyone is interested, it's on 13 – 15 April).



Newsletter subscriber Baz found these beautiful specimens in the Pyrenees last year

Anyway, now is the time to start looking for these wonderful mushrooms and so I am passing on a few facts and hints. First let's get the science out of the way. Most of the mushrooms we eat are basidiomycetes which are named after the single cell on which the spores grow. Morels, in contrast, are ascomycetes, producing their spores in special chambers, a bit like peas in a

pod. Some ascomycetes positively explode, firing their spores out onto the winds, but morels are less exciting, with chambers which merely crack open.



The Uzumlu Morel Festival is well worth a visit for an *fungiphile*

Experts are divided on how many species of morels exist, with the great Roger Phillips speculating mildly that there may be one main species with several colour and shape variations. Most mycologists, however, believe there are at least four or five types, pointing to structural differences in the way the cap joins the stalk. Whichever camp is correct, it makes little difference in the kitchen.

Finding them is no easy matter because they are superbly camouflaged, but the Maybriers give the following tips:

Start checking likely spots when the daytime temperatures have stayed above fifty-five [12 – 13C] for at least five days after a week without a frost. The morels may not be there yet – it generally takes two weeks after the last frost for the morels to show up – but you want to be the first to find them . . .

When you find a morel, look around the immediate environment and determine what triggered the morel to

grow there. If the trigger is a dying tree on a south-facing slope, look for all the dying trees on south-facing slopes. If the area is open, ten feet down the north side of a hill, look for all the similar areas facing the same direction, ten feet down the hillsides.

Morels like poor, depleted, soil. They are usually – although by no means always – associated with trees (both broadleaf and conifer). Certainly the best spots around Uzumlu last year was in the mountain pine forests above the village where they thrived on the thin, dry, limestone soil.

On the other hand, there are no trees on my Norfolk patch, but it does share the same well-drained chalky soil. They seem to thrive in tough conditions, famously appearing in profusion over London's bombsites following the Blitz. Similarly, American morel addicts carefully note the locations of forest fires – apparently the first spring after a major conflagration is the most productive.



Two Turkish morels: the second is in a village garden - note the thin, depleted, soil

There is one note of warning, however – the false morel (*Gyromitra esculenta*) is one of the 'five deadlies' (see my newsletter of 5 July 2011). Although it is perfectly edible when cooked, if eaten raw it not only can, but probably will, kill. Fortunately it is easy to distinguish from the real thing – its cap is folded a bit like a brain rather than covered with sharply ridged pits and when sliced open its stalk and cap contain several chambers rather than one large cavity.



The false morel – deadly when raw and less insistent on alkaline soil

Don't let this put you off, however – if it's any consolation, in Finland this killer is sold on market stalls, although by law it has to be accompanied by a large warning notice, telling purchasers that it must be thoroughly cooked before consumption.

Happy hunting!

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P.S. As always, let me know if you want to be removed from the list and I will do it forthwith.