



THE FUNGUS AMONG US

Learning to love 'shrooms, the other white not meat

BY WILLIAM KENNEDY

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My editor emails me and says, “If you’re interested, I’m looking for someone to write a piece for the next *Chow!* insert.” I think to myself: “Great! Go out, find Eugene’s best burger, write about it, get paid. Killer.” It could be steak, sausage, pizza, whatever — I was in. Let’s go. I’d be eating and getting paid to write about it. Dream come true, right?

“It needs to involve mushrooms,” the email concluded. I thought, “You’re killing me, Levin,” but I agreed.

Don’t get me wrong. I like mushrooms. I’ve had plenty of great mushroom dishes. And I know Lane County is prime mushroom growing country — forested, wet and temperate. Locally the fungus has spawned societies devoted to it, festivals and a virtual cottage industry of pickers during the fall and spring months.

And, please, before you start firing off angry letters to the editor, Lane-Veggie-Mafia: I know there are plenty of health reasons to eat mushrooms instead of meat. It’s just that to an unapologetic carnivore like myself, mushrooms always just seem a little like... well, *not meat*.

People don’t have a lot of money to eat out these days. With the economic downturn, the restaurant industry has struggled both at the local and national level. So rather than going out and stuffing my face at any one of Eugene’s fine restaurants — something many can’t afford to do these days — I decided to take a different approach to my mycological mission and dine in.

Now, I love to eat. But I don’t cook much. Luckily, my close friend Kat Nichols is a fantastic cook who throws dinner parties that rival Eugene’s finest dining experiences any day. So I approached her. “Want to prepare a meal, host a dinner party and I’ll write about it for the *Weekly*?”

“Yes!” she responded immediately, visions of the Food Network dancing in her head. Kat’s passion for cooking started while studying art at UO and, in recent years, that passion has grown. “It’s my favorite thing to do,” she says. “It sounds cheesy, but cooking people food is my language of love.” This is the woman who spit-roasts a pig in her

backyard every summer, and not too long ago served up Cornish game hens that we tore apart with our bare hands.

“The meal has to involve mushrooms,” I clarify. “You’re killing me, Kennedy,” she replied, disappointed at not being able to throw one of her legendary meats orgies. But she agreed nonetheless.

“I tried to find morels, but nobody had them,” Kat explained when my wife, daughter and I arrived at the south Eugene home she shares with her fiancée. The place already smelled of garlic and butter. Appetizers of cheese, olives and almonds were laid out on the counter along with bottles of red wine. “So I went with wild mushrooms instead,” she said (morels typically grow in the spring in these parts). On a chalkboard near the dining room table was written the evening’s menu: Crusty baguette, asparagus with compound butter and a verjus (a juice made from unripe grapes that is more than vinegar but not quite wine) and wild mushrooms in a brandy cream sauce over homemade pasta. “I ripped up the mushrooms by hand — it’s more sensual that way,” Kat joked.

The dinner party was split pretty evenly among those with mycological inclinations and those slightly less enthusiastic about the tasty fungi. “It’s the texture,” Heather, one of Kat’s guests, told me. “It feels like I’m eating someone’s ear.” She added, however, that she was more inclined to try things at a dinner party than at a restaurant.

And that was the general consensus among those with some reservations about the evening’s meal: It was the off-putting texture, and that flavor the Japanese might

describe as *umami* — or, as most call it, “earthy.”

Kat told the party that you have to be gentle when cooking mushrooms. Tonight, she said, she’d made an attempt to let the mushroom’s flavor be what it is, as well as allowing it to retain its unique texture. Soon we were all eating in silence. Everything was so delicious I couldn’t believe there wasn’t any meat in it. Eden, sitting next me, couldn’t overcome her distaste, devouring the pasta, asparagus and bread but picking out the mushrooms. Heather — an archaeologist with a colleague who packs a plastic bag on forest expeditions to stash any mushrooms she might find — was converted. She turned to her husband and said, “I think we can cook with hedgehog (mushrooms) now. I like them.”

Flush with wine and good food we sat and talked, a luxury not to be had at some restaurants where you are rushed out to turn over your table to the next six-top. Our conversation turned to dining in our fair city and beyond — amazing ingredients, casual restaurant atmosphere, no pretense, but a woeful lack of variety in ethnic foods. We all admitted to eating at home more than we did in our 20s — partially for financial reasons, but also because we found ourselves driven to recreate the food we once craved from restaurants.

After a dessert of root beer floats, Kat fired up *Beatles Rock Band* on Wii and, after a turn rockin’ out “Helter Skelter,” I hugged my friends and said goodbye, mulling the evening over in my mind. I wasn’t sure I’d be substituting portobello for my burger anytime soon, but I did know amazing food, wine and friends followed by *Beatles Rock Band* was an experience no restaurant in Eugene, or anywhere, could replicate. ■





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