

Morels in cream sauce

By Tom Dickson

Cook Time: 18 min. | Serves: 4



INGREDIENTS

8 oz. morels, rinsed, dried, and sliced in half lengthwise
 1 T. minced shallots (or onions)
 1 T. butter
 ¼ c. dry white wine
 1 c. half-and-half (not fat free)
 Pinch of grated nutmeg
 Salt and pepper to taste
 Dried pasta
 2 T. chopped parsley
 2 oz. grated Parmesan cheese

OPTIONAL INGREDIENTS

8 oz. steamed asparagus, cut into 2-inch pieces, or
 8 oz. frozen peas, thawed

PREPARATION

Melt butter in a saucepan. Sauté shallots and morels for about 5 minutes. Add wine and simmer for 3 minutes. Add nutmeg and half-and-half. Simmer for 10 minutes. Season to taste. If desired, stir in asparagus or peas.

Meanwhile, bring water to a boil and add pasta. Cook as directed, drain, and top with morel sauce, parsley, and grated Parmesan cheese. ■

After 20 years of picking and cooking morels, I still never tire of the sport or the taste.

Finding these forest mushrooms can be difficult. I've spent hours searching the charred floor of a burned forest without seeing a single one. Usually the weather has been too dry. Morels often wait for a soaking rain followed by a few warm days before poking their heads up through the duff. During hot weather when the ground is dry, I've learned to look along forest pools, seeps, and stream banks.

Then again, sometimes morels blanket a forest floor and you and a partner can fill a pillowcase in just a few hours.

The biological conditions that create morel growth is little understood. The mushrooms pop up in late spring and early summer when soil temperature reaches a certain level. Morels also respond to soil disturbance, such as a fire or flood. Experienced pickers key in on areas burned the previous year. Or they search the islands of big rivers in early summer after water levels drop.

Most morels in Montana are picked west of the Continental

Divide because of the moister soil conditions. Peak picking is generally around Mother's Day weekend, later at higher elevations.

If you've never picked morels before, go with people who know what they're doing. Or visit a popular site, like those in large burned forests, and ask other pickers for advice. Morel hunters may be secretive, but they're usually friendly.

Picking morels in national forests requires a free permit available from ranger stations. Offices are open Monday through Friday. If you want to harvest morels on the weekend, be sure to get your permit ahead of time.

Morels have a wonderful nutty flavor and are simple to cook. The easiest way is also the tastiest: Slice them in half and sauté in butter, drain on paper towels, salt liberally, and eat as you would french fries. I often put sautéed morels on grilled venison steaks right before serving.

Another favorite is this easy recipe for morels in cream sauce. Serve it as a side dish over pasta or in puff pastry. Consider adding asparagus or peas for color and nutrition. 🐾