Chef Jack Czarnecki, chef-owner of Joel Palmer House in Dayton, Oregon, takes mushrooms seriously. His restaurant offers mushroom-based cuisine and he has written two books on mushrooms (both with Artisan Press). With over 2,500 varieties to choose from, Czarnecki recommends staying with major varieties, such as traditional white button mushrooms, shiitakes (intensely flavored), oyster mushrooms (mildly flavored), enokis (which resemble match sticks), chanterelles, porcinis (a mild, nutty-flavored, wild variety), and morels. Chef Czarnecki’s menu includes fungus fantasies such as endive salad with mushrooms, pickled ginger, and edible flowers, as well as fiddlehead fern salad with enoki mushrooms and a dressing of puréed beets and chilies.

Mushrooms are available fresh, canned, or dried. Select the kind best suited to your budget, your menu, and your kitchen staff’s skills. Fresh mushrooms have a firm texture. They are delicate, highly perishable, and must be handled with care; they are sensitive to hot temperatures and rough shipping. Many varieties of fresh mushrooms are seasonal, so have a back-up variety. Canned mushrooms are limited in variety, generally to the button mushroom type (visit Asian markets to find canned straw, enoki, and oyster mushrooms). Canned mushrooms are convenient and require little handling. Dried mushrooms are available year-round and store easily. These mushrooms must be reconstituted prior to use or your customers will be chewing on wood-like ingredients. Dried mushrooms can be soaked in water or vegetable stock or broth until they are the desired texture. Save the soaking liquid, as it is quite flavorful, and use it as a base for soups and sauces or as cooking liquid for beans and grains. Once reconstituted, dried mushrooms are perishable and must be stored in the refrigerator or foodborne illness might result. Purchase mushrooms from reputable purveyors and never serve mushrooms you’ve picked yourself (unless you are very well trained in mycology, the study of mushrooms). The right variety of mushrooms can be wonderful. The wrong variety can be deadly.

**KNOW YOUR MUSHROOMS**

Go beyond button and portobello and play with the following types (available fresh or dried).

**Domesticated (cultivated mushrooms):**

- **Enoki**: looks like white matchsticks; good raw.
- **Crimini**: looks like brown button mushrooms. Flavorful – use for soups, pasta, pizza topping, etc.
- **Oyster**: very delicate; keeps only a few days in the fridge. Pleasant texture, mild flavor.
- **Portobello**: the “big daddy” of mushrooms. Firm texture; will hold in the fridge for a week.
  - Stands up to grilling and baking.
- **Shiitake**: black or golden in color; looks like a miniature umbrella. Smoky flavor, great in sauces, soups, and stews.

**Wild:**

- **Porcini**: has a large cap (looks like a fairy tale mushroom). Very chewy and nutty in flavor.
- **Chanterelle**: reddish-orange color, almost fruity flavor. Good for stews and sautéing.
- **Lobster**: lobster-colored with a crunchy texture. Terrific baked in a casserole.
- **Morel**: very chewy and very flavorful. Lends a peppery flavor to foods.
- **Wood ears**: used for medicinal purposes in Asian medicine. Wood ears are dark brown and gray (and ear-shaped!). Use in stir-fries and soups.
- **Truffles**: at $500 to $2,500 per kilo, probably not going to be using too many of these. For a slightly smaller hit on your wallet, try truffle oil or truffle pieces.
Mushrooms generally have a mild flavor and lend themselves well to seasoning. (See below for seasoning ideas.) Large mushrooms, such as portobellos, large button, lobster, and porcini, stand up to baking, roasting, or grilling. Offer a mushroom “steak” or a mixed mushroom grill as an entrée; serve on a bed of herbed rice, paired with black beans and garlic and fresh corn. Also, serve as a sandwich, layered with shredded salad greens, sliced onions, and tomatoes on a crusty sourdough roll or baguette. Large grilled mushrooms can be an entrée on their own, thrown on the grill or broiler.

Smaller mushrooms can be chopped and used for texture and flavoring. A duxelle is a combination of mushrooms and shallots (or onions) chopped so fine as to resemble a paste. This earthy, flavorful paste can be used to flavor stuffing, pilaf, soup, and cooked grains, or can be served as an elegant spread for a hot or cold appetizer. Spread duxelle on Melba toast or matzo, top with chopped olives, capers, and chopped pimentos for a colorful appetizer. Or stir some duxelle into a vegan canned mushroom soup (use blended tofu instead of water or milk) to create a thick, flavorful creamy soup (which can also be used as a mushroom sauce). Stuff tomatoes, bell peppers, eggplant, or even larger mushrooms with plain duxelle or one mixed with cooked rice, barley, or stuffing. Bake and serve with a mushroom sauce.

Mushroom gravy can be made by purchasing mushroom broth or using the liquid from soaking dried mushrooms. Sauté sliced mushrooms and onions and add to heated broth. Thicken with cornstarch and allow to cook until the flavors are melded. In addition, you can purée soaked dried mushrooms with sautéed onions and tofu for a creamy mushroom gravy.

I have sliced fresh or canned mushrooms available for “tossing.” Mix mushrooms with tofu and scramble for a morning menu item, and consider adding mushrooms to stir-fries, pizza, and pasta. Toss mushrooms into vegetable, bean, and curried soups for extra flavor and texture. Add cooked or raw mushrooms to potato, green, and pasta salads; use sliced mushrooms as a garnish for entrees, casseroles, and soups. Offer raw or cooked mushrooms on your potato and pasta bars. Most important, think mushrooms for your menus, and make fungus your friend.

**FLAVOR YOUR FUNGUS**

Here are some marinating ideas for mushrooms. In a small amount of oil, add some of the following herbs. Allow to marinate for at least 2 hours, and then grill, sauté, barbecue, or bake your mushrooms.

- Turkish: caraway, dried mint, cumin, oregano, and red pepper flakes
- Indian: cardamom, garam masala (a spice blend available in Indian markets), cloves, cinnamon, fennel, and turmeric
- Greek: cracked black pepper, oregano, cinnamon, and mint
- Brazilian: bay leaf, black pepper, cloves, coriander, and nutmeg
- Caribbean: jerk spice mixtures or allspice, nutmeg, ginger, cloves, and chilies
- Chinese: Chinese five-spice blend, star anise, dried orange peel, chili, and ginger
- Mexican: fresh cilantro, chilies, cumin, and cinnamon
- Moroccan: cinnamon, cumin, ginger, turmeric, saffron, and paprika
- Thai: ginger, lemon grass, fresh mint, Thai basil, and chilies