

**SHORT  
GUIDE  
TO  
THE EDIBLE  
FUNGI  
IN WALTHAM FOREST & THE  
LEA VALLEY**

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& Ryan O'Kane

# Wild mushrooms? Are you mad?!..

When I mention I go picking wild mushrooms, I often get a reaction along the lines of 'that's a dangerous game, you've got to know what you're doing'. Well yes, of course. However, as a mushroom hunter of some experience I can tell you it is not as hard as it first seems to be confident in what you are doing. The main point is this - you are only interested in the edible fungi, and to some extent the poisonous ones. Everything else, ignore. This makes things much easier. Get an edible mushroom guide and, as you identify each species, by cross referencing in ID guides and often a process of elimination, you come to recognise it for the next time you come across it. There are only about 50 edible and 20 poisonous fungi in the UK, and over time you get to know all of the important ones. Finding & eating wild fungi can be deeply rewarding and is a great way of really getting into your environment.

Happy foraging!

**Ru Kenyon**

## Your Essential Foraging Kit:



Edible Mushroom Guide (not a general mushroom ID guide, though these are good for cross referencing)



Knife



Basket or other container

# Oyster Mushroom



Photo: Jan Willem-Swane (Flickr Creative Commons)



## *Pleurotus ostreatus*

Found all year round, one of the most voracious of fungi. Grows in dense clusters on all kinds of wood but shows a preference for beech and horse chestnut in and around London. **Cap:** colour varies from grey to brown; undulating, with an inrolled rim and usually with a depression where it joins the stem. **Stem:** pale, short and thick, occasionally absent, sometimes off centre. **Gills:** pale (white or cream) and crowded extending far down the stem. **Safer to avoid similar species with pale caps.**

Sometimes known as the 'shellfish of the woods', it can be substituted in some oyster recipes. Suitable for frying and stewing, but does not benefit from drying. Pick while young to avoid infestation with maggots. Keeping the site watered can help produce future crops.

# Field Blewit



Photo: Boris Lariushin (Flickr Creative Commons)



## *Lepista saeva*

Late season/winter mushroom. Watch out for large rings of these in open grassland. Can survive frosts but get some before they get mown over!

**Cap:** beige; up to 12cm across; depressed and undulating. **Stem:** bluish lilac, contrasting with cap; coarse violet fibrils; up to 10cm; bulbous at base. **Gills:** light beige; wavy and crowded.

Both Blewits are best picked on a dry day, check for fly larvae before cooking. Can be fried or baked, though some recommend parboiling. Particularly good sauteed, and combine well with sour cream. They do not dry well but can be pickled.

**Unlike their pretenders, the Blewits both have a unique, perfumed smell. So use your nose!**

# Wood Blewit



Photo: 'randomtruth' (Flickr Creative Commons)



## *Lepista nuda*

This pretty violet fungus grows in leaf litter, late season, often under oak. **Cap:** bluish lilac, fading brownish with age; undulating and irregular, usually depressed the centre, up to 15cm across. **Stem:** bluish lilac, fading pale, fibrous surface, up to 10cm, bulbous at base. **Gills:** bluish lilac, wavy and crowded. Basically young ones are lilac all over, unlike the Field Blewit which has contrasting violet stem and brown cap.

Can be confused for the ***Lepista sordida*** (edible but less tasty) which is smaller, darker and tends to have a risen (convex) rather than depressed centre. Can also resemble the inedible ***Cortinarius purprascens*** which has a slimy cap and bruises purple-red when damaged.

# Parasol Mushroom



Photo: Photo: © Ru Kenyon (All rights reserved)



## *Macrolepiota procera*

Elegant and distinctive from a distance when fully open. Grows in groups in open pastures, waysides and clearings. **Cap:** pale beige with darker shaggy scales; open from a small sphere, through egg-shape into a flattened parasol, risen in the centre; grows up to 30cm across. **Stem:** white with brownish felty covering split into scales; up to 30cm tall. **Gills:** white and loose. **Distinctive large ring which can be moved up and down the stem.**

Very light & delicate flavour & texture. A highly regarded wild delicacy, some compare the taste to chicken. It should be picked just when the cap begins to open. Fry the cap (though not the fibrous stalk) quickly on a high heat, but do not simmer too long as it will toughen. Young ones can also be stuffed and baked.

# Shaggy Parasol



Photo: Steve Chilton (Flickr Creative Commons)



## *Chlorophyllum (Macrolepiota) rhacodes*

Resembles Parasol but, well, shaggier! Found in woodland leaf litter. **Cap:** pale, densely covered in peeling darker brown scales; convex, opening to flat; up to 15cm across. **Stem:** white, discolouring brown (lacks the scaly patterning of the Parasol stem); up to 15cm; moveable ring. **Gills:** white, discolouring red-brown. White flesh becoming orange-red on cutting.

Has a fainter smell but more 'mushroomy' and meaty flavour than Parasol, but overwashing can weaken this. Drying the caps for 1-2 years deepens their flavour. **Said to cause gastric upsets in some people but this seems to be rare. Try a small amount at first to be sure and don't eat it raw.** The variant *bohemica* looks different and may be responsible for the gastric upsets rumour.

# Horse Mushroom



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## *Agaricus arvensis*

Similar to the earlier fruiting field mushroom, but with grey gills. Also found in fields, prefers rich soils and (horse) manure. **Careful not to confuse with the poisonous yellow stainer** (see opposite). One of the many mushrooms which smells and tastes of almonds. **Cap:** white / pale yellowish; opens from tight 'helmet' shape to broad convex or flattened parasol, risen in the centre; up to 20cm across. **Stem:** thick; white; up to 15cm tall. **Gills:** grey white, becoming chocolate brown with age. Flesh stains dull yellow.

Its subtle almond / aniseed flavour can be brought out in a bechamel or cream sauce. The flavour deepens with age, but watch out for maggots in older specimens! Fresh young caps **can** be eaten raw in salads. Benefits well from drying.

# But watch out for this trickster!...



## The Yellow-stainer

*Agaricus xanthodermus*, same genus and very similar in appearance. The number one cause of mushroom poisoning in the UK, it is not fatal but causes severe gastric upset and diarrhoea. The horse mushroom also stains yellow, but the yellow stainer is a brighter yellow. The acid test is to cut the stem base in half and wait a short while, if it bruises yellow in the stem base it is a yellow stainer. A good *arvensis* will not bruise yellow in the stem base.



Photo: 'frankenstoen' (Flickr Creative Commons)

If still in doubt, the Horse Mushroom can also be identified in another way. When viewed from below, the *arvensis* has a well developed ring around the stem with a distinctive 'cog-like' pattern around its edge. This can just about be seen in this photograph. No other mushroom has this feature.



Photo: 'Norte' (FCC)

# Fairy Ring Champignon ☺

Photo: Andrew/'polandeze' (Flickr Creative Commons)



## *Marasmius oreades*

Also known as the Scotch Bonnet, one of the earliest mushrooms, fruits from early June to late autumn. Grows in rings in grassland; dark rings in the grass indicate Fairy rings are there before the mushrooms come up. Again, get some for dinner before they get mown over! **Cap:** tan when moist drying to buff with tan centre; convex to flat with a risen centre; up to 5cm across. **Stem:** white/pale buff; rigid; up to 10cm tall. **Gills:** white to creamy ochre; loosely spaced.

Fresh sawdust smell. With a mild, nutty and surprisingly sweet flavour, the champignon can be used in cookies (dried and minced, use like raisins). Discard the stems. To dry, cut off stems and thread caps on string. Also good for pickling.

# But don't be fooled!...



## Fools Funnel

*Clitocybe rivulosa*, although it does not look much like the fairy ring champignon, which is buff in colour, it is the same size and grows in rings in grassland. The fools funnel is stony marbled white whereas the *marasmius* is buff in colour. Always pay attention when picking small mushrooms!



**Photo:** 'larsjuh' (Flickr Creative Commons)

# Shaggy Inkcap



Photo: Steve Chilton (Flickr Creative Commons)



## *Coprinus comatus*

Grassland mushroom, appears on parks, cricket pitches and wasteland. Very delicate, strange, texture. **Cap:** white with brown centre and large, white shaggy scales tipped brown; mature specimens blackened at the margin; from acorn to bell-shaped; up to 15cm from centre to margin.

**Stem:** white, hollow and fragile; up to 30cm tall.

**Gills:** from white, maturing into black, inky mess!

Truly a 'mush'-room, so pick while young and firm and cook within an hour or so, before they liquify into inky mush! Sautee young ones. Richard Mabey also recommends turning mushy ones into ketchup, or can be boiled with cloves to make natural ink. **Don't confuse with much less 'shaggy' common ink-cap which, while edible, becomes poisonous if you drink alcohol within 2 days.**



Photo: Rachel/'nutmeg66' (Flickr Creative Commons)



## *Auricularia auricula-judae*

One of the many jelly fungi. Grows on dead elder branches all year round. Can be found in large clusters. **Cap:** bright reddish-brown darkening with age; gelatinous, like a rubbery ear or cup; up to 10cm across. **Stem:** occasional rudimentary stub but usually absent.

Cut from the host tree with a sharp knife while young. Simmer for at least 45 minutes in milk or stock, the resulting texture is somewhat like seaweed. Old tough ones can be dried and ground as a flavouring for soups and stews. Very popular in the far east where it is known as 'tree ear'.

While a spurious reference to Judas is sometimes used to defend its traditional name, the 'Jew's Ear' has at last been consigned to history, even if some medieval prejudices which spawned it persist.

# Amethyst Deceiver



Photo: Jan Willem-Swane (Flickr Creative Commons)



## *Laccaria amethystina*

A cheeky little woodland mushroom. Grows in small groups, very common in late Autumn. Small and violet. **Cap:** bright violet, but colour fades in dry conditions; convex becoming flatter with depressed centre; up to 5cm across. **Stem:** violet streaked with pale fibrils; often bent and twisted; base covered in lilac down; up to 10cm tall. **Gills:** same colour as cap; widely spaced alternating long/short gills.

Little flavour, but they have a chewy, interesting texture and hold the juices of whatever they are cooked in. They retain their beautiful purple colouring after cooking. Many caps are needed for a decent meal, discard the tough stems. Similar to the common Deceiver (*Laccaria laccata*) when dry, which is also edible.

# Pick safe...

## Don't panic!

Responsible foraging is arguably safer than your local dodgy fried chicken place...

## ...but when in doubt, don't!

An obvious one, but easy to forget in the midst of 'forager's fever'!

## Avoid roadside specimens

Mushrooms are particularly good at absorbing heavy metals such as cadmium and mercury.

## Always keep a sample of what you eat

Just in case you eat a nasty - the quicker doctors can identify it, the better.

## There are no general colour rules!

With three delicious purple specimens in this pamphlet - don't take anything for granted! Actually the more unusual the fungus the less likely you are to confuse it with others.

## Go for 'young adult' specimens

They're easier to identify than immature ones, and less likely to be infested with larvae than old ones.

## Don't even touch poisonous fungi!

It's just not worth the risk.

# And pick sustainably...

## Don't overharvest

Leave little ones to grow and old ones to set spores & provide food for the local ecosystem.

## Spread the spores

Carry your foraged fungi in a basket or finely netted bag and leave an invisible trail of spores behind you.

**This pamphlet is for information only.**

Please use multiple reputable guides to guarantee identification. Or, even better, learn in the field from someone who knows!

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*The*

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