

Cooking Demo with Take-out Tips

Article by Joan FitzGerald

Photos by Susan Goldhor and Joan FitzGerald

When Ben Maleson waved his hand across the mouth of a container he was holding particularly closely, the smell of musk and forest floor rolled through the demonstration kitchen. He might have lost us to reveries on one of the earth's great mysteries, but several blasts from a tender black trumpet, (requiring a technique best left to oboe players) brought us back to the night's agenda. It was March 5, 2012 at Boston University, and we were attending *Mushrooms: Safe Foraging, Delicious Cooking*, a BMC event in partnership with Boston University's Metropolitan College. This cooking demo was hosted by Chris Douglass, faculty member in BU's culinary arts program and chef-owner of Ashmont Grill and Tavolo restaurants.

A survivor of his own foraging trips, Chef Douglass nevertheless relied on the BMC for expert advice. Susan Goldhor, BMC president and a columnist for the *Journal of Wild Mushrooms*, answered the call, along with Ben Maleson, the area's consummate fungi finder. With three such pros, the evening proved instructive and toothsome.

Eating Wild Mushrooms Safely

Opening the evening, Susan reviewed the basics of mushroom foraging as her audience sipped red wine from Italy's Piedmont region. Foraging needn't sound ominous, she said, "...but there are rules you absolutely must follow!"



Susan Goldhor addressed participants at the cooking demo.

Rule: Few mushrooms will kill you, although a few might make you wish you were dead for a moment. In any case, when in doubt about a mushroom's identity or freshness, *throw it out!*

Rule: Fungi possess “an enormous number of very bizarre chemicals,” including toxins and psychedelics. What might be safe for most human beings might not be for you. So eat gingerly the first time you try a new species. Where a mushroom grows might be a source of toxicity as well.

Which points to yet another rule.

Rule: Cook all mushrooms well – except those Ben says can be eaten raw (tiny garlic mushrooms and beefsteaks). Even the ubiquitous button mushroom?

“Personally, I wouldn’t,” said Susan.

The Dishes

In short order we began tasting the dishes that had been prepared earlier in the day by Chef Douglass’ graduate students. Washtub-sized trays carried small plates bearing paper sacks. Tearing into them, we found chanterelles and nickel-sized slices of fingerling potatoes, steamed with garlic and herbs like tarragon, sage, anise and thyme, in olive oil and white wine.



Paper sacks bundled chanterelles in herbs.

The irrepressible Ben Maleson and Chris Douglass have collaborated on fungi since Chris bought mushrooms from Ben’s mother years ago. They agree on many things fungal.



Chris Douglass, in chef whites, and Ben Maleson exchanged pointers.

Tip: Get comfortable hunting one species. “One mushroom a year, one at a time works for me,” says Chef Douglass. “Collect what you know,” advises Ben Maleson.

Tip: Never carry your mushrooms home in plastic - use waxed or unwaxed paper. Clean the dirt off before you put your finds into your collecting basket.

Tip: Chris Douglass doesn't cut mushrooms with a knife. “Pull them apart with your fingers.” Don't wash mushrooms if you can help it but if you have to, immerse them in “copious” amounts of cold water, and then spread them out to dry.

Our forks sank into Portobellos stuffed with a sauté of sun dried tomatoes, garlic, diced onions, carrots and celery, lightly bound with Parmesan. The upturned cap was topped with a slice of Taleggio cheese that gave the dish a satisfying body without overpowering the vegetables.

We also sampled a plate of *Shiitake* pickled in Japanese soy sauce, ginger and sherry vinegar, nested in baby greens.



This tofu dish was prepared with pickled Shiitake and blanched bok choy. Underneath the plate was the first page of Susan Goldhor's handout.

Tip: *Shiitake* winter mushrooms have cracks in their caps which gives them a more robust flavor, Ben believes. Dried shiitake can be very tasty. Look in Chinese grocery stores for “the flower style” or “golden coins”; check for cracked caps, a consistent shape, and that the mushrooms have been dried uniformly.



Fresh Shiitake winter mushrooms.

Chris Douglass demonstrated how to make polenta, a peasant dish he has served in his restaurants since 1987. His version, a ratio of 1 part cornmeal to 1.5 parts milk and 1.5 parts water, came out as light as custard. He finished the polenta with a mushroom sauce of *Shiitake*, Oyster, and Portobello mushrooms with garlic, Madeira, chicken stock, thyme, and sage.

Tip: When making polenta, first make a slurry of cornmeal and water, then add the boiling milk (and sautéed shallots and leeks if you like). Stir until the mixture

comes to a boil again. This technique keeps the starch suspended in the liquid long enough to blend. In 20 minutes or so it is done.

As we listened to the repartee between Ben and Chris we in the audience could only murmur our appreciation for the fine professional execution of the dishes.

Recipes are like a map, Chef Douglass believes. “Cook with all your senses, your ears, your eyes, your sense of touch.” He took a bit of the polenta he has been cooking and rubbed it between his fingers. “If you can feel the grain as gritty, it is not ready.”

Luckily for us his senses have been enhanced by over 30 years of professional cooking and, in the case of his mushroom recipes, Ben Maleson’s hunting prowess.

At the start, Susan Goldhor referred to the evening as “the first joint program with BU....” So, does that mean there will there be more?

Will prayer help the decision?