

Crab-stuffed morel mushrooms

By Tom Dickson

Preparation Time: 15 min. | Cooking Time: 20 min. | Serves: 8–10 (as appetizers) or 4 (as dinner)



This recipe is based on one created by David Eger of Earthy Delights, a food purveyor in Michigan.

I like that it uses halved rather than whole morels, allowing you to serve more delicious crab stuffing in each mushroom.

INGREDIENTS

20 medium or large morel halves

½ c. crab meat*

1½ c. bread crumbs

2 small or 1 large celery ribs, finely chopped

1 small onion, finely diced

4 T. grated Parmesan cheese

1 T. fresh thyme leaves or 1 t. dried thyme leaves

Zest of 1 lemon

1 egg beaten with 1 t. water

Hot sauce (Louisiana or Srirachi), 4 dashes or to taste

Salt and pepper

1-2 T. fortified wine (optional)

1 T. butter, melted

*Finding fresh crab meat—sweet, tender, with a touch of salinity—in land-locked Montana is not easy. The best substitute is refrigerated lump or jumbo lump meat. Most canned crab meat is mushy or fibrous. The best refrigerated meat, according to the testers at *Cooks Illustrated*, is Phillips Premium Jumbo Crab. If you can find only canned, go with Miller's Select, say the *CI* testers.

DIRECTIONS: Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

In a large bowl, combine the crab meat, bread crumbs, chopped celery, diced onion, Parmesan cheese, and thyme. Using a microplane grater or zester, finely grate the peel of one lemon and add it to the mixture. Beat the egg with the water and stir into the mixture. Add the hot sauce, and salt and pepper to taste. The crab meat mixture should be just moist enough to cling together when gently pressed into a spoon. If it seems too dry, mix in 1 to 2 T. of water or fortified wine (port, madeira, or sherry).

Lightly brush the bottom of each morel half with melted butter and lay on a baking sheet. Firmly press a spoonful of the crab meat mixture into the cavity of each morel half, mounding it up above the mushroom's edge. Bake the crab-filled morel halves for about 20 minutes, or until the tops are golden brown and the mushrooms are cooked through and tender. For decoration, top each stuffed morel before serving with a small piece of baked crab meat and a thyme sprig (see photo). Eat immediately.

This year is shaping up to be a great one for morel picking. Higher-than-average snowfall this past winter moistened soil enough to encourage yellow morels to start popping up in mid- to late May along many river bottoms, cottonwood forests, and other wet, low-lying areas across the state. The emergence of these delectable mushrooms was about two weeks later than usual, owing to chilly temperatures in early spring.

Starting in about mid-June, morel hunters began heading to the sites of many 2013 fires, looking for black morels poking up through the charred duff. Harvest begins at lower elevations and along south- and west-facing slopes and continues well into summer up burned mountainsides along east- and north-facing slopes and wetter areas.

Most big fires last year were deep in the Bitterroot National Forest along the Idaho border and in other forests far from roads. It could be a challenge accessing many of those burned areas.

New to morel hunting? The best way to locate and identify these tasty fungi is to befriend an experienced mushroomer at work, church, the gym, or elsewhere (though even a big-hearted morel hunter will not reveal secret spots that may have taken years to locate). Also, check out the Western Montana Mycological Association website, fungaljungal.org, which is packed with great information.

If you've never tried morels before, eat just a few in the first meal to see how you react. Also, some people have experienced bad stomach reactions when combining cooked morels with alcoholic beverages. Morels should always be well-cooked and never consumed raw.

If luck, experience, or perseverance leads you to a patch of larger specimens, try this recipe for crab-stuffed morels. They make great appetizers for parties or a tasty summer supper when served with a hearty salad. 🐾

—Tom Dickson is editor of *Montana Outdoors*.