



Morel Mushroom Hunting

The morel mushroom is prized for its distinctive, meaty flavor. It's also relatively easy to find – given you know where to look – and to identify, making it a great target for first-time mushroom hunters. Below are our tips for all things morels:

When to Start Looking: Morels thrive in warm, wet conditions, and usually fruit after the first good rain once daytime temperatures first reach the 60s. That being said, there is a lot of variation in microclimate in the outdoors, and the best way to know when it's "morel time" can be keeping an eye on spring plants; morels tend to pop up when Dutchman's breeches, trilliums, trout lilies, and violets are blooming in the woods. Additionally, an old adage suggests that it's time to start looking when the oak leaves are the size of a mouse's ear. Early-season morels are generally smaller than the later-season ones.

Where to Start Looking: Early in the season, start looking in places where the soil warms first, like exposed south-facing slopes. As the season progresses, ventured more into areas that receive less sun. And morels tend to occur around certain species of trees as well, as they're thought to be mycorrhizal, meaning they have symbiotic relationships with these trees. Around northern Michigan, we've had luck finding them near dead ash trees (of which there are plenty due to the emerald ash borer) or in aspen groves, though around oaks and dead elms is also purported to be good morel habitat. Additionally, pine forests that have been recently burned may be good spots, as the fungus produces mushrooms (the fruiting body) as a response to environmental stress as a last-ditch effort to reproduce. Many people also have luck finding morels in old, retired apple orchards, but be aware that many apple farmers used pesticides containing lead and arsenic throughout the 1900s on their trees, that these toxic elements don't readily break down into the soil, and that they can be taken up by fungus.



Above all else, when you do find a morel, slow down and look closely in the immediate area! Because they're spread by spores that are often blown in the same wind direction, where there's one, there are likely to be more. Take note of the environment in which you found a mushroom; notice the tree species, the slope, the soil, leaf litter, amount of sunlight, etc., and consider that on that day, that type of microhabitat is likely to be the most productive, so try to find other spots like it if you've exhausted a given area.

Lastly, stooping, or even getting down on your hands and knees, can make the difference between a delicious dinner and coming home empty-handed. Focusing your gaze 6-15 feet in front of you – not directly down – can make it easier to spot the morel's distinctive shape.

How to Make a Positive ID: Morels are relatively difficult to misidentify as far as mushrooms go, but there are a few lookalikes out there, collectively referred to as “false morels.” Here are some aspects that your morel SHOULD have that will distinguish it from those lookalikes, which can be toxic:

- Conically shaped
- The surface of the cap should have pits, not wavy wrinkles
- The cap should be fully attached to the stem from the tip of the cap to the very bottom of the cap
- When sliced lengthwise, the cap should be entirely hollow from the tip to the bottom and without any cotton-looking tissue filling the cap
- The cap should be much longer than the stem

Consult field guides and local mushroom experts if you're unsure, and, as always: When in doubt, throw it out.

How to Harvest Morels: Use a sharp knife or clippers to cut (or just use your nails/fingertips to pinch) the morel cleanly just above the ground. When foraging, use a mesh bag (reusable produce bags are great, but old citrus or onion sacks will work too) so that you continue to spread the morel spores as you walk through the woods, helping to ensure that there



will be a harvest for years to come. Side note: each morel can contain up to 500,000 spores!

How to Cook Morels: To clean your mushrooms, set them in a bowl of water and let them soak for a bit, which will loosen any dirt or bugs that are inside the pits. You can slice the morels lengthwise to more thoroughly clean them. And as with almost every wild mushroom, morels need to be cooked before they are consumed. We recommend just sauteeing them in butter and then eating them on their own, tossing them into a pasta, or using them to top a steak or chicken breast. Happy mushroom hunting!

