

'Tis the Season of the Matsutake Mushroom

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31 October 1996

This article originally appeared in the Wall Street Journal
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Cascade Mountains, Wash. -- "I've got one. I think I've got one," shouted Jon Rowley, an avocational mushroom gatherer for more than 20 years and a nationally recognized seafood authority. My heart skipped a beat, and with no further delay, I climbed over a fallen tree and dashed across the forest. Nestled in a thick bed of moss and surrounded by a circle of Douglas fir trees was the wild mushroom we had been seeking since the beginning of September -- a matsutake.

As a light rain tapped on the leaves around us, we knelt to the ground and gently rocked the treasure from the deep green carpet. A perfect specimen, the pine mushroom's stem was sturdy and thick. The slightly browned cap, sprinkled with pine needles, had just separated from the stem. The gills were clean and white. The aroma was fresh, woody, intense, and almost intoxicating.

We were duly proud of our find. What we simply plucked from the forest floor, the Japanese have been revering for centuries and are currently buying for about \$200 a pound.

The matsutake (whose botanical name is *Tricholoma magnivelare*) is considered the king of fall foods in Japan and has long been a symbol of fertility, good fortune and happiness. Although the mushroom's phallic shape, short fall season and toothsome crunchy texture contribute to its allure, what really accounts for its popularity is its unique aroma. Reporting from her home in Tokyo, Elizabeth Andoh, an American journalist and the author of "At Home With Japanese Cooking" (Knopf, 1980), explained that the matsutake, which means pine mushroom, possesses what the Japanese call *kaori*, an olfactory element that helps get the saliva flowing and creates an appetizing environment.

The fragrance is difficult to define, and the descriptions run the gamut. When describing the Japanese matsutake, Ms. Andoh said she detects a woody men's aftershave and explained, "Other mushrooms smell more like the earth -- matsutakes smell more like foliage of the woods." Others who take deep sniffs under the cap and around the gills detect red-hot candies, baking bread, damp wood, freshly cut timber and even spanking new tennis sneakers.

While the lore and romance around the matsutake make for interesting conversation and speculation, the reason why the mushroom is so expensive is much more simple: In Japan the demand far exceeds the local supply, and, unfortunately, that supply is slim and dwindling.

Here in the Pacific Northwest, anyone with a little know-how and lots of energy can find a matsutake. It is a matter of hooking up with an experienced mushroom gatherer, poking around until you find the right habitat (pine forests of Douglas fir or hemlock) and being in the right place at the right time. For the most part, the Japanese have no such opportunity.

In Japan, most of the forests in which the matsutake grow are owned by government agencies or private citizens, and during the fall months when the pine mushrooms fruit, the owners lease the land to large corporations or mushroom companies. The companies then have the sole right to pick in the forests, and all others are denied entry. Also, because the matsutake is mycorrhizal, it cannot be farmed but needs the roots of living pine trees to grow. And due to several blights of pine nematode (or pine weevil) since the turn of the century, Japan's pine forests have been decimated, and the matsutake's habitat has drastically shrunk.

Cultivating the "matsie" to fill the gap and meet demand isn't an option. According to David R. Hosford, a matsutake specialist at Central Washington University in Ellensburg who has been studying the pine mushroom since 1982, "No one has cracked the problem of growing them. You aren't dealing with just the mushrooms. You are dealing with a symbiosis. They can't be grown in a laboratory. We are stuck with long-term studies."

Working closely with researchers from Kyoto University and carefully monitoring his secret matsutake spots each fall, Mr. Hosford is working to pinpoint the conditions under which a matsutake fruits. He wants to enhance the mushroom's growth in a natural environment without destroying the fragile symbiotic relationship in the forest. "But," Mr. Hosford explained, "until we can really take the matsutake into a lab and grow it like a commercial mushroom, it is going to be a limited resource."

In the meantime, Japanese matsie fanciers have been importing matsutakes from other countries, and those from the Northwest U.S. have been high on their list. Although the Japanese matsutake is browner and apparently more aromatic than the imports, the Japanese managed to gobble up more than 350,000 pounds of top-quality American matsutakes last year.

That still leaves some mushrooms for us matsie-wise Americans energetic enough to forage for them. But then what? How would we cook these treasures? Reasoning that the Japanese know best, we brought our bounty to Shiro's, a sushi restaurant in Seattle, and asked the owner, Shiro Kashiba, to work his magic. After inspecting our find and smiling approvingly, Mr. Kashiba explained that in Japan they "eat a smell" and offered to make us a very traditional dish called dobin mushi.

Made only when matsutakes are in season and requiring its own teapot-like cooking vessel (a dobin), dobin mushi accentuates and magnifies the mushroom's aroma. The simple soup consists of a light clear broth, slivers of matsutake and a bit of shrimp or chicken, all steamed together in the dobin. At the table, we removed the dobin's lid, closed our eyes and savored the telltale woody aroma. When we bit into the matsutake, the slices were tender yet crunchy. As we sipped the broth, we were brought right back to our secret spot in the woods.

How to Find Matsutakes

Mail order: Matsutakes and dobins can be ordered by mail from Uwajimaya, a family-owned Japanese grocery store that has been serving Seattle since 1928. At the height of the season, Uwajimaya sells more than 500 pounds of matsies a week. Grade one matsutakes, which have tightly closed caps, are considered the best and are \$50 a pound. Grade five matsutakes have a completely open cap and sell for \$25 a pound. To order call 1-800-889-1928 between 9 a.m. and 8 p.m. PST.

In the woods: According to Dr. Denis R. Benjamin, a pathologist and the author of "Mushrooms: Poisons and Panaceas, A Handbook for Naturalists, Mycologists and Physicians" (W.H. Freeman, 1995), there is a poisonous matsutake look-alike called Amanita smithiana, but it has absolutely no aroma.

In restaurants: Though they may not appear on the menu, any self-respecting Japanese dining spot will have matsutakes on hand during the fall season. Ask for them at your favorite local Japanese restaurant.