

Head for California's Mendocino Coast to celebrate the bounty of wild mushrooms nurtured by forest and fog.

where the wild things grow

as he ambles among towering redwoods and spruce, Eric Schramm ignores the lofty tree-tops. He's busy scanning the ground with the intensity of a veteran scout stalking big game. In fact, his quarry is much smaller, but no less prized: the wild mushrooms that flourish in the moist woodlands of the Mendocino Coast. "We have more than 3,000 kinds here," Eric says. His company, Mendocino Mushrooms, harvests up to 60,000 pounds annually. "This place is heaven if you're a mushroom," he says.

Or if you're a mushroom lover—especially during the mushroom season that, as locals like to say, "puts the fun in fungi." In this rain-kissed spot three hours north of San Francisco, 'shrooms crop up during much of the year but are most abundant from November through January. It's a fine time to savor imaginative cuisine, sea-scented air, and the primeval appeal of misty groves and rocky coves.

Most visitors arrive with sketchy knowledge of the fungus among us. Everyone knows "magic mushrooms" are the mind-altering ones. But in a way, all mushrooms are magical, their diverse forms produced by unseen fungi only when moisture, temperature, and other conditions are just right. Fanciful names such as hedgehog, angel wings, and lion's mane attest to their evocative shapes and textures. They range in size from minuscule to hefty.

Over the ages, mushrooms have served as food, medicine, and spiritual aid. They seem to be all three at a special dinner created by Alan Kantor, the talented chef at MacCallum House Inn & Restaurant. Meaty slices of

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mushrooms and dollops of smoked salmon caviar add depth to seared scallops. A mushroom-and-ham stuffing complements roasted quail. More courses follow, punctuated by a wild-huckleberry granita and commentary by Alan, winemaker Greg Graziano, and Eric. (The latter wears his favorite denim shirt, which his mother embroidered with mushrooms.) “Wild mushrooms are part of the circle of life,” Eric declares. “By breaking down organic matter, they release nutrients to trees and other species. Besides that, they’re delicious!” The banquet ends with a remarkable Napoleon flavored with candy caps, mushrooms that possess a surprising maple-syrup flavor.

Living in mushroom paradise, area chefs have a flair for fungus. At the Little River Inn, executive chef Marc Dym matches robust Belgian beers with such dishes as potato-and-chanterelle gâteau, lobster-mushroom pot pie, and veal-porcini meatballs with white beans and Swiss chard. The opposite of such hearty fare comes together at Living Light Culinary Arts Institute in Fort Bragg. In what could be called a non-cooking demonstration, chef Cherie Soria makes raw, vegan mushroom stroganoff—a room-temperature dish that’s—no kidding—very flavorful.

Visitors can explore more of the forest-to-table experience at the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens. Staff expert Mario Abreu illuminates mushrooms and more as he guides visitors across 47 acres of formal gardens, woodlands, fern-filled canyons, and oceanfront bluffs. Those who go out with Eric witness a kind of ESP—Extra ‘Shroom Perception—as he probes the apparently barren forest floor and plucks clusters of ruffled chanterelles. After 35 years of foraging, he has a detailed mental map of the county’s most fertile patches and knows which bewitching varieties grow where.

Mendocino’s mushrooms may not be magical, but they are tasty, nutritious, sometimes elusive, endlessly recurring—and a rewarding reason to visit this rich slice of the California coast. 🍄

SPORES ON THE SHORE

The Mendocino Bounty Festival runs January 24 through February 10, 2008. Call 866/466-3636 or visit gomendo.com for more info. Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens; 707/964-4352 or gardenbythesea.org. MacCallum House Inn & Restaurant; 800/609-0492 or maccallumhouse.com. Little River Inn; 888/466-5683 or littleriverinn.com.

Editor’s Note: Some varieties of mushrooms are highly toxic. Always consult a specialist before cooking or consuming any mushroom picked in the wild.