

SEARCH PARTY

If you go down to the woods today ... you may bump into TASTE reader and modern-day forager **MIKE ROSSI**, who, together with fellow fungi fanatics, combs the forest floor for its elusive fruits

PHOTOGRAPHS **KATE HIGGS** TEXT **MIKE ROSSI**



From left: Forager Michael Wright, Dennis Higgs and author Mike Rossi with the fruits of their labour.

Diligently, every May, just after the first winter rains, we enter the dark pine forests that are peppered around the southwestern Cape. Four of us – Dennis Higgs, his daughter Kate, myself, and Michael Wright, a novice in his early sixties yearning for another sniff of childhood – venture forth in search of edible fungi.

On this particular morning, Michael is our designated driver. The journey along Baden Powell Drive reveals a beautiful Cape day with fishermen trek-netting on the white beaches and dogs barking at ravenous seagulls that circle, squawking, above. Winding down the window, I take a deep draw of salty air laced with pungent kelp and briefly contemplate a seaside amble. But the anticipated mildewy bouquet of the waiting mushrooms proves far too alluring to ignore.

I should point out that mushroom hunter-gatherers are a particularly cagey lot when it comes to revealing the locations of their treasured loot – you'll be hard-pressed to find an intrepid forager prepared to reveal the co-ordinates of his source. Why? Because he wants it all to himself, of course. Rather like a devotee of the Scarlet Pimpernel, you will be sent – as I was when a novice – in ever-expanding circles that will only serve to thoroughly confound you. And, to complicate it further, they will then insist that you've "got the month wrong ... mushrooms only emerge in late winter".

An hour later, having traversed many a bumpy dirt road, we arrive at our secret destination. Although we are dressed appropriately for the cold and damp, in no time we are clammy from the exertion of our mission and the forest humidity. To counter this, we imbibe some ready fortification (Michael has brought a selection of grappa, gin and Drambuie with which to lace our freshly brewed coffee) and, armed with our trusty Sasol field guides, wicker baskets, sharpened penknives, walking sticks and rubber gloves, we push on, each in our own direction. Yes, we are friends, but even so, we don't want the others encroaching on our stash.

The hours that follow are ones of supreme quiet with only the odd chirruping of a forest bird breaking the silence. As it turns out, I stumble on a veritable Aladdin's Cave of pine boletes. Just as tasty as their sticky sisters, slippery jacks, these beauties come with the added plus of not being as painful to clean, and I happily work at gathering the prolific feast. My concentration is broken, however, when I hear rustling

nearby. Anxious about having to reveal my secret horde, I peer over the thicket to see two men engrossed in earnest discussion. Concerned, I enquire, "Are you searching for wild mushrooms?"

"No, no, no," they answer.
I try to gauge the truthfulness of their answer: "Are you tree spotters or bird spotters?"
"Oh no," they answer, "we're bush spotters."

Humph, bush spotters indeed! Sensing my consternation, they soon move on, leaving me to plunder the booty that lies hidden on the forest floor. Two hours later, and with a fully laden basket, I head back to our agreed meeting point. At this stage I suppose I should point out that, yes, greed is an unbecoming quality and, sadly, we foragers have it in spades. While trudging along, I hear my mother's voice: "Michael, your eyes are too big for your stomach."
Inside my basket, pine and sticky boletes jostle with juicy pine rings and I take a moment to seat myself on a stump and enjoy the glorious fragrances: the earthy, garlic and dark chocolate scent of sticky boletes; the fir-tree notes of the pine boletes; and the nutty perfume, with hints of crushed fern frond, of the pine rings.

On my final furlong along the forest path I come to a sudden halt. Strewn all around a mossy glade are countless inedible mushrooms, including the purple-stemmed russulas and the lethal death cap, which accounts for 90 percent of the world's mushroom fatalities – just 30 grams is enough to take out an adult.

FORAGING FUNDAMENTALS

When it comes to successful mushroom hunting, Mike recommends the following:

- 1 Fortification.** A shot of grappa in your flask of freshly brewed coffee is a must.
- 2 Knowledge.** A field guide to mushrooms, such as Sasol's or Van der Westhuizen's, or, even better, an expert companion. There are countless deadly impersonators and if you haven't the wisdom, you'll end up at the nearest ER, or, worse, the morgue.
- 3 A walking stick** to part the bracken where boletes are known to hide. It will also come in useful if attacked by a Cape cobra or puff adder, or if your mushroom partner attempts to steal your stash.
- 4 A penknife,** preferably something razor-sharp, like a Leatherman.
- 5 Compassion.** Make sure you always cut the base of the mushroom's legs, giving the fungus a chance to have another life.

On my return to our vehicle I'm greeted by an excited Dennis, who waxes lyrical about his handsome stash of fungi: "I've never seen so many fresh pine boletes!"

I agree, and, comparing his horde to mine, add: "I had more luck than you."
"No, you didn't," he retorts indignantly.
"Mine weighs more than yours."
"Never!" I insist.

And, like children, we lift each other's baskets, sizing up the weight of each. Our bickering, however, is brought to an abrupt halt when Michael arrives. The poor man's basket is empty, save for a few inedible russulas. "What were you doing in the forest, Michael?" I ask, puzzled.

"I'd collected a whole stash of mushrooms when I was accosted by a stranger who, upon peering into my basket, enquired if I was trying to kill myself," explains Michael. "When I replied that, no, this hadn't been my intention, he pointed out that my basket was full of poisonous mushrooms and then he promptly tipped the whole lot onto the forest floor, adding that I shouldn't put any edible mushrooms into the basket now for fear of tainting them."

We all feel sad for Michael – he has, after all, been our chauffeur, not to mention the bearer of our much-needed fortification. So, with another swig, we head back into the forest, this time to fill Michael's basket. **W**

MIKE'S MUSHROOMS ON TOAST

Serves 4 ■ EASY ■ GREAT VALUE

Preparation: 5 minutes

Cooking: 5 minutes

- butter 3 T
- small brown mushrooms 200 g
- portobellini mushrooms 200 g, halved
- garlic 2 cloves, finely chopped
- fresh sage or thyme
- cream ¾ cup
- brandy 2 T
- sea salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- ciabatta slices, toasted, for serving

1 Melt 2 T butter in a large frying pan and, when hot, fry half the mushrooms until golden. Remove from the pan and keep warm.

2 Add the remaining butter to the pan and fry the remaining mushrooms. When golden, return the first batch of fried mushrooms to the pan, along with the remaining ingredients (except the ciabatta), and simmer for 3 minutes.

3 Pile onto slices of hot ciabatta toast.

MEAT-FREE

WINE: Creation Pinot Noir 2010



Scan this QR code to find out more about mushrooms and how to use them



MIKE'S MUSHROOMS ON TOAST

Clockwise from top left: The poisonous fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*), so named for its former use as a fly repellent; much-needed fortification for the hard-working foragers; pine boletes: delicious sautéed in butter and served with steak or chicken; a different form of fly agaric – take care not to pick these; Mike and Dennis's stashes – can you spot the difference?; a handful of coveted pine rings (*Lactarius deliciosus*).

