

spilling the beans

Obsession with Mushrooms:

Chef Daniel Bruce

by Julie S. Hatfield



Known already for his pairing of the flavors of food and wine, Boston Harbor Hotel Chef Daniel Bruce has another passion that consumes his little bit of time and energy away from the hotel kitchens: Often, between July and November, he'll leave the hotel after a long day-into-night of cooking, and instead of heading home for a good night's sleep, will drive out into the woods with a flashlight and start in on his second, much less known obsession, mushroom foraging.

His wife, thankfully, understands his mushroom lust. "I dream of foraging," says Bruce.

He has the same intense care and concern for mushrooms, it turns out, as he does for wine, and couples that with a serious study of the various types of mushrooms that grow all over Massachusetts, where they can be found, when they're at their peak and what wine and recipe ingredients pair best with them.

Bruce could tell you exactly where in this state—whether it's in a field behind a private home, or a forest near the Berkshires, or a riverbed at the southern edges nearest Connecticut—there grows a certain wild mushroom, but he won't. Devotees are secretive and protective of their favorite foraging sites, which take awhile to discover. He doesn't waste any of the as much as 5,000 pounds he finds per year, but brings them home to freeze, dry and make broths to serve to friends and family. He cannot bring them back to the hotel because health department rules dictate that hotel mushrooms must be purchased from

a wholesaler. He says this is a good idea, because he does not want inexperienced restaurant chefs to forage without the knowledge and background of wild mushrooms he has gleaned from a lifetime engaged in the activity.

It's a natural, perhaps genetic, talent, he admits. Bruce grew up in northern New England where his father was a part-time Maine guide, acoustic country and Western musician and mechanic. "I love being in the woods," he says, noting, "lots of things are happening here."

There was another reason he foraged: Both of Bruce's parents were teenagers, who married because he was on the way. Neither finished high school, and money was tight. Feeding four children on barely \$15,000 per year was hard, and the chef says he foraged out of necessity; the family was hungry. He spent a lot of time with his maternal grandmother, who was in her 30s and loved to can food, make pickles and bake Christmas cookies, and he was fascinated with food preparation.

Meanwhile, his mother was a waitress at a restaurant and got him a job as a busboy there. "I hated it," he recalled. "I wanted to be in the kitchen."

Within a year, he was a prep cook. He was 16 years old. By a series of lucky happenings and very hard work, the chef began to move up in the world of fine cuisine. The owner of the restaurant, The Candlelight, in Skowhegan, Maine, took him to live with her and seeing

his talent, got him a grant through the Rotary club and a series of loans to attend Johnson & Wales. While there, a chef from Italy came to the school during its Distinguished Visiting Chef series. The chef, Angelo Paracucchi of Restaurant Locanda del'Angelo of Marinalla di Sarzana, watched him work at the school all day and then go to work at a restaurant at night. Appreciating the young man's intense work ethic and talent, he invited him to travel to his restaurant to work and learn.

"I had never been outside New England," recalled Bruce. "Didn't know I needed a passport. Didn't know any Italian."

He learned Italian, eventually worked at Harry's Bar in Venice, and then in a restaurant in Paris and, eventually, with Paracucchi's connections in New York, cooked at the famous Le Cirque in New York, where then Boston Harbor Hotel general manager Francois Nivaud lured him away from an offer at the Drake Hotel in NYC and back to Boston and New England.

As he talked, Bruce took us to an unmarked place in the woods at the Blue Hills Reservation to show us how to change our untrained eye, which saw nothing but leaves and dead limbs, into a mushroom forager's eye, which sees mushrooms everywhere. "How did you know there were mushrooms here?" we asked in wonder.

"There's a sense you develop if you're a forager," he noted. "The lay of the land, the types of tree growing here, the condition of the land. If it's sloping and wet, that's good for mushrooms. It's a matter of being aware of your surroundings." That said, he pointed out a simple white mushroom that was growing on some rotting

wood. "It's an Amanita," he declared, "and poisonous. Toxic mushrooms don't necessarily taste bad." The Amanita is one such mushroom.

Quickly, amidst what we had seen as a pile of sticks and dirt, he pointed out Late Fall Oyster and Hen of the Woods mushrooms, both edible and both totally invisible to us until we began to look at the ground through the chef's eyes. "Oysters don't like these kinds of trees," said Bruce. "Each type of mushroom likes certain things." He next came upon a Russula mushroom and declared it "edible, but this one is old, past its prime. It's good if you need to eat, though."

"I'm not a mycologist" (scientist who studies mushrooms) he said as he pointed out "LBMs" or Little Brown Mushrooms, also poisonous, "but I am a field expert. This red oak tree is where you can usually find Hen of the Woods mushrooms, but we're a little late in the season now for them, and they're gone."

Bruce's father asked him to take him foraging, and the Maine guide learned a new talent from his son. As we began to see that this woods was bursting with mushrooms, he pointed out the Birch Polypore, which he said American Indians found useful for honing their knives, as it gets harder when it gets bigger. The Horsetail mushroom, which he showed us, is "pretty, but not edible. Neither is this Turkey Tail. I can identify 29 species that can be eaten," all of them within about an hour or less drive from the hotel.

We came upon Blewits, which Bruce harvests in October. Its Latin name is *Clitocybe nuda* and the chef said they can be found in glacial bowls of land. Bruce said there are five other states near Massachusetts where they can be found. "Smell this Black Trumpet," he urged, noting their woody odor. "The Late Fall Oysters are edible and actually do smell like oysters. I make a wild mushroom soup with these, and a wild mushroom polenta mold."

The chef's talent for pairing wine with food continues with his matching of wine with mushrooms. Pinot noirs, he says, go "very well" with mushrooms, as do older chardonnays and Old World syrahs.

Bruce's latest endeavor at the Boston hotel, the new waterfront Rowes Wharf Sea Grille, has a menu that reflects the best of the local catch prepared in a minimalist and artful way. No doubt, at the right time of year, it often includes wild mushrooms—even if purchased according to the health department's rules.



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