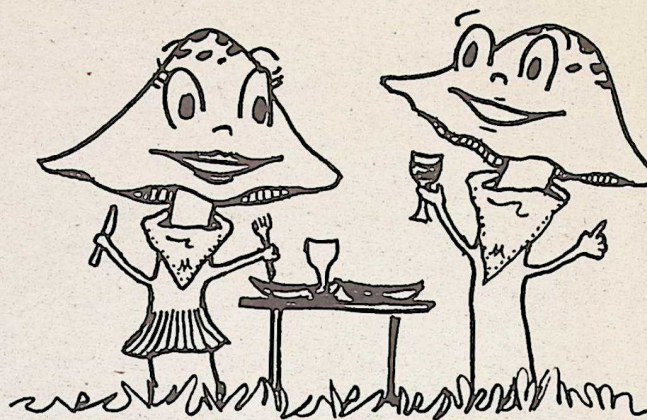


From Aunt Olivia's Kitchen

Mushrooms make a meal

by Lydia Lovell



Early in the morning on an occasional crisp fall day, Aunt Olivia tossed a woolen cape over her shoulders, hung her woven rush basket over her arm, and slipped out the side door to search for mushrooms. Often as not on a Friday evening, she'd say to me, "I'll be going mushrooming before sunrise. If you want, be ready when I come along at six." A small wind-up alarm clock next to my bed helped me make certain I'd be up and dressed when she came. We enjoyed those rambles for not only did Aunt Olivia teach me where to find and how to identify edible mushrooms, she taught me to know, and to leave alone, poisonous ones.

While we gathered mushrooms, of course, we listened to the hush of dawning day, the stirring birds, and watched the fast-changing light as the sun's ray picked through the long shadows, turning dew drops to sparkling brilliants and sending aloft in rising layers ground-hugging morning mist. So quiet were those mornings that we spoke hardly at all, and then only in whispers.

Our favorite mushrooms were those that sprang up overnight in the meadows, their fresh pink-beige gills under tan tops our field marks for safety. In addition, we found bright orange pepper-flavored chanterelles in damp places under oaks and pines. Even the little sponge fungi, gray sometimes, sometimes pale yellow, that grew up through the carpet of needles under towering white pines helped fill our basket. Many varieties we left untouched — not because we knew they were poisonous, but because we didn't know for sure that they weren't. Aunt Olivia's first rule about gathering mushrooms was: Never, never, never, take a mushroom unless you are absolutely sure it is edible."

After an hour of prowling the woodland paths, picking our way through meadow grasses wet with dew, and wandering along the mossy bank of the creek that skirted the swamp at one end of a nearby fresh-water pond, our feet were soaked and chilled. We welcomed the warmth of the kitchen where we changed our footwear and bustled around, getting Uncle Henry's breakfast ready. Mushrooms could wait until morning chores were finished.

Breakfast began with fruit, not juice. If oranges or grapefruit were available, each of us had one orange or half-a-grapefruit. Lacking citrus fruit, there might be pears, stewed prunes, peaches, or a banana to slice over cereal and milk. Cereal,

from the double boiler which had stood on the back of the big coal range all night long, might be oatmeal, ralston, or cream of wheat. After his cereal, Uncle Henry expected crisp-fried bacon and a poached egg on toast. Sundays, he liked his egg scrambled. The rest of the family modelled appetites and preferences after his. When Uncle Henry had emptied his big cup of coffee laced with rich cream and a generous helping of sugar, and I had downed a tall glass of cold milk, breakfast was over.

Morning chores of dishes and bedmaking quickly behind us, Aunt Olivia and I sorted out our mushroom harvest, brushing clinging scraps of grass or pine needle from each smooth dry fruit, and cutting away any sandy stem with a sharp knife. We separated the mushrooms by variety, placing each kind in a small brown paper bag, twisting the top of the bag shut, and storing them on a shelf in the shed where they would keep ten days to two weeks until wanted.

Mushrooms, now as then, are a high-fiber protein, contain no cholesterol, are low in calories and a good source of phosphorus, calcium, iron, and vitamins B and D. We had no idea at the time that mushrooms offered such value; we like the piquant flavors they imparted to soups, stews, salads, omelettes, and sauces for macaroni. With steak, Uncle Henry enjoyed **Sauteed Mushrooms**.

4 T. butter **a dozen 3" mushroom caps**
4 T. olive oil **1/4 C. minced fresh parsley**
3 cloves minced garlic **salt and pepper to taste**

In a large skillet, melt butter, add oil, and meat to sizzling. Add garlic and stir with a wooden spoon until golden. Add mushrooms sliced 1/2 inch thick. Toss briefly for just a minute or so over medium heat. Adjust seasoning. Serve immediately with broiled steaks. Alternatively, serve on a thin slice of white bread, lightly toasted, for a satisfying lunch. Accompany mushrooms-on-toast with half a pear filled with cottage cheese, arranged on shredded lettuce, and topped with crumbled bleu cheese.

Aunt Olivia, because Uncle Henry preferred regular meals, seldom served brunch. Occasionally, however, when the family expected relatives from some distance to visit on a Sunday, Aunt Olivia stayed home from church and prepared

brunch so the out-of-towners (who had left home before dawn) wouldn't starve waiting for their next meal, and so they would have an appetite for a big Sunday dinner before starting home again in the early evening. Often, for brunch, Aunt Olivia fixed **Mushroom-Bacon Pilaf**. Makes enough for eight.

a dozen 3" mushrooms **1/4 t. garlic salt**
12 slices bacon, crisp fried **1/4 t. sage**
1/2 C. chopped onion **1/8 t. pepper**
1/2 C. sliced celery **1 C. long grained rice**
2 C. beef broth

Slice mushrooms 1/2" thick. In a large skillet, fry bacon until crisp. Drain and crumble bacon and set aside. Pour off all but a tablespoon of bacon fat. Add onion and celery to skillet and cook until tender. Add mushrooms and cook a minute or so longer. Add broth, garlic salt, sage, and pepper. Bring to a boil. Add rice and return to a boil. Reduce heat to low, cover pan, and simmer until liquid is absorbed and rice is tender. Check after 30 minutes; if liquid has boiled away, but rice is not done, add 1/4 C. water and continue cooking another 20 minutes. Sprinkle with bacon and fluff with fork just before serving.

When mushroom season was at its peak, Aunt Olivia and I often brought home more mushrooms than we could use promptly. Then we made **Marinated Mushrooms**, put it up in jars, and kept it refrigerated until ready to eat.

4 C. large mushrooms, sliced **8 cherry tomatoes, quartered**
1/4 C. sweet onions, sliced **1/2 C. lemon juice**
8 small cauliflowerets **1/2 C. vegetable oil**
equal amount broccoli **2 T. sugar**
1 small zucchini, sliced **1 t. oregano**
1 medium cucumber, sliced **2 t. salt and pinch of pepper**

Place vegetables in a shallow glass baking dish. Combine remaining ingredients in a small bowl and mix well. Pour over vegetables. Cover and refrigerate overnight, stirring occasionally. Garnish with parsley sprigs when serving.

Of all mushroom cookery, my own first choice among the many delicious treats Aunt Olivia created was, and still is, **Stuffed Mushrooms**. This recipe yields four servings.

8 mushrooms, 3" diameter **1 T. minced fresh basil**
1/2 C. olive oil **1 T. minced garlic**
1/3 C. dry bread crumbs **1 t. capers**
1/3 C. Parmesan cheese, grated **2 T. water**

Remove stems from mushroom caps. Gently wipe top of caps clean with a moistened sponge. Use two tablespoons of oil to grease a shallow baking dish. Place mushroom caps, hollow-side-up, in the dish. Chop mushroom stems coarsely and combine with remaining ingredients except oil and water. Spoon the mixture into mushroom caps. Drizzle remainder of oil over stuffed mushrooms. Spoon water into pan between mushrooms. Cover pan and bake at 400° about 12 minutes. Serve as a luncheon entree or as a vegetable with dinner.

Whether you gather your own mushrooms on cool fall mornings or choose snowy white ones from the bins at the vegetable stand, look for those with evenly-formed caps, short stems, and with the veil unbroken between the stem and the edge of the cap. Those mushrooms will slice attractively, are at their best in flavor, and, because they are fresh and young, are tender and juicy.

Bon appetit.