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PRODUCE PICKS by Michael Marks

Make room for mushrooms

September is National Mushroom Month, so let's talk fungus. Mushrooms bring plenty of flavor to the table. Whether it's in omelets for breakfast, a fresh salad for lunch or pasta for dinner, mushrooms top just about everything good.

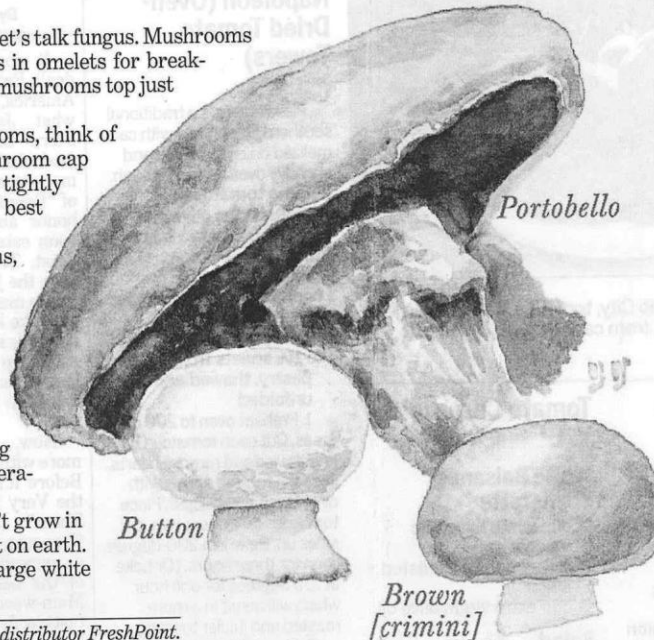
In picking out the best white button mushrooms, think of three words: white, tight and bright. The mushroom cap should be very white and bright, and the gills tightly closed. These will be the sweetest mushrooms, best used raw in salads.

(For fuller flavor in your cooked mushrooms, look for open gills.)

Small brown top crimini mushrooms have even more flavor. And their grown-up brother, the portobello, offers even more possibilities. I love Beef Stroganoff, but in our home, we slice up portobellos instead of beef. We even turn our portobellos into small pizzas.

Store your mushrooms in a brown paper bag — or the container they came in — in the refrigerator.

What about washing? Well, mushrooms don't grow in dirt. They grow in some of the cleanest compost on earth. European chefs simply place mushrooms in a large white towel, close up the corners and gently shake.



IN THE BINS

White Corn

Brentwood, Dixon
\$0.20-0.33 each

Kiwifruit

New Zealand, Chile
\$0.25-0.39 each

Heirloom Tomatoes

San Joaquin Valley
and local farms
\$2.49-\$2.99 per
pound

Honeydew

San Joaquin Valley
\$0.39-0.59 per pound

TIPS

This is the beginning of the end for summer's super sweet corn season, so when you see them, grab them and use them within two days.

The healthiest fruit grown on planet Earth is like a vitamin pill — with a little fuzz. Let them ripen, covered, at room temperature.

September is the peak of the season for these special tomatoes. Don't treat them like regular tomatoes — use them within a couple of days.

Store these, covered, in your laundry room or your garage. After just a couple of days ripening, these melons will be heaven, one bite at a time.

Michael Marks is marketing manager for the produce distributor FreshPoint. He has been in the fruit and vegetable business for more than 30 years.