

MARVELOUS MUSHROOMS

Wellness and Recipes at Oakland Cancer Center

BY RACHEL TRACHTEN

SAUTÉED MUSHROOMS WITH YAM NOODLES

- 1 package of dry yam noodles
- 2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil
- ½ cup sunflower or other neutral oil
- 1¼ pounds brown crimini mushrooms
- 1 pound small fresh shiitake mushrooms, stems discarded
- 1 pound oyster mushrooms, trimmed and halved lengthwise if large
- 1½ pounds small whole portobello mushrooms, stems trimmed and thinly sliced lengthwise. Gills on caps scraped away with a spoon, caps cut into ½-inch-thick slices.
- Sea salt and fresh ground black pepper
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped garlic
- 1 teaspoon finely chopped ginger
- ½ cup sliced scallions
- ¼ cup shao shing wine or sherry
- 2 tablespoons tamari or soy sauce
- 2 teaspoons oyster sauce

Cook the yam noodles according to package instructions, then toss with toasted sesame oil to prevent sticking.

Heat 2 tablespoons oil in a 12-inch heavy skillet over moderately high heat until hot but not smoking, then sauté crimini mushrooms, stirring occasionally, until the liquid the mushrooms give off is evaporated, about 5 minutes. Transfer cooked mushrooms to a large bowl and cover to keep warm.

Sauté shiitakes, oyster mushrooms, and portobellos in separate batches in same manner, using 2 tablespoons oil, pinch of salt and pepper for each batch. Transfer to bowl with crimini mushrooms.

Heat a bit of oil in skillet and sauté garlic and ginger over moderately high heat for a few seconds. Add scallions. Return all cooked mushrooms with shao shing wine, soy sauce, and oyster sauce; stir to mix, cook for 1 to 2 minutes.

Add the cooked yam noodles, mixing well with the mushrooms. Continue cooking until noodles are hot. Season with additional tamari to taste. Serve immediately.

On a Wednesday evening at Oakland's Women's Cancer Resource Center (WCRC), all eyes are on the mushrooms. Although books with titles like *How Cancer Works* line the shelves, tonight's focus is fungus. An array that includes portobellos, porcini, hedgehogs, pom poms, and maitakes is laid out on a table along with tamari, garlic, and sesame seeds. Thirty mushroom enthusiasts settle in as chef and nutrition scientist Sandy Der picks up a mushroom and a kitchen knife.

Der has an easy smile and a passion for food. "Growing up Chinese," she says, "meant you were never asked how you were, but 'Have you eaten yet?'" She wears a white apron, rather than a chef's coat. "You don't have to be a chef to cook," she continues. "I don't want to put up barriers." Der strives to make cooking easy, while educating people about the health benefits of local foods available in the Bay Area.

To enhance their services for women with cancer, the Center's community outreach manager, Margo Rivera-Weiss, has organized not only cooking classes, but also classes with names such as Gentle Yoga, Yarn Divas, Writing for Wellness, and Watercolor Weekend. "A lot of support and community-building takes place when people share food or sit around the table knitting," she says. By offering these courses free of charge, the Center promotes wellness and connection for anyone inclined to join in. Tonight's audience, mostly women, ranges from 20- to 70-somethings, and includes former and current cancer patients, Center volunteers, and other Bay Area foodies.

Der has led most of WCRC's food-related courses, with offerings like Rice and Risotto, Sprouting and Krauting, Kicking Sugar, and Heart Health. As she chops king trumpet mushrooms, each about five inches tall with a thick beige stem and darker cap, she fields a barrage of questions. No query seems to stump her.

"What does a mushroom grow from?" one participant asks. "Mushrooms start from spores, not seeds," is Der's reply. "Are mushrooms rich in any vitamins or minerals?" We learn that they are high in selenium, zinc, iron, and vitamin D2, and that chanterelles grow under oak trees. Der shares her knowledge in such an amiable, unassuming way that I start to feel like I'm sitting in a friend's kitchen.

Der sautés the king trumpets in a wok that sits on a one-burner butane stove. (The WCRC has a tiny kitchen with no stove, so Der brings her own and also uses the Center's toaster oven.) She's chosen grapeseed oil for the sautéing because it is neutral (unflavored) and won't disguise the mushrooms' flavor.

The room buzzes with anticipation as small paper plates and forks are passed around, followed by a platter of cooked trumpets. Easy to chew, they have a subtle, almost nutty flavor. Meanwhile,



Sandy Der's cooking classes meet one Wednesday per month from 6 to 8 p.m.

May 20: Rice and Risotto

Black rice, brown rice, basmati, or Arborio—each is unique and each has its own culinary traditions. Learn how to make jook, risotto, and rice pudding.

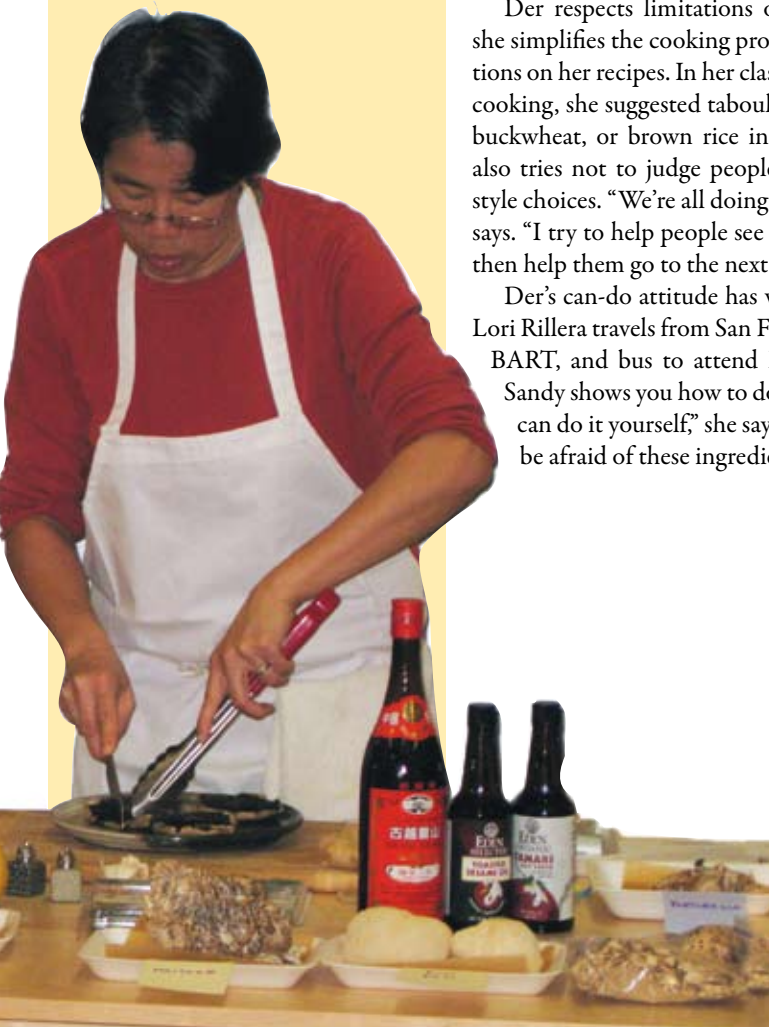
June 17 ¡Tapas!

Learn how to make tasty little appetizers in the Spanish tradition.

July 15 Sprouting & Krauting

Learn about the benefits of fermented foods and how to make pickles, sauerkraut, kombucha, and more.

Register by emailing margo@wcr.org or calling 510.601.4040 x111 wcr.org/calendar.htm



Der puts two volunteers to work: One gently pulls cream-colored oyster mushrooms into halves while the other scoops out the dark underside of large portobellos (an aesthetic choice, for people who don't want the brown gills to darken other ingredients in a dish). She drizzles olive oil over the portobellos and roasts them in the toaster oven, offering more mushroom tips along the way: Dried mushrooms, she says, create a more concentrated, richer flavor—try adding dried porcini to a pot of lentils.

Friendly taps on my shoulder bring more samples: portobellos (“meaty,” someone comments), hedgehogs (surprisingly fruity), and then maitakes, a wild mushroom also called “hen of the woods.” “Does it taste like chicken?” Der asks hopefully. The consensus is that it doesn't. But as I bite into the soft flesh, scrambled eggs come to mind . . .

Throughout the evening, Der advocates using fresh, unprocessed ingredients. “It's real food that will heal our bodies,” she says, “not supplements and fads.” In a class about antioxidants, people were interested in mangosteen juice, but Der encouraged blueberries, pomegranates, and citrus fruits instead, all of which grow locally.

Der respects limitations of time and energy: she simplifies the cooking process and offers variations on her recipes. In her class on Middle Eastern cooking, she suggested tabouli made with quinoa, buckwheat, or brown rice instead of bulgar. She also tries not to judge people for unhealthy lifestyle choices. “We're all doing the best we can,” she says. “I try to help people see where they're at and then help them go to the next step.”

Der's can-do attitude has won over many fans. Lori Rillera travels from San Francisco by streetcar, BART, and bus to attend Der's classes. “Once Sandy shows you how to do it, you feel that you can do it yourself,” she says. “You don't have to be afraid of these ingredients.”

Rillera's words resonate with the WCRC's mission: to empower women with cancer to be active and informed consumers and survivors, and to educate the greater community about cancer. The Center's services, all free of charge, include information and referral, support groups, a resource library, assistance with daily chores, and a multicultural outreach program.

As her finale, Der prepares Sautéed Mushrooms with Yam Noodles, using a mixture of crimini, trumpets, and shiitakes. “Recipes are guides,” she says, referring to the choice of mushrooms. “Just use what's around.” The aroma of soy sauce, garlic, and ginger mingles with the fragrant mushrooms, and we all line up like a pack of kids at the ice-cream truck.

After slurping down the last of my cellophane noodles, perfect for absorbing the flavor of the sweet shiitakes and gingery wine sauce, I catch up with Liisa Lyon. A breast cancer survivor, Lyon regularly attends classes at the Center. “When I was diagnosed, so much felt out of my control,” she says, “but one area you *can* control is your nutrition.”

The wok now empty, Der packs her equipment into the cardboard box she travels with. “I love cooking and getting people to cook with their friends and family,” she says. Her students file out with thoughts of pom poms and porcini, making promises to return next time for Rolls and Wraps. 🍴

Freelance writer and editor Rachel Trachten is a regular contributor to The East Bay Monthly and Conscious Dancer magazines. Her work has also appeared in The Washington Post, The San Francisco Chronicle, The Contra Costa Times, and in anthologies about parenting and marriage.

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