

Finders, *Keepers*



Come rain, mushrooms grow. Reds, whites, yellows, browns. But daunting as it might be to parse the edible from the definitely-not, sometimes all it takes is a little guidance to realize the best stuff is right under your nose

Written by Bonnie Bauman | Photography by Arshia Khan

A chanterelle peeks through the detritus on the forest floor.



“THERE’S ONE.

Do you see it?”

brown oak leaves scattered over with dead pine needles and an errant twig or two.

“Right there between the rock and that little green sprout,” our guide insists.

I keep looking, and then slowly, slowly, like the hidden figure in a 3-D stereogram, it comes into focus. It looks like a miniature trumpet, its rounded bell shrewdly mimicking the curved cut-outs of the dead oak leaves surrounding it, its mocha hue further ensuring that it blends in with the detritus on the forest floor. And then suddenly there’s another. Then another. Then *another*, until where I once saw nothing, I see a

veritable orchestra of tiny trumpets blaring up at us.

It’s a bit of beginner’s luck—we’ve only just set out on our mushroom-foraging expedition through the sun-dappled woods near Lake Sylvania, deep in the Ouachita National Forest. Or maybe it’s the fact that our foraging Sherpa for the afternoon is none other than Jay Justice, mycologist, co-founder of the Arkansas Mycological Society and Knower of Everything about mushrooms.

Jay, who bears a slight resemblance to the jolliest of wood gnomes, glides through the trees with the sure-footedness of someone who’s perfectly at home in the forest. He’s been leading mushrooming forays like ours since the ’80s, generously revealing his secret spots in the interest of, as he puts it “bringing people and mushrooms together.” And now that foraging has become all the rage, his services are more in demand than ever.

“Some people call them black trumpets,” Jay informs

A few commonly seen edible mushrooms

Laetiporus circinnatus

“chicken of the woods,” or sulfur shelf mushroom



Yellow cantharellus

yellow chanterelle



Cantharellus appalachiensis

Appalachian chanterelle



Cantharellus cinnabarinus

cinnabar chanterelle



Craterellus Ballay

black trumpet, or black chanterelle



me as we begin harvesting our find. “Others call them black chanterelles, but I like the French nickname for them best: *trompettes de la mort*.”

Trying to appear casual, I back away from the mushroom I was about to pluck from the ground. I don’t have much French, but I recognize the word “death” when I hear it.

“Some people say they call them that to scare others away from picking them,” Jay says, a glint of mischief in his eye. “But the truth is they have a custom in France where somebody goes before a funeral procession playing the trumpet, thus the genesis of the name.”

Breathing easier, I get back to the business of uprooting *la trompette*, dropping it gently into our communal collection basket.

“I’ve heard them called poor man’s truffles,” volunteers Jason Paul, the chef in our party and a faculty member at Brightwater: A Center for the Study of Food in Bentonville. “And they’re pretty great in risotto or pasta.”

Jason would know. At his former venture—the acclaimed downtown Rogers restaurant Heirloom, which closed in November and is set to reopen nearby in the spring—he was known for vegetable-driven dishes that made the most of Arkansas’ edible landscape. And not just mushrooms—wood sorrel, ramps, wild onions, oxalis and the like made it onto the plate at Heirloom, and always with thoughtful purpose. Jason is one of the most inventive chefs around. (Need proof? The guy can make a carrot taste like the best hot dog you’ve ever had.)

But you don’t have to be an inventive, veggie-crazed chef in order to find mushrooms in the wilds of Arkansas. The first step is just getting outside and staring at the ground.

THE local food

movement often gets credit for the recent popularity in culinary foraging—after all, what could be more local than harvested-from-the-ground-

right-next-to-my-shoe? Others place that credit squarely on the soldiers of René Redzepi, founder of the Copenhagen juggernaut Noma, which is widely considered one of the world’s best restaurants. And indeed, Redzepi was one of the first chefs to put professional foragers on the payroll.

But professional food foragers are rare in Arkansas, so most chefs are left to fend for themselves if they want to pepper their menus with wild edibles. For his part, Jason’s been known to add black chanterelles to risotto and duck-egg frittatas. Matt McClure, executive



Just about any forest will do for foraging in Arkansas—here, chef Jason Paul scouts specimens in the Ouachita National Forest, near Lake Sylvia.

Where to forage this fall

“I HONESTLY think a lot of these people would not reveal their spots even under torture,” says writer Bonnie Bauman. A bit extreme? Perhaps. But truth is, most fungus aficionados would sooner let slip the coordinates for Atlantis, Jimmy Hoffa and the Fountain of Youth before divulging their best spots.

Bonnie did get them to tell us, generally, where they’ve had luck in the past. If you’re in Northwest Arkansas, head to **Cove Lake Loop** in Paris or the **Dutton Hollow Loop** in Hobbs State Park, near Rogers. (Note: If you’re foraging in a state park, you’ll need a permit.) The trails around **Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art** in Bentonville are also fruitful—and gorgeous, to boot. Central Arkansas foragers would do well to head out into **Burns Park**, or on the trails around **Lake Sylvia** in Perryville.



chef over at The Hive, cooks up a roast-chicken dish with creamed corn and chanterelles when he scores their yellow counterparts. And Luke Wetzel over at Oven & Tap has cooked up his haul of chanterelles as a topping for locally roasted carrots.

Where do our local culinarians and their fellow fungi hunters go in search of edible mushrooms in Arkansas? With its abundance of oak-hickory forests, the majority of edible mushrooms in The Natural State are the kinds that have a symbiotic relationship with trees, meaning that anyone who wants them for dinner will be making a foray into the woods. (For instance, chanterelles crop up around groupings of oak trees.) And since the majority of Arkansas is covered in oak-hickory forest, just about any woods will do. To increase your chances of finding enough to feed the whole family, wait until after a good rain before venturing out.

There's also a seasonal component to mushroom foraging in Arkansas, with fall considered the peak season based on the sheer variety of edible fungi that surface. Honey mushrooms, hedgehogs, puffballs and oyster mushrooms are perhaps the most sought-after fall finds. The second busiest season is summer, when foraging enthusiasts are typically on the lookout for chanterelles (yellow, black and red), oyster mushrooms, fu ling mushrooms and chicken of the woods, among others. And spring gives forth one highly in-demand edible gem that chefs and home cooks alike tend to go wild for: morels.

All newbie foragers should be warned that some edible mushrooms have evil nonedible, and potentially poisonous twins, so the best way to know for sure if a mushroom is plate-worthy is to arm yourself with a mycology expert whom you trust.

And while there's a primal pleasure in unearthing wild fungi in the forest, looking to the ground as your grocer can also be quite the money-saving exercise. Case in point: black chanterelles go for upward of \$22 a pound online.

A couple of hours in, our haul's loaded down with at least \$60 worth of black chanterelles, as well as a few other specimens. There are the tiny orange *laccaria laccata*, which some folks like to cook up in a stir-fry, and the cream-colored milkcap, which, true to its name, leaks droplets of milky ooze. (We left behind the red-capped russulas we spotted, as they're squirrel and turtle food, not people food.)

By now the sun is beginning to set, casting an enchanting green glow over the forest. As we cross a long wood-planked bridge with a crystalline stream running below, our conversation devolves into inarticulate sounds of nature worship.

Jason and I have fallen behind during our talk of his experiences cooking with wild edible mushrooms. As we catch up with the group, we notice that they've wandered off the beaten path and are huddled around a tree, always a good sign at a mushroom forage. I know immediately by the looks on their faces that they've found something—something big.

"There you go! There you go!" whoops Jason, who catches sight of the find before I do. "That's chicken of the woods right there!"

When my eyes finally settle on the object that's unleashed such glee, I gasp. Growing at the base of a pine tree like a laid-down offering is a bright-orange-tinted mushroom as big as a football, its terraced flesh giving it the look of a giant rose in full bloom.

Jay looks perplexed. "It's unusual to see it near pine. I've never seen one growing on a pine. Usually, it's on hard wood."

"What is it?" I ask

"It's called a 'sulphur shelf' mushroom, or like Jason said, 'chicken of the woods,'" says Jay.

"We're cooking this one!" exclaims Jason before I can even articulate the inevitable question. "That bad boy is getting cooked!"



Tips For The Aspiring Mycologist

Step 1

Join the Arkansas Mushrooms and Fungi Facebook group, where you'll find similarly minded folks and a curated list of mycological resources, including a very helpful post titled "Can I eat it? Can I eat it? Can I eat it?"

Step 2

Sign up for one of the group's regularly scheduled forays. Jay's leading an expedition in the Ozark National Forest on Nov. 4 called "Fabulous Fall Fungi."

Step 3

Spring for a field guide. The National Audubon Society's *Field Guide to North American Mushrooms* is a great choice.

Step 4

Grab your basket and pocket knife, and head out into the woods!