

Hen of the Woods

By Bill Roody

Hundreds of varieties of wild mushrooms occur in West Virginia, including many that are very good to eat for those willing to learn about them. In fall, the Hen of the Woods (*Grifola frondosa*) stands head and shoulders above the others because of its excellent flavor, ease of identification, and abundance. Hen of the Woods, so named for its fanciful resemblance to the feathers of a sitting hen, is also known as Sheep's Head, which, according to some who have a vivid imagination, it also resembles. This widely distributed mushroom is much appreciated in various parts of the world where it grows. In Japan it is called Maitake, meaning "Dancing Mushroom," because those who find it are said to dance with joy in celebration. While few West Virginia mushroom hunters are likely to break out in a spirited jig on locating a cluster of "Hens," they are at least genuinely exhilarated.

Hen of the Woods is one of our largest wild mushrooms, averaging the size of a soccer ball, but sometimes growing much larger. It is composed of a central stalk-like core that branches into multiple, overlapping, petal-like lobes. The scientific genus name *Grifola* means curved or hooked, in reference to the shape of the individual lobes, which have incurved margins. *Frondosa* means "leaf-like."

Hen of the Woods belongs to a large family of wood-decaying fungi called polypores, meaning "many pores." Members of this group have a layer of small pores on the undersurface of the cap in which microscopic spores are produced. Spores are to fungi what seeds are to green plants. When mature, the spores are released and carried away by air



Hen of the Woods or Maitake mushroom. Right, the uncommon Umbrella Polypore is also edible. Far right, a Black-staining Polypore.

Photos by Bill Roody / WV DNR

currents. If a spore comes to rest in a suitable location it will germinate and develop into a mass of fungal tissue known as mycelium. Although normally hidden from view, the mycelium is actually the main body of a fungus. The mycelium of Hen of the Woods is somewhat parasitic on the roots of oaks, or infrequently on other broad-leaved trees. It may live on a host tree for many years, periodically producing the fruiting bodies that we know as mushrooms.

Look for Hen of the Woods anytime from late August into November (September is normally the best month). Since host trees are not killed by the mushroom, once you locate a "Hen tree," you can return to it year after year to harvest the fruiting bodies. It is not unusual to find several "Hens" clustered near the base of a single living tree, providing the lucky mushroom hunter with a bonanza of choice



edible mushrooms. When a host tree eventually dies, the mycelium may continue to live as a saprobe on the decomposing wood, which is why "Hens" sometimes appear near dead trees and decaying stumps.

From a culinary point of view Hen of the Woods tastes best when young and the leaf-like lobes are small and tightly packed. At this stage the entire fruiting body is tender and delicious. As the mushroom ages, the flesh becomes tough and fibrous, and then only the more tender lobes are good to eat fresh. The remaining fibrous parts can be added to soup



stock, or dried and simmered to make a healthful tea-like beverage. At its tender best, this mushroom can simply be cooked in butter or oil and enjoyed as is. However, unlike many mushrooms, the flavor and texture are robust and will hold its own in more highly spiced dishes. It is especially popular in tomato-based sauces.

If fortunate enough to find a “mother lode” of “Hens,” you will have enough for several meals. Any surplus can be preserved by canning, or better yet, sliced into bite-sized pieces, cooked in butter or oil, and then frozen. It can also be finely chopped, fried with garlic or other seasonings until most of the moisture has dissipated, then packed into ice cube trays and frozen. These concentrated mushroom-flavored cubes are convenient for adding to soups and sauces.

Hen of the Woods is easy to recognize. The grayish brown to dark umber-brown compound caps with white pores on the underside is distinctive. The Black-staining Polypore (*Meripilus sumstinei*) is similar in appearance and growth form, but unlike Hen of the Woods, its flesh stains dark brown and eventually black when cut or bruised. It typically grows around decaying stumps in late spring and summer. Although harmless, some find the Black-staining Polypore to be indigestible. Generally it is regarded as edible when young and fresh, though much inferior to the Hen of the Woods and rarely gathered for food.

One other possible confusion is with the Umbrella Polypore (*Polyporus umbellatus*). This uncommon mushroom also resembles Hen of

the Woods in overall form and color, but the fruiting body is made up of numerous roundish caps with short stalks that branch off from a central core. Each cap is about an inch in diameter and distinctly depressed in the center. The Umbrella Polypore appears earlier in the season than Hen of the Woods and although seldom encountered, it is also an excellent edible.

In recent times, the Hen of the Woods has received a lot of attention for its potential to bolster the immune system. It is also reputed to help lower blood pressure and to have anti-cancer properties. The Chinese and Japanese have been using Hen of the Woods as medicine for centuries. Modern clinical research seems to support this ancient wisdom. It's nice to think that something that tastes so good may also be contributing to good health.

As with most wild mushrooms, the Hen of the Woods is an important element in the food chain. Many insects and other invertebrates feed on, or shelter within its fruiting body, so be sure to clean specimens carefully to remove any insects or other critters that may be lurking there. Do not collect old or moldy specimens for eating, and since some individuals may have a food allergy to certain mushrooms, only consume a small amount when trying Hen of the Woods for the first time. Happy Hen hunting and bon appétit!

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Dancing Mushroom Shiromiso

- Whole, dried organic Maitake (*Grifola frondosa*)
- Fresh scallions, sliced
- White miso paste
- Organic spinach powder
- Homemade chicken bone broth, vegetable stock or filtered water
- Low-sodium tamari
- Dried organic celery root
- Dried hijiki

Soak dried Maitake in filtered hot (not boiling) water for 20 minutes. Set re-hydrated mushroom aside to drain. Reserve soaking liquid.

Drizzle mushroom with clarified butter, sprinkle with pepper and spinach powder and roast in a 350° oven until golden brown (about 25 minutes). The mushroom should be slightly crispy on the edges.

Meanwhile, bring reserved soaking liquid and chicken stock to a rapid boil and cook until reduced in volume by 1/3.

Reduce heat and add tamari (be sure to use traditionally-fermented tamari that doesn't contain hydrolyzed protein) celery root, scallions and hijiki (a wild brown sea vegetable). Simmer for 5 minutes.

Remove broth from heat and stir in white miso paste.

Ladle broth into bowl or deep plate then place roasted Maitake on top.

— recipe from ediblearia.com