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A tutorial on sautéing mushrooms

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Mushrooms are immensely versatile, and every chef should know how to properly sauté them. From a culinary standpoint, one could sauté mushroom varieties every day of the year and create a different dish simply by adding different herb and spice combinations and adjusting the length of the sauté. Sautéed mushrooms can transform and enhance most any dish. They make excellent toppings, garnishes, garnitures or outright protein substitutes. One of my favorite preparations is the classic duxelles. Not only does it really intensify the natural flavors of mushrooms, the finished product has a multitude of great culinary applications. Sautéed mushrooms can be "the center of plate," play a critical support role or simply serve as the background flavor notes that keep customers coming back to the same expertly crafted dish without really knowing why.

Sauté literally means "to jump" in the pan, and keeping this in mind is fundamental to doing it well. Sautéing is typically a quick process using a small amount of fat or oil over relatively high heat. If using sliced mushrooms, one should only sauté small amounts and be careful not to overload the pan. Regardless of the pan size and volume of mushrooms needed, excess steaming or stewing should be your first indication that something isn't quite right. The pan size, amount of available heat, and volume of mushrooms must be balanced if a strong and proper sauté is to be realized. For something different, you may want to try distilling sautéed mushroom and use the resulting intense liqueur in sauces and foams.

Sautéing is my favorite mushroom cooking technique because I believe it best develops their unique, rustic, woody notes and highlights their wonderful fifth savory taste, called umami. Basically, umami comes from amino acids, particularly glutamic acid, which is ever present in mushrooms. The reduction of moisture during the sauté highlights these savory properties. Sautéing allows us to bring out that deep, savory, brothy, rich or meaty umami taste sensation. Umami, in some applications, can counterbalance the need for salt, especially where mushrooms are either featured or are simply a minor component.

In the past years, I've noticed a foodservice trend of using mushrooms as a meat alternative. I think this trend is going to stick around because it's easy to do and always proves very satisfying for customers. As Americans become more knowledgeable about food and the number of foodies increases, consumers are also becoming more aware of how mushrooms are used in world and regional cuisines. Capable culinary craftsmen use mushrooms to their advantage. I've noticed consumers are more appreciative of mushroom flavor profiles, and how different cooking techniques can change a mushroom's "mouthfeel." I believe people are also more aware of their nutritional benefits. Mushrooms are the only vegetable or fruit containing vitamin D, and they also have lots of antioxidants.

How to sauté fresh sliced mushrooms



Step 1: Choose the correct pan for the amount of heat and size of mushroom using and select a fat or oil with a fairly high smoking point, such as clarified butter, canola oil, etc.

Step 2: Heat the pan and oil over medium-high heat, and tilt the pan away from yourself, allowing the excess oil to pool into the pan's distant edge, and then add the sliced mushrooms. This technique has saved my fingers numerous times from being burnt with splashing hot oil.



Step 3: Toss the sliced mushrooms to evenly distribute the oil, then leave it alone to sauté. Patience is key in sautéing mushrooms. You have to allow their moisture to reduce in order to properly caramelize them.



Step 4: When the mushrooms have caramelized, they will turn brown around their edges. Toss the pan again when they have reached this point.



Step 5: Add salt, if needed, with your seasonings. It's important to wait until the mushrooms are just finished so you can better judge how much salt or seasonings are needed.



Step 6: Toss the seasoned mushrooms to evenly distribute flavors. Mushrooms are finished sautéing when they have a nice, browned, caramel color.



Cultivated mushroom varieties

- **Button mushroom:** The most popular mushroom. They represent approximately 90 percent of mushrooms consumed in the United States. *Flavor:* They have a fairly mild taste and blend well with almost anything.



- **Cremini:** Also called baby portabellas, these are close cousins to button mushrooms. They have a light tan to rich brown cap and brown gills. *Flavor:* They have a deeper, earthier flavor than whites with firm flesh.



- **Portabella:** A matured cremini mushroom. They have tan or brown caps and measure up to 6 inches in diameter. *Flavor:* They have a bold, meaty texture and flavor.



- **Enoki:** Tiny, button-shaped caps and long, spindly stems, usually eaten raw or as a garnish. *Flavor:* They have a delicate sweet flavor and slightly crunchy texture.



- **Oyster:** Can be gray, brown, pale yellow or blue. *Flavor:* Oysters have a very delicate flavor and a velvety texture.



- **Maitake:** Appear rippling and fan-shaped, without caps. They are also called "Hen of the Woods." *Flavor:* Maitake have a distinctive aroma, woody, roasted-chicken taste and a firm, crunchy texture.



- **Shiitake:** Brown umbrella-shaped caps, ivory gills and curved, woody stems that should be removed. Must be cooked. Shiitake have the highest umami content. *Flavor:* They have an intense, rich and woody flavor with a meaty, chewy texture.



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