

What kind of

mush

rooms

are these?

By Karen Olson House

How to grow, buy, cook, enjoy  
and pronounce shiitake mushrooms

Eating a truly fresh shiitake is deliciously different than chewing transport-weary produce encased in plastic for a week or more. Buying local is the key to experiencing full flavor.

Indeed, John munches them raw during harvest. “We harvest the whole stem, and then trim off the end. We don’t cut the whole stem because people use them to flavor soups and stocks.” The Garners use shiitakes in egg scrambles or sautéed in butter with fresh squash, garlic and onion.

Market customers pay \$2.50 a quarter pound. The Garners also sell “value-added” products including inoculated logs and t-shirts with their logo, “Shiitake Happens.”

They sell the logs at their farm, too, located in the community of Tyro, Davidson County. Visits help folks understand how to grow their own logs, which some like to give as gifts. Logs are priced according to size, and range from \$20 to \$40.

Depending on the season, Sandy Creek Farm also sells scuppernong and muscadine grapes, blackberries, pecans, black walnuts, garlic, heirloom pears and figs, fresh-cut and dried flowers, jams and jellies.

The Garners sell shiitake mushrooms to local restaurants, including Liberty Steakhouse in High Point, Yarborough’s Restaurant in Lexington and The Buttercup Cafe in Denton. Brenda is working to develop a veggie dip made from a frozen mushroom duxelles (onions, shiitakes, garlic and heavy cream). The Garners hope eventually to sell online.

Diane Price and husband Rob Griffith, members of the Blue Ridge Electric cooperative, throw shiitake inoculation parties at their farm in Todd, located between Boone and West Jefferson. Price has been selling shiitakes for several years from The Farm at Mollies Branch.

“My daughter and her friends help at the parties,” Diane Price says. “When it comes time to inoculate, we’ll tell people who have expressed an interest in it that we’re doing it if they’d like to come. Someone will be drilling logs, someone will be putting in the mushroom spawn, someone else puts cheese wax over the holes, someone else will be marking logs with the kind of mushroom spawn and date of inoculate.”

The logs are stacked together later. Logs fruit more generously when they are with another log or in a group.

Diane notes that the price of mushrooms is climbing with consumer interest. “When we started, they were about \$8 a pound. Now at farmers markets, they’re going for \$16 a pound.”

Although she no longer sells at market, she sells shiitakes to local restaurants. Their clients include the Bistro, GameKeeper, Wildflower and Melanie’s, all located in Boone.

**A**fter a soaking rain, as if by magic, they’re suddenly everywhere, sprouting atop stumps, sidling up trees, popping up on pastures.

But now in North Carolina we’re seeing mushrooms cultivated on small farms, where they peek out from manmade holes in inoculated hardwood logs. More often than not, they are shiitakes, or *Lentinula edodes*, an exotic cousin of the white button mushroom.

When fully fruited, the shiitake (pronounced “sha-TALK-ee”) goes to market. Later, they re-emerge on dinner plates, starring in tasty kabobs, hearty sauces, flavorful soups, chunky ratatouilles, silky pastas and other appetizing fare.

Tan to dark brown, with broad umbrella caps ranging in size from 2 to 4 inches, the shiitake has an earthy aroma, woody taste and meaty texture. A symbol of longevity in Asia because of its health-promoting properties (see sidebar), it’s a multi-tasker in any kitchen. Shiitakes can be sautéed, broiled, baked, grilled, stir-fried or stuffed. They don’t have to be cooked—folks slice it thin and mix it in salads and use it as a meat substitute for its protein.

Farmers markets in North Carolina are selling shiitakes now. Traditionally, shiitake season is April through November, although warm weather can prompt a flush in other months.

Brenda and John Garner, who own Sandy Creek Farm and are members of the EnergyUnited electric cooperative, started growing shiitakes on their family-parceled land in 2006. They pick them Friday or early Saturday morning and then sell them at The Depot, a farmers market in Lexington. “We lay them out in a basket so people can feel them as they pick them out,” Brenda says. This year, they’ve harvesting shiitakes off nearly 700 inoculated logs.

Shiitakes worth their salt should feel cool to the touch, she explains. “The cap should be fairly smooth—that indicates good moisture content. If they’re crinkled, they’ve lost moisture and have been around awhile.”

## Mushrooms in North Carolina

A rising interest among North Carolina farmers in exotic mushrooms is attributable in part to funded research aimed at developing the mushroom industry.

Headed by Omoanghe S. Isikhuemhen at N.C. A & T State University, "Edible and Medicinal Mushroom Farming in North Carolina: A Cash Crop for the Future" and subsequent projects have been assisting farmers in getting their own mushrooms started. Isikhuemhen's outreach workshops across North Carolina have been practical and hands-on, with attendees bringing their own logs in to be inoculated.

"The number of growers has increased dramatically since A & T began their mushroom project," notes Don Lunsford, spokesman of the North Carolina Mushroom Growers Association based in Brown Summit.

Chartered in 2006, the association's membership comprises more than 70 family farms growing shiitake and other edible mushrooms to supplement income. The association's mission includes promoting culinary and health benefits and providing educational and networking opportunities.

Enthusiasts note that once logs are inoculated, they can harvest in two to five years, and mushrooms face few pests. To find out more:

[www.ag.ncat.edu/OmonMushroom/index.htm](http://www.ag.ncat.edu/OmonMushroom/index.htm)  
[www.ag.ncat.edu/omon/index.html](http://www.ag.ncat.edu/omon/index.html)  
[www.ncmushrooms.org](http://www.ncmushrooms.org)

## Edible or poisonous?

Never eat a wild mushroom unless you or someone knowledgeable recognizes it as safe. Although the majority of mushrooms are non-poisonous, North Carolina hosts several species that potentially could cause death if only a single mushroom is eaten. Small children, older people and people with existing medical problems are most vulnerable to toxins from poisonous mushrooms.

To begin learning how to safely identify edible mushrooms, use a reputable guide with full-color photographs such as "The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mushrooms" by Gary H. Lincoff.

## Where to buy fresh mushrooms

These Web sites list farms and markets near you that sell mushrooms and other organic, sustainable food.

[www.buyappalachian.org/index.php](http://www.buyappalachian.org/index.php)  
[www.localharvest.org](http://www.localharvest.org)  
[www.ncagr.com/ncproducts/index.htm](http://www.ncagr.com/ncproducts/index.htm)


When purchasing shiitakes, the gills should be a whitish color. If the gills are brown, they are not fresh.

Fresh shiitakes can keep up to two weeks (some folks say three) in the refrigerator. Store in paper bags (plastic hastens decay).

## Mushroom nutrition

Brown mushrooms such as shiitakes have antioxidant capacities that compare to green beans, red peppers and broccoli. White mushrooms compare favorably to tomatoes, carrots and zucchini.

White button mushrooms are one of the few natural food sources of vitamin D, which promotes the absorption of calcium, essential for healthy teeth and bones. Portabella and crimini mushrooms are good sources of phosphorus, a mineral that generates energy and is essential for strong bones and teeth.

Recent studies have traced shiitakes' legendary benefits to an active compound called lentinan that helps power up the immune system. Animal and human studies have shown that another active component in shiitake mushrooms called eritadenine lowers cholesterol levels. 



Brenda Garner with her shiitakes.



## Mushroom bruschetta

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
  - 1 tablespoon butter
  - 1 tablespoon minced garlic
  - 3 tablespoons minced onion
  - 2 to 2½ cups of chopped shiitake mushrooms
  - 1 teaspoon dried thyme
  - 1 teaspoon dried basil
  - 1 teaspoon salt
  - 1 teaspoon pepper
- Red wine or Balsamic vinegar  
Sliced bread (Italian, French, or baguette)

## Ingredients below to taste

- Olive oil
- Garlic salt
- Shredded Mozzarella cheese

In skillet heat olive oil and butter, add onion and garlic until soft. Add mushrooms, thyme, basil, salt and pepper. Add ¼ of vinegar. Cook until soft.

Place sliced bread on baking sheet. Drizzle with olive oil and sprinkle with garlic salt. Top with mozzarella cheese. Toast until cheese melts. Top with mushroom mixture.

*Recipe by Cheryl Walser, Yarborough's Restaurant*

## Chicken and Shiitake Alfredo

- 1 package (3½ ounces) shiitake mushrooms
- 2 tablespoons butter or margarine
- ¾ cup chopped sweet red bell pepper
- 8 ounces boned and skinned chicken breasts (cutlets), thinly sliced
- 1 cup heavy (whipping) cream
- 1 cup frozen green peas
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon ground black pepper
- ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 4 ounces capellini (angel hair) pasta, freshly cooked and drained

Remove stems from shiitake mushrooms (you can use stems to flavor broths and stews). Cut each cap in half, then into 4 to 6 slices; set aside. In a large skillet, melt butter.

Add red pepper and cook until slightly softened, about 3 minutes. Add chicken and reserved mushrooms and cook until chicken is tender, about 3 minutes. Add cream, peas, salt and black pepper; boil, uncovered, until sauce is slightly thickened, about 4 minutes, stirring often. Stir in Parmesan cheese. Spoon over pasta; serve immediately.

*Yield: 2 to 3 portions, about 5 cups*