

# PECONIC FORAGER

BY E.L. WYVES

## EDIBLE UNDERWORLD

There are no hard and fast rules when hunting wild mushrooms in Long Island—or anywhere else. At early stages of growth, the feared Destroying Angel mimics the delectable Puffballs. The fleshy Bolete family contains the largest number of safe edible mushrooms in North America, including Chicken-fat Suillus, Old Man of the Woods, and King Bolete, as well as a few unsafe ones. The same mushrooms that expand your mind, make you fearless, and allow you to talk to God—like the abundant Fly Agaric, its storybook red cap speckled with white dots—can also make you violently ill.

“You should be very careful, because there are poisoning incidents,” said Joel Horman, 66, of the Long Island Mycological Society. Recently, several Korean immigrants in Long Island were hospitalized, when they mistook a poisonous variety for a similar looking edible from their native land.

That’s the bad news. The good news is that an abundance of choice mushrooms sprout on Long Island—Oyster mushrooms in spring, Porcinis in the fall—and there are people who can show you where.

“I’m always saying that we’re going to find a dead body some day,” said Peggy Horman, 60, president of the society and Joel’s wife, as four of us—eyes trained on the ground, wicker baskets in hand—hiked deep into the woods behind a community college playing field somewhere east of Riverhead and west of Montauk.

Mushroom seekers can be aggressively secretive of their hunting

grounds. “One hundred birders can share the sight of one bird, but one mushroom can only go so far,” Mr. Horman explained. Still, the members of the Long Island club happily welcome other interested souls. (The password-protected, members-only section of the club’s website, notwithstanding.) Shortly after meeting Mrs. Horman she gave me a bulging bag of Hen of the Woods, the savory, grayish-brown flesh that forms a feathery tuft at the base of old oak trees in the fall. The Long Island Mycological Society broke off from the New York Society in 1973, and the Hormans, two naturalists who segued from birding into mushrooming, took over the Long Island club 11 years ago. The club has roughly 100 members, a doubling since a couple of years ago when *Newsday* printed a story about the society. (Although most of the club’s members live in Nassau County, there are hunts planned throughout Suffolk County in the fall, including a walk organized by the North Fork Audobon Society at Inlet Pond County Park on October 8. Interested individuals should call 744-4965 or check out [limyco.org](http://limyco.org).)

Mr. Horman, as editor of the club’s newsletter, *L.I. Sporeprint*,

keeps careful records of found species, double-checks their identity by examining the spores under a microscope, and confers with experts outside of the region when necessary. The club led the mycological segment of the recent “BioBlitz” on Long Island. Mr. and Mrs. Horman, who live in Ridge and are both retired, make the round of national mushroom conventions and other fungiphile gatherings. (They just took a trip to France to sample some of the local crop.)

The club adds 20 to 30 species a year to a list of hundreds of species they have already found on the Island. Following several wet years, the fun-



Assorted mushrooms found on the East End, including (clockwise from top left) White Oysters, Chicken of the Woods, Cinnabar-red Chanterelles, and King Bolete.



gus crop has been solid, despite this summer's drought. "At this time of year, the deciduous trees are getting ready to shut down for the winter and they send a blast of sugars to their roots," Mr. Horman explained. "This stimulates the fruiting of many desirable species."

On our foray in late August, we found two types of Chanterelles (large Black Trumpets and tiny Cinnabar-reds that glowed even after cooking), Gypsy Mushrooms, Viscid Violet Corts, and Honey Mushrooms. Straight from the forest to the pan, sautéed with olive oil, garlic, and onions.

The air was quiet. Sunlight sliced through the foliage to illuminate an otherwise dark trail—the sort of setting where fairies, sprites, and other little people might lurk. The hike had a stream-of-consciousness, other-worldly, Alice-in-Wonderland quality. Mushroom lovers are prone to distractions. Heated conversations dropped off when one of us spotted a fruiting body in the distance. The group broke up momentarily. We reconvened to ogle our finds.

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Tony Mish, a 46-year-old carpenter from Lake Grove who went on forays with his father as a child, often strayed from the trail to explore some

sun-dappled bit of forest as if the fungi call to him from under a fallen tree or pile of damp leaves. He relishes the beefy *Suillus* mushrooms that are prized in Poland, and has filled his basket with enough for several meals.

"Environmentalists, hunters, nature-lovers," was how Mrs. Horman described the group's membership, which isn't surprising considering that mushrooms provide a barometer for ecological health. "We have some vegans, and two girls and their mother who love wild foods," she said. Many of the club's members share a background of family mushroom hunting.

Foraging with experienced hunters is definitely the safest option for amateurs. (At the end of our foray, each of us emptied our baskets to be double-checked for dangerous mushrooms.) But the East End has its share of loner fungophiles. Spot them by their cars parked alongside the Montauk Highway in the Pine Barrens after a rain or carrying paper bags along hiking trails. Of course, this isn't a new tradition. In the 1975 book *Bridge Hampton Works & Days*, Pete Peck, a mushroom afficianado, lamented that "in the last few years I have noticed a marked decrease in both the common edible mushrooms and puffballs—reason unknown."

Nadia Ernestus, a real estate broker and sometimes restaurateur in Westhampton Beach, picked her first crop of chanterelles and porcini after rains in late July and usually continues picking through the fall. Ms. Ernestus, who is Russian, learned to recognize mushrooms from her grandmother at the family's summer home on the outskirts of Moscow. Today, Ms. Ernestus favors one sight in Westhampton Beach where the mushrooms come up so thick that "you can bring

#### PICKLED MUSHROOMS

From Nadia Ernestus, Westhampton Beach

1 part vinegar	Pickling spices
3 parts water	1 tsp. sugar

Bring the mushrooms to boil in the mixture. Pour hot mushrooms and brine into sterile jars. Seal and store. Enjoy the pickled mushrooms as is or rinse them off and mix with dill, onions, garlic, and olive oil for a cold salad.

#### OYSTER MUSHROOM DELITE

From Meri Halweil, Southampton

Oyster mushrooms	Local parsley
Garlic	White wine
Leeks	Hot pepper (optional)

Slice mushrooms, garlic, leeks, and a sprinkle of hot pepper in small pieces. Coat pan lightly with olive oil and sauté garlic and leeks for 2 minutes. Add mushrooms. Sprinkle with sea salt and parsley, and add a touch of white wine. Cook for additional 2 minutes until mushrooms are golden brown. The trick is to keep the pan on the dry side with just enough moisture.

a lawn mower and make mushroom caviar," she said. "It's a magic spot." After a large harvest, she generally dries her mushrooms in the oven at a low temperature, so that the shrunken caps can be easily stored. "A wonderful soup is to put sautéed mushroom and lots of fresh spinach in chicken broth. Put yesterday's steak in it too, I do a lot of that in winter." Among those traditions that she has brought from the old country are pickled mushrooms—the perfect tangy food to follow a palate-cleansing sip of vodka. (See recipe above.)

Despite the drought, Tom Morgan, who directs marketing for Lenz Winery in Peconic, expects to find porcini this fall. "It's the most reliable," he said. "Any time after the 15th of September is when things start popping up." In moister years, among the sandy, wooded areas near his Orient home, he encounters black chanterelles and Milky Hygrophorus, a choice edible whose cap oozes a white liquid. "You don't need to identify them all by name," said Mr. Morgan, a self-taught forager who depends on a well-worn copy of the *National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mushrooms*. "But it's worth seeking out those marked as 'choice.'"

Like Ms. Ernestus, Mr. Morgan often dries his findings to have them around all year. He crumbles them into any sort of meat sauce, chicken stock, or soup. "They make Thanksgiving turkey gravy that much better," he said.

In this sense, the lone forager isn't that different from the Mushroom Society tribe. "Most of our members look to find something to eat," Mrs. Horman admitted. She often cooks a mélange of the day's catch into a colorful sauce to pour over pasta. "I tell them that if we don't find something to eat, we'll at least find something interesting to look at. And, we'll at least have a nice walk." □