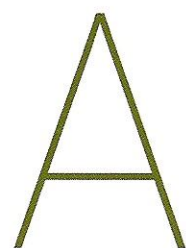


# PORCINI

"The porcini d'estate are the early risers of porcini. They are prized for their delicate flavor and seen as harbingers of the hot season."



cross Italy, porcini are considered the king of mushrooms and are nearly an addiction, sought out for their large size, soft, meaty texture and lingering woodsy taste. While Italian tables welcome all varieties, the porcini d'estate are the early risers of porcini. They are prized for their delicate flavor and seen as harbingers of the hot season.

As spring transforms into summer, the first porcini begin to pop up in the forest mulch of Italy's pine groves. People of all ages return to their secret spots and search the forest floors where the porcini d'estate make their debut. In the following months, from late August through fall, when other varieties of the mushroom crop up from the Middle East to New Zealand, foragers around the world hunt the prized funghi.

An assortment of porcini can be found in Italy, depending on the season and region. They grow at the base of trees in pine, spruce, hemlock, fir, oak and chestnut forests. The plump porcini got their name, which translates to piglets, because they resemble baby pigs rooting in the fresh mulch. They are most prevalent on the slopes of the Apennine Mountains, like the Borgotaro area around Parma, but they also grow wild in regions of Tuscany, Lazio and Calabria. The porcini del freddo grow in colder regions, while the porcini nero, named for their black cap, grow in beech and fir tree stands.

Porcini are the centerpiece of summer culinary festivals, where they're prepared in vibrant dishes by professional chefs and home cooks. In the Tuscan countryside, the small town of Ronta hosts a Sagra del Fungo Porcino every August, while in northern Lazio, the town of Vetralla dedicates the first two weekends of September to its own porcini festival.

Before the celebrations begin, though, the mushrooms have to be harvested, which requires a tesserino, or license. Established by the Italian government to regulate the mushroom harvest, the license is easy to obtain but prevents over-harvesting, and educates foragers about the dangers of poisonous mushrooms.

Many foragers sell their finds at markets and roadside stands, though amateur foragers often fill the coffers at home. Porcini are so loved that Italians preserve them through drying or flash-freezing to ensure they have an ample winter supply. Though dried porcini can lose some of their flavor, they can be rehydrated and used with their broth, much like fresh porcini. Flash-frozen porcini are also a good substitute for the fresh variety, and in some ways preferable to the dried mushroom, since the freezing process retains much of their nutrients, smell and flavor. — *by Bree Shirvell*