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FOOD

Matsutake mushrooms from Northern California, sold by David West, at the Santa Monica (Organic) farmers market. (David Karp / September 25, 2010)

By David Karp, Special to the Los Angeles Times

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Aromatic matsutakes, a seasonal delicacy prized by the Japanese, rank among the elite of true wild mushrooms — along with porcini, morels and chanterelles — but are generally less available and less well known at farmers markets. Part of the reason is that although appreciation of matsutakes is deeply ingrained in Japanese culture, production of these mushrooms, which must be foraged from the wild, has plummeted over the last century in that nation, which now imports most of its supplies from other lands such as China, Korea and the United States, pushing up prices. But there's a bumper West Coast crop this year, and last week David West, mushroom purveyor extraordinaire, started receiving shipments from the mountains near the California- Oregon border.

The name matsutake means "pine mushroom" in Japan, where the local species, *Tricholoma matsutake*, grows in mycorrhizal association with Japanese red pines. About 15 other closely related species occur worldwide, including *T. magnivelare*, the American matsutake, which flourishes in coniferous forests across North America (and particularly in the Northwest and Northern California) with fir, spruce and pine, as well as tanoaks.

Japanese pay a premium for young, unopened matsutakes, before the veil between the cap and the stem breaks, which stay fresh better than more mature ones. (Matsutakes at this stage have a phallic appearance, and women at the imperial court at Kyoto once were forbidden to speak the mushroom's name.) However, there's no difference in flavor,

says West, and he sells all his matsutakes for the same price at the Santa Monica (Saturday Organic and Wednesday) and Hollywood (Sunday) farmers markets.

"I never know whether I'm going to have matsutakes for two weeks or 10," West says.

Much of the mystique around matsutakes derives from their heady aroma, redolent of the forests in which they grow. Chemical analyses have shown that the major volatile compounds responsible for this aroma are methyl cinnamate, also found in many food plants, including strawberries and Sichuan pepper; and 1-octen-3-ol, which has been characterized as having a green, musty or meaty scent.

Much of the aroma resides in the skin, but dirt tends to adhere and cannot readily be removed by simple brushing. Using a sharp knife, West demonstrated how to pare off a thin layer of skin, his preferred technique for getting rid of the grit. "The trick is to clean them without deflavoring them," he said.

Washing matsutakes is a big no-no, since the aromatic compounds are water soluble; Japanese often consume them in a classic soup dish, *dobin mushi*. It also would be a waste to sauté matsutakes like porcini or morels, said West, adding that ideally they should be used to impart their flavor to other foods, as one would do with truffles. About 70% of West's matsutakes go to restaurants such as Mori Sushi in West Los Angeles, Go's Mart in Canoga Park and Capo in Santa Monica.

Wampee watch

Among the rarest and most sought-after fruits grown in Southern California is the *wampee*, a distant citrus relative native to southern China, which Jerry Dimitman and his family will be selling for a few weeks, probably starting this Sunday, at the Alhambra farmers market.

Round to oval in shape, less than an inch in diameter, the *wampee* (also spelled *wampi*) has thin but tough tan or brown skin covered with fine short hairs and somewhat resembles the unrelated longan, the little brother of the lychee. The skin is usually peeled off, revealing several large bright green seeds, and translucent, whitish flesh with a grapelike texture and a peculiar mildly acid flavor reminiscent of grapefruit with resinous notes. The fruit is typically consumed fresh but can also be used to make jams and drinks.

Sunburned trees

The record-breaking heat earlier this week seared not only humans unfortunate enough to be exposed to it, but countless trees throughout the badly affected coastal districts. Michael Cirone, who dry-farms apples and pears in See Canyon near San Luis Obispo, said that the south sides of his trees looked like they had been scorched by a blowtorch, and that he had lost 20% of his remaining crop to sunburn.

Fruit on the north side of the trees was less affected, including, thankfully, his late-harvest Hass avocados, which are a rare treat and by far the best choice of any avocados in the markets at this time. By this late in the season, avocados from the warmer southern and inland growing districts, such as San Diego and Riverside counties, have a good chance of developing rancid flavor, flesh browning, internal breakdown, sprouting seeds and other signs of overmaturity. Usually the harvest from these areas is finished by now, but the crop

this year was very large. Hass from cooler northern coastal districts, in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, are a better bet, but still marginal by October.

Morro Bay on the Central Coast, where Cirone grows his avocados, is the coolest, latest-maturing avocado district in the state and produces fruit that at this time is not only free of decay but mind-bogglingly rich in oil. Such super-premium avocados from San Luis Obispo County, where some 3,900 acres are grown, are sold at supermarkets alongside less desirable fruit. That's good reason for Hass lovers to make a beeline for Cirone's stand at the Santa Monica Saturday Organic and Wednesday markets.