



# THE MAGIC OF MUSHROOMS

TEXT BY VANESSA FARNSWORTH

MUSHROOMS HAVE LONG HAD A PLACE IN CANADIAN CUISINE AND IN RECENT YEARS THESE FABULOUS FUNGI HAVE BEEN ENJOYING AN EXPLOSION OF INTEREST UNLIKE ANYTHING THAT'S BEEN SEEN BEFORE

THERE'S NO MYSTERY AS TO WHY

"People are becoming more educated in the culinary uses and health benefits of mushroom varieties that just a few years ago many people had never heard of," says Monte Paynter, co-owner of Kootenai Fungi, a Kimberley-based producer of local and exotic mushrooms, mushroom spawn and grow kits.

Paynter's own interest in mushrooms began when he and his partner, Lija Lasmanis, ordered a mushroom kit and were so thrilled with the results that when the time came to order a new kit, they decided to go into the mushroom business instead. They now sell mushrooms at the Kimberley Farmers' Market and to local restaurants all the while encouraging others to catch the mushroom bug.

"They're fairly easy to grow if you start with a kit," Paynter says. "And it's kind of fun to watch them grow. Also, some of the less common varieties, such as lion's mane, are not always available in stores so the only way you're likely to get them is to grow them yourself."

One of the reasons for the rising popularity of mushrooms is an increasing understanding of how they benefit human health. This is something that herbalist Rachel Beck, co-owner of Tilia Botanicals

in Creston, knows all about. She points out that much of the world perceives mushrooms very differently than how they have traditionally been perceived here in Canada.

"If you look not just at China but at all of Asia and even in Eastern Europe, they make a practice of going out mushroom picking. It's a very big part of their lives," Beck says. "They use them not only as a food, but as a way of staying healthy."

Indeed, mushrooms have been shown to strengthen the immune system, build energy, increase stamina, improve cardiovascular function, relieve stress, prevent cancer, slow tumor growth, decrease anxiety, improve memory and more.

And it's not just the so-called medicinal varieties such as chaga or cordyceps that offer these benefits.

"Enoki, shiitake and oyster mushrooms all have medicinal value. Even the button mushrooms that are widely available in grocery stores can have a medicinal effect," she says, adding that before considering using mushrooms for your health, you should first make sure the ones you're buying are organically grown.

Or, better yet, pick them yourself.

The Kootenays are home to literally dozens of varieties of edible mushrooms and Christoff Schulz is one of many local residents who has made a practice of harvesting wild mushrooms, having learned the skill the old-fashioned way.

"I met a local old-timer and he put me on to them. He didn't even know the true names for many of the mushrooms, only the local names he grew up with. He said, 'seriously, make yourself a broth of these and drink it every day and you'll see a difference.' He was right."

Schulz has since gone on to learn how to distinguish between the many different varieties of hard and soft mushrooms that can be found in the Kootenay region. When asked about the possibility of novices poisoning themselves by accidentally harvesting toxic species, he offers some sage advice.

"Find someone who knows what they're doing. Go for a walk with an herbalist or a mushroom expert and have them point out the good from the bad. It can help so much because you can see examples of what you should be picking and what you shouldn't." ■