

**Fabulous Fungi**

*Mushrooms work like magic when it comes to warding off disease.*

Grow up in a household where Mom used mushrooms only one way, if at all—chopping up the white, button variety and tossing the bits into a casserole? It's time to branch out if you haven't already. These old reliables have a slew of stand-out health benefits, but the more exotic mushrooms now readily available boast an even greater array of cancer-fighting and immune-boosting compounds. "Most varieties of mushrooms contain complex carbohydrates known as polysaccharides, which increase the immune system's vigilance against potential infecting agents—whether it's cancer or the common cold," says Georgianna Donadio, MSc, PhD, program director for the National Institute of Whole Health. So next time you head to the grocery store, venture into new culinary—and health-supporting—territory with these mushroom varieties, and work them into your diet with these easy recipes from Hinnerk von Barga, associate professor at the Culinary Institute of America.

**Button**

While not considered the most exquisite of the bunch, button mushrooms—or white mushrooms in layman's terms—have a host of cancer-thwarting antioxidants. Studies show that button mushrooms increase vitamin D in the body, which makes them a bone-strengthening and especially valuable to those living in northern climates where sunlight (the body's main source of vitamin D) takes a winter vacation.

*In the Kitchen:* Button mushrooms keep the pastry dry while meat pies cook. Chop up a pound, and sauté in olive oil in a skillet over medium heat until all moisture is gone, stirring often to keep them from burning. Place mushrooms in the bottom of the pastry pie shell, top with other desired ingredients, and bake.

**Shiitake**

These mushrooms have been a nourishing culinary staple for many millennia in Asia and for good reason: Shiitakes contain an abundance of lentinan, a polysaccharide that stimulates the immune system. Research shows that lentinan helps fight infection and prevent tumor growth. Eritadenine, another component found in shiitakes, can lower blood cholesterol and triglyceride levels, two critical factors in cardiovascular disease.

*In the Kitchen:* Make a batch of nutritious salad croutons by cutting shiitake tops into 1/4-inch cubes and placing in a generous amount of heated canola oil. Fry until crisp (about 1 minute)—and don't fret about the oil, since shiitakes don't absorb all that much of it. Reserve the stems for use in vegetable stock.

**Portobello**

A favorite in Italian cuisine, portobellos are loaded with selenium, an often overlooked mineral that helps regulate thyroid function and prevents cellular damage in the body. In addition to selenium, portobellos contain L-ergothioneine, an antioxidant shown to halt atherosclerosis (the hardening of the artery walls) by reducing the buildup of artery plaque.

*In the Kitchen:* Portobello's meaty texture takes well to marinades and glazes. Combine 1/3 cup each soy sauce and rice wine with 1/8 cup sugar and one minced garlic clove in a pot, and bring to a boil. Add 1/4 cup grated apple, and boil until thickened and reduced. Brush over portobello caps, and broil for 5 minutes or until mushrooms are limp.

**Maitake**

In Japanese, maitake (pronounced my-TAH-key) means "dancing mushroom" because people supposedly danced for joy when they found these medicinal mushrooms in the wild. And there's still good reason for excitement: A number of studies report that polysaccharide unique to maitake mushrooms—called maitake D-fraction—stimulates the immune cells that ward off cancerous cells. Some data also indicates that the beta-glucan found in maitakes improves insulin sensitivity and lowers blood pressure.

*In the Kitchen:* Slice into fine strips, and stir-fry over medium-to-high heat with 2 teaspoons minced ginger, 2 tablespoons rice wine, and a half teaspoon of sesame oil for 2 to 3 minutes. Serve on slices of crispy bread for a new take on bruschetta.

**Reishi**

Once reserved for emperors and royalty, reishis earned the nickname "the medicine of kings" because they're chock-full of medicinal compounds, including the beta-glucan present in maitake mushrooms. But reishis also contain loads of triterpenes, a group of compounds that reduce inflammation, blood lipids, and blood pressure—all of which benefit cardiovascular health—as well as germanium, a rare mineral that scientists think stimulates healthy blood circulation and increases the body's capacity to absorb oxygen.

*In the Kitchen:* Make a reishi mushroom tea to reduce reishi's bitter taste. Add 1 to 2 tablespoons chopped reishi to a pot with 1 cup water and several thin slices of ginger. Bring to a boil, and simmer for 5 minutes. Strain, and add honey to taste if the brew is still too bitter for you.

**Mushroom Musts**

Follow these simple rules to get the most out of your mushroom experience.

Be picky. Firm, plump, and clean are good signs—withered and slimy with an ammonia-like aroma are not.

**Keep 'em fresh.** Store in a loosely closed paper bag or wrapped in a damp cloth in the fridge. Keeping mushrooms in an airtight container or plastic bag will cause moisture to accumulate and accelerate spoilage.

**Yes, wash 'em.** Contrary to popular belief, mushrooms can and should be washed—especially the wild versions, which are typically dirty. Gently toss mushrooms in a bowl of water just before cooking to remove grit, and pat with a paper towel or dry in a salad spinner.

**Don't go wild.** Many poisonous mushrooms look a lot like their edible brethren, so go hunting for wild mushrooms with an expert.

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