

A Guide to Varieties of Autumn Mushrooms in Japan: Selecting, Storing & Prepping



Top row

Left: *shiméji* しめじ

Right: *éryngi* エリンギ



Center row

Left: *matsutaké* 松茸

Right: *shiitaké* 椎茸



Bottom row

Left: *enokidaké* えのき茸

Right: *maitaké* 舞茸

Fresh mushrooms should be loosely wrapped, each variety separately, in barely moistened paper towels or damp newspaper. Stored in the vegetable bin of your refrigerator, most varieties will keep well for 4 or 5 days. Clean and slice as close as possible to cooking time to preserve aroma and texture.

Details for each variety follows:



Cultivating mushrooms

Shiméji or ***buna shiméji*** (oyster mushrooms; *Pleurotus ostreatus*) しめじ

It is rare to see foraged *hon shiméji* in Japanese domestic markets: nearly all *shiméji* mushrooms sold in Japan today are *buna shiméji*, an easy to cultivate varietal. Like other cultivated fungi such as *énokidaké*, *buna shiméji* are grown in clusters in squat jars. At market, the unattractive sponge-like material on which the mushrooms are grown is hidden from view with opaque packaging. When ready to use, open the package, trim away the moldy-looking section of the stems and, if necessary, rinse the caps briefly under cold running water. Gently squeeze dry. With your hands, separate each mushroom from the larger mass.



Éringi (king trumpet mushroom; *Pleurotus eryngii*) エリンギ

Éringi mushrooms were first introduced in Japan in the early 1990's. Their rapid rise in popularity was due to their resemblance (in appearance and texture) to costly *matsutaké*. What aroma *éringi* can boast tends to be quite mild (barely reminiscent of the earth) and the taste is devoid of the spicy, cinnamon bark overtones that distinguish superior *matsutaké*. *Éringi* are perfect, however, for pan-searing with leeks or chives (serve with *ponzu* for dipping). The mild-flavored mushrooms match well with more distinctive seasonings such as *sanshō* pepper.



Matsutaké (pine mushroom; *Tricholoma matsutaké*) 松茸

Matsu means “pine” and *také* means “fungi.” These mushrooms grow in symbiotic bliss with red pine trees and boast an incredible woodsy aroma. They must be foraged (to date, no one has successfully cultivated them) and command a high price. The highest quality *matsutaké* come to market early in the autumn and can go for hundreds of dollars per mushroom, especially the pale colored ones foraged near Kyoto (Tamba is considered best). Canadian, Korean and Pacific Northwest mushrooms are usually dark and command a slightly lower price. In Japanese markets, *matsutaké* are packaged with *sudachi* or *kabosu* limes and placed in a loosely woven bamboo basket lined with *shida* leaves (a fern-like forest plant) to retain optimal moisture when packaging.

When buying, shape (ideally a phallic, stocky column with unopened cap) is more important than size. The mushroom should have earth still clinging to its base. When ready to cook, whittle away just enough to expose the white interior (like old-fashioned pencil sharpening). A cinnamon-like aroma should be released. The column and cap should be wiped with a soft cloth, paper towel, or brush to remove any sand or soil clinging to the surface.

For most recipes, the mushroom will need to be cut in half so the cap and stem are separated. Use your fingers to gently shred the stem; the irregular surface of these pieces will preserve the crisp texture and yield greater flavor than knife-sliced pieces. Similarly, shred the cap, beginning with the stem end. Or, if you are making *Kinako Gohan* (download recipe from this page) cut one cap into paper-thin slices with a sharp knife and scatter these on the top at the last minute for an impressive appearance.

For long-term storage wipe, trim and slice to separate stem from cap (place knife about 1/2 inch below the cap). Wrap the stem and cap pieces separately in foil, crimping edges on each packet to keep air out. Place foil packets in a re-sealable plastic bag and freeze for up to 6 months. When ready to use, defrost in the refrigerator before unwrapping. Use immediately to preserve as much of the original aroma and flavor as possible.

The centuries old saying -- *kaori matsutaké, aji shiméji* (aromatic *matsutaké*, flavorful *shiméji*) – provides a rationale for spending less without skimping on gastronomic enjoyment. See the entry for ***Shiméji***, above.



Shiitaké (*black oak mushroom; Lentinula edodes*) 椎茸

The calligraphy for *shii* is “oak tree” indicating that *shiitaké* mushrooms are cultivated from spores on oak logs (note the correct spelling in English is “ii”). Production of *shiitaké* is quite ancient in Japan; early records suggest that cultivation began in the Third century AD. Current commercial crops are grown in two ways: under natural forest conditions and in climate-controlled indoor facilities.

Just before cooking, remove any dirt that might be clinging to the fresh mushrooms (a pastry brush does a good, non-abrasive job). Wipe mushrooms with a damp cloth if need be. After trimming away any gritty material clinging to the stems, twist and remove them (set aside to simmer and enrich stock). Slice the caps, lengthwise, into narrow strips, or into 4 or 6 wedge-like pieces.



Énokidaké (*ivory colored mushroom; Flammulina velutipes*) えのき茸

If you're using cultivated, slender-stalked, small-capped *énokidaké*, remove them from their plastic bag. Rinse the caps under cold running water ONLY IF the moldy-looking growing medium has been caught among the stalks; shake them dry. Trim away the spongy (moldy-looking) bottom half. The remaining stalks can be left as is, or cut into short lengths.



Maitaké (*hen-of-the-woods; Grifola frondosa*) 舞茸

If you're using beige-gray, ruffled *maitaké* (sometimes called “hen-of-the-woods” though the name in Japanese is written with calligraphy for “dancing” and “fungi”) trim away any moldy parts of the white stems and, with your hands, separate clusters, lengthwise into thin strips (as though you were stringing string-cheese). The irregular surface that results from hand-tearing mushrooms will make them more flavorful than knife-sliced ones. *Maitaké* are extremely flavorful but tend to darken and “stain” the cooking broth that results from cooking them.