

cern. Parmesan cheese and Italian truffles also have this quality.

Most of the mushroom hunts that I've attended start out with modest expectations. Usually, friends gather early in the morning and gaze skyward, wondering how the day's weather will unfold. A few stories of past hunts inevitably spill out along with a few quiet words of humility. Nothing is worse than a forager full of *braggadaccio* when dinner has yet to be procured. For this particular hunt, however, the early fall rains had given way to ideal cooler temperatures, saturated woods, and a lunar cycle that was cooperative as well. (Some hunters, this one included, feel that mushrooms fruit in cycles that can be influenced by a number of factors. Temperature, rainfall, location, and even the phase of the moon all contribute to how well you'll be eating that very night.) So, optimistically, off we went in search of our prized fungi.

Through the pines, past the oaks, over the creeks, under the barbed wire fence (we were granted permission to hunt on private land) and finally over gentle sandy hills dotted with madrones we trekked. In a matter of minutes, we were rooting through the leaves and underbrush, where many seasons worth of "leaf litter" might be preserving our intended catch. Finally, there at the nexus of pine trees, oaks, and madrones, in the shaded darkness: a sign (or "flag," as we say); a large, open matsutake had pushed aside the skin of the earth and the camouflage of decomposing leaves. A beaming white flag of surrender set against the dark brown earth signaled where to turn our keen eyes. Quickly, as if fearing the mushrooms might get away before we could pick them, we gently began to unearth the pride of this particular hunting locale: white matsutake buttons.

Gloriously perfumed and shrouded in their new coats, they leapt into our baskets as our excitement and enthusiasm collectively rose. Minoru began leading us in chorus of "*Matsu-take!*" at each discovery. In 30 minutes we had enough for dinner, but the thrill of the pursuit fueled our energy and we couldn't stop. Finally, when we had exhausted this generous habitat, we gazed wide eyed at our bulging baskets and bags with great self-assurance. Humility was brushed aside like the forest undergrowth that revealed our prizes. Was there ever a doubt that there would be perfumed matsutake rice for dinner?

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PERFUMED MATSUTAKE RICE

3 cups Japanese rice
3 cups water
2 or 3 small "number one" matsutake
1 abura-age – fried tofu (optional)
¼ cup sake
¼ cup soy sauce

Begin by washing the rice in several changes of cold water, repeating the process until the water becomes clear. Drain the rice thoroughly. Add rice and water to rice cooker and let stand for 30 minutes. In the meantime clean the mushrooms of all loose dirt using a firm brush or paring knife. You may peel back a bit of the thin outer layer if overly dirty. Using the large holes of a box grater, shred the mushrooms lengthwise into long strands. Alternatively, if using your hands, pull apart into small rough pieces of the same size. If using the optional fried tofu, cut into strips. Add the mushrooms, tofu, sake and soy sauce to the rice cooker, cover and follow manufacturer's instructions for cooking.

Serves 6 as part of a larger meal

Resist the urge to treat matsutake in a western style cooking fashion (i.e., sautéing or frying in fat) as the essence of the mushroom will be lost and will result in a bland, tough dish. However, grilling is a wonderful way to enjoy matsutake, brushed lightly with soy sauce and allowed to caramelize slightly.

