

MUSHROOM NEWSLETTER

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The latest fungal treasure trove has emerged a good three weeks early with Thursday's chanterelle haul. Quantities were modest, but the current mixture of high temperatures and scattered showers should provide the perfect conditions for the start of a good flush.

Without doubt these delicately-fluted, golden, trumpets are one of the greatest wild mushrooms: perfect for flavouring ('scenting' would probably be more accurate) dairy- and white meat-based dishes. That said, they are also wonderful in their own right, served lightly sautéed on toasted ciabatta: or even on a lightly-browned slice of brioche.



Chanterelles ('girolles' in French) are usually difficult to spot – but not always . . .

Chanterelles – or *girolles* as the French and restaurant trade prefers to call them – usually grow in broadleaf woodland. They are most common in birch scrub and beech woods, but traditionally-managed hazel and oak coppices towards the end of the rotation are a particular favourite. In Scotland, however, they also grow in profusion in conifer plantations (I once stumbled across a huge crop beneath Norway spruce near the north tip of Mull).

That said, they are usually hard to spot at first, but where they do occur they are often plentiful and among the easier fungi to identify with certainty. Like most wild mushrooms, they do not grow regularly, but start as little buttons pushing out of the soil on stalks, before the caps spread out into an irregular funnel perched on a deeply-veined stalk.

Another tell-tale indicator is the scent. Although faint, a basketful has a distinct whiff of apricots that is lacking from the main source of confusion: the false chanterelle. The latter is not edible (although books can't seem to agree whether this means undistinguished or mildly poisonous). It is also a much less substantial fungus, with a thin stalk and usually more garishly orange in hue. Its veins are narrower and more delicate and if one traces these up the stalk, they are like the branches of a tree, dividing again and again until they reach the cap. In contrast those of the true chanterelle are thicker and more irregular, rather like an aerial view of a delta where channels cut across mud split only to rejoin their neighbours.



The true chanterelle has deeper veins and is – generally – less garish in colour

When you do discover your first gleam of gold among the grass beneath the trees, fan out to look for others. As often as not there are more hidden beneath the grass – sometimes in huge quantities. For example while last year's fungal harvest was generally disappointing, I stumbled across two rich chanterelle patches to buck the trend.



This chanterelle patch was anything but hard to find – I gathered three kilos in 10 minutes

These are also interesting in being the only wild mushrooms that are harvested on a commercial scale in Britain. This industry is based in the Highlands and like so many wild Scottish delicacies (lobster, langoustines, venison etc) most of the yields are destined for Continental markets. "We get European ones from May onwards, but the main Scottish harvest doesn't start until about the third week in July," says Tony Booth, Britain's top wild mushroom wholesaler. "It's a very secretive world where people jealously guard their patches so I only know they sell their harvest direct to agents who grade them, pack them and send them south to me."

Scotland's pickers are not alone in jealously guarding the location of their patches from rivals. In the early '90s the woods of Oregon rang with gunfire in what became known as the 'chanterelle wars', with rival gangs of commercial pickers battling over prime patches. Two pickers lost their lives before a licensing system restored some semblance of calm.



These mushrooms deserve their reputation – try the chanterelle and feta recipe on the website

Why the frenzy? The reason is that this delicate little fungus has one of the most exquisite flavours of any wild mushroom. Slightly bitter when raw, when cooked its apricot aroma lingers on, working particularly well with dairy- or egg-based dishes. Try it lightly fried in butter with a little garlic, clarifying the pan with a little vermouth and serving on a slice of toasted brioche with a garnish of chopped parsley. One taste and the chances are you too will be scouring your woods through the summer for these little golden treasures. Strike lucky and you too will be guarding your patch as jealously as any professional.



The bounty is here – get cooking!

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P.S. I loathe junk e-mails and would be horrified to think I might be clogging up your systems unnecessarily, so if at any time you want your name taken off, just let me know with a brief - preferably polite - indication that you want to be removed.