



Ah, mushrooms!

My first memory of them goes back to childhood, when my dad suddenly got it into his head that he would grow mushrooms at home.

A large, shallow wooden container appeared in the garage, filled with what I remember as manure or compost and mushroom spores. I was far too young to understand the finer points of mushroom cultivation. What I do remember is the disruption to the garage—and then, rather remarkably, a whole lot of mushrooms. Mushrooms remained part of my cooking life as I grew up: sometimes as simple as mushrooms on toast or soup, sometimes hidden within something considerably more elaborate, such as the duxelles in a Beef Wellington. And, as happens so often in cooking, experience gradually revealed how much larger the subject really was. Beyond cultivated mushrooms lies an extraordinary family of flavours: wild mushrooms and truffles, certainly, but also chestnuts, juniper and woodland aromatics, together with techniques such as drying, roasting and smoking.

I think of these collectively as The Earth System—not a strict ingredient category, but a flavour family connected by earthiness, savoury depth and the aromas we associate with the forest floor.





This Week's Focus

The Earth System

Mushrooms are remarkable because they can occupy very different positions within a dish.

They can provide a subtle background note, enrich a sauce or stock, become a concentrated duxelles—or take centre stage as the principal ingredient.

But forest flavour is broader than mushrooms alone.

The system can bring together five complementary characteristics:

Umami & Depth — mushrooms and truffles

Earthiness — mushrooms, roots and roasted ingredients

Resinous Freshness — juniper, spruce and rosemary

Nutty Warmth — chestnuts, hazelnuts and browned butter

Woodland Aroma — drying, roasting, smoking and fermentation

The result is not necessarily heavy or rustic. Used with restraint, these flavours can be remarkably delicate and refined.



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Flavour Lens

Profile

Earthy, savoury, deeply umami, nutty, woody and aromatic, sometimes with resinous or gently smoky notes.

Behaviour

Mushroom flavour changes dramatically according to variety and technique. Cooking can concentrate savouriness and develop caramelised notes, while drying intensifies flavour still further. Within the broader Earth System, roasting and smoking can reinforce woodland character.

Balance Role

Earth flavours bring depth and grounding.

They can provide the low savoury notes beneath brighter flavours, connect proteins with sauces and garnishes, or become the central flavour around which the rest of the dish is constructed.

Key Partners

Butter • Cream • Garlic • Shallot • Thyme • Soy • Miso • Gochujang • Chestnut • Hazelnut • Juniper • Rosemary • Wine • Vinegar



Chef's Insight

The term forest flavours could easily become a culinary cliché if we interpret it too literally.

The useful idea is not to make food look like a forest.

It is to understand the sensory connections between earthiness, umami, roasted nuts, resinous herbs, smoke and the deep aromas associated with woodland environments. Your notes describe precisely that relationship: the category is about sensory connection rather than simply where an ingredient happens to grow.

Used thoughtfully, those relationships can inform everything from a simple mushroom on toast to a highly contemporary restaurant dish.

Ingredient Spotlight — King Oyster Mushrooms

King oyster mushrooms offer an interesting lesson in what a mushroom can become.

Rather than the softer cap-and-stem character we commonly associate with mushrooms, their dense stems retain a substantial, almost meat-like texture when seared. They also absorb flavour particularly effectively.

Cut into thick planks, crosshatched and caramelised in a hot pan, they can therefore be treated almost like a small steak.

The scoring is more than decorative. It increases the surface area available for browning and allows a glaze to penetrate while the mushroom retains its structure.

That makes the king oyster particularly suited to contemporary plant-forward cooking where the mushroom is expected to provide substance —not simply garnish.

Kitchen Curiosity

Why Does Browning Matter So Much?

One of the simplest ways of understanding mushrooms is to compare a pale, gently cooked mushroom with one that has been properly seared. The ingredient may be identical, but the experience is very different.

For this week's recipe, the king oyster mushrooms are placed scored-side down in a hot pan and allowed to develop deep caramelisation before the glaze is introduced. Only then is the heat reduced and the glaze built in successive layers.

The principle is useful beyond this particular dish:

Develop the mushroom first. Add the supporting flavours second.



[Click for Mushrooms & Forest Flavours Podcast](#)



Kitchen Practice

Technique: Allow mushrooms sufficient heat and contact with the pan to develop colour. A cut surface, crosshatched before searing, increases the area available for caramelisation and glazing.

Timing: Build flavour in stages.

Sear » colour » reduce heat » glaze » turn » glaze again.

Repeated thin applications create a polished lacquer and caramelisation.

Common Mistakes: Crowding & preventing effective browning.

Introducing sugary glazes too early. Treating mushrooms as a garnish.

Professional Approach: Decide first what the mushroom is doing in the composition: Background depth? Sauce component? Texture? Aromatic accent? Or principal ingredient?



Pairing Logic

- Earth + Richness – Butter • Cream • Browned Butter • Sesame
- Earth + Aromatics – Garlic • Shallot • Thyme • Rosemary • Ginger • Spring Onion
- Earth + Fermentation – Soy • Miso • Gochujang
- Earth + Nutty Warmth – Chestnut • Hazelnut • Sesame
- Earth + Resinous Notes – Juniper • Rosemary • Spruce
- Earth + Acidity – Vinegar • Pickles • Bright fruit
- The objective is not simply to make mushroom flavour stronger.
- Build around its earthy foundation while retaining contrast.



A practical application of this week's flavour system

Korean-Style Glazed King Oyster Mushrooms

Korean-style king oyster mushrooms seared and glazed with gochujang, soy and sesame, served with crisp rice, charred spring onions and pear-cucumber pickle.

What This Dish Teaches

The important lesson isn't simply that mushrooms work with gochujang.

It is that earthiness provides a foundation upon which other flavour systems can be built.

The mushroom brings depth and texture.

Fermentation amplifies savouriness.

Caramelisation creates intensity.

Sweetness rounds the heat.

And the crisp, lightly acidic pickle resets the palate between bites of the rich glaze.

This is flavour layering with the mushroom firmly at its centre.



[Recipe Link: Korean Style Glazed King Oyster Mushrooms](#)



The Liquid Counterpoint

A dry, lightly aromatic Riesling would provide freshness and acidity while accommodating the chilli and gentle sweetness of the glaze.



From the Kitchen

When cooking mushrooms, ask:
What do I want the mushroom to contribute?
If the answer is depth, concentrate it.
If it is texture, preserve it.
If it is aroma, don't bury it.
If the mushroom is the principal ingredient—
give it the same attention you would give the protein.



Chef's Reflection

My earliest mushroom memory involved little more than a wooden container, compost, spores and a temporarily disrupted garage.
What followed was a lifetime of discovering just how much complexity can emerge from something apparently so simple.
Perhaps that is the real lesson of The Earth System.
Earthy flavours don't need to be heavy. At their best, they provide the depth that allows everything around them to become more interesting.

FLAVOUR NOTES
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MUSHROOMS & FOREST FLAVOURS

The Earth System
Flavour System Focus: Ingredient Systems

Earth flavours bring grounding, umami, nutty warmth and woodland aroma, whether supporting a dish or taking centre stage.

1. INGREDIENT FAMILY

- Mushrooms — cultivated and wild, subtle to deeply savory
- Truffles — concentrated aroma and luxury depth
- Chestnut / Hazelnut — nutty woodland warmth
- Juniper / Rosemary / Spruce — resinous freshness
- Drying, roasting, smoking — techniques that reinforce forest character

2. SYSTEM FUNCTION

- Adds grounding, umami and savory depth
- Connects proteins, sauces and garnishes
- Supports brighter flavours without losing presence
- Can be background structure or the core flavour identity
- Gives a dish a sense of earth, warmth and place

3. MECHANICS / BEHINDER

- Fresh mushrooms show clearest natural character
- Searing develops colour, savouriness and caramelized notes
- Roasting reduces moisture and deepens earthiness
- Drying concentrates flavour for stocks, sauces and dusts
- Smoking adds another woodland dimension

4. KITCHEN PRACTICE

- Give mushrooms enough heat and just contact to brown well
- Do not crowd the pan
- Develop the mushroom first, add supporting flavours second
- Decide the role: depth, savor, texture, aroma or principal ingredient
- Let technique follow function

5. PURING LOGIC

- Earth + richness — butter, cream, browned butter, sauce
- Earth + aromatics — garlic, shallot, thyme, rosemary, ginger, spring onion
- Earth + fermentation — soy, miso, gochujang
- Earth + nutty warmth — chestnut, hazelnut, sesame
- Earth + acidity — vinegar, pickles, bright fruit

6. IN COOKING

- Soups, sauces and stocks
- Dusts and concentrated mushroom preparations
- Sear or roast mushrooms dishes
- Pasta, risotto and toast
- Contemporary plant-forward mains
- Glazed, grilled or smoked applications

7. ADVANCED COMPOSITION

- Background depth vs principal ingredient
- Fresh vs dried
- Served vs marinated
- Classical cream and thyme direction vs soy- and gochujang direction
- Forest flavour is sensory, not simply geographical

8. CONTEXT & INTENT

- European kitchens use mushrooms in soups, sauces, dusters and game dishes
- East Asian kitchens pair mushrooms with soy, chili, sesame and fermentation
- "Forest flavours" means sensory connections: earthiness, umami, roasted notes, woody herbs, smoke and woodland aroma
- Earthy flavours need not be heavy; used with restraint they can be delicate and refined

WORKING EXAMPLE

- Mushroom — earthiness, umami and substance
- Gochujang + soy — fermented savory depth
- Nashi pear + rice syrup — controlled sweetness
- Sesame — mouth richness
- Crisp rice — textural contrast
- Peanut-sauce pickle — acidity and palate reset
- Spring onion — charted aromatic lift

Develop the mushroom first. Build the supporting glaze second.

LIQUID COUNTERPOINT: A dry, lightly aromatic Riesling — or a pear, ginger and sparkling water cooler.

9. PREPARATION TECHNIQUES

- Slice / trim for even cooking
- Score / combatch to increase browning area
- Soak brief before glazing
- Roast for concentration
- Dry to intensify
- Smoke carefully for woodland aroma

10. PRACTICAL TIPS

- Match the technique to the job the mushroom must do
- Prep work of the mushroom is the key note
- Concentrate if depth is required
- Control moist glaze carefully; add after final browning
- Rich earth flavours need acidity, freshness and savor for balance

11. CHEF'S REMINDER

Decide what you want the mushroom to contribute—then choose the technique that develops it.

Depth? Concentrate it. Texture? Preserve it. Aroma? Don't bury it. Principal ingredient? Give it the attention you would give the protein.

INGREDIENT SPOTLIGHT

KING OYSTER MUSHROOM

Dense, meaty stem retains an almost meat-like texture when seared.

Combining increases surface area for browning and glaze penetration.

Earthy flavours do not need to be heavy; at their best, they provide the depth that allows everything around them to become more interesting. — MJF

The Five Dimensions of the Earth System		
Dimension	Principal Sources	Contribution
Umami & Depth	Mushrooms, truffles	Savouriness, depth, complexity
Earthiness	Mushrooms, roots, roasted ingredients	Grounding, deeper base notes
Resinous Freshness	Juniper, spruce, rosemary	Lift, aromatic contrast
Nutty Warmth	Chestnuts, hazelnuts, browned butter	Richness, warmth, roundness
Woodland Aroma	Drying, roasting, smoking	Concentration and forest character

Larger Reference Charts

[IS-o4 Mushroom Varieties](#)

[IS-o5 Mushrooms Forest Flavours Chart](#)



Last Word

Earthy flavours don't need to be heavy. At their best, they provide the depth that allows everything around them to become more interesting.

Further Reading & Resources

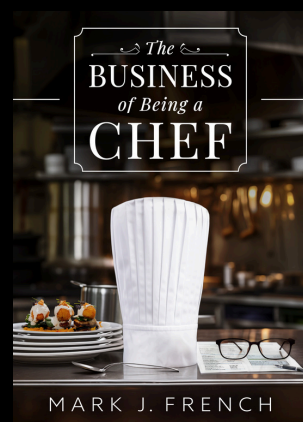
From the Library

See flavour balance charts and acidity mapping in the ChefsNotebooks archives.

The Business of Being a Chef

For a deeper understanding of flavour structure and kitchen systems, The Business of Being a Chef provides useful operational context alongside culinary insight.

<https://chefsnotebooks.com/books>



The Business of Being a Chef is the result of more than 30 years of experience in hotels and restaurants throughout the world. It is a guide to managing the multiple business demands of today's executive chef, encompassing diverse areas including cooking, taste, food safety, human resources, finance, and sales & marketing, amongst others. It is also a great resource for operations managers.

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About the Author

Mark J French is a hotelier, chef, consultant, and author of several books on culinary arts and business. Based in the UK and Philippines, he blends classical training with global flavours.

