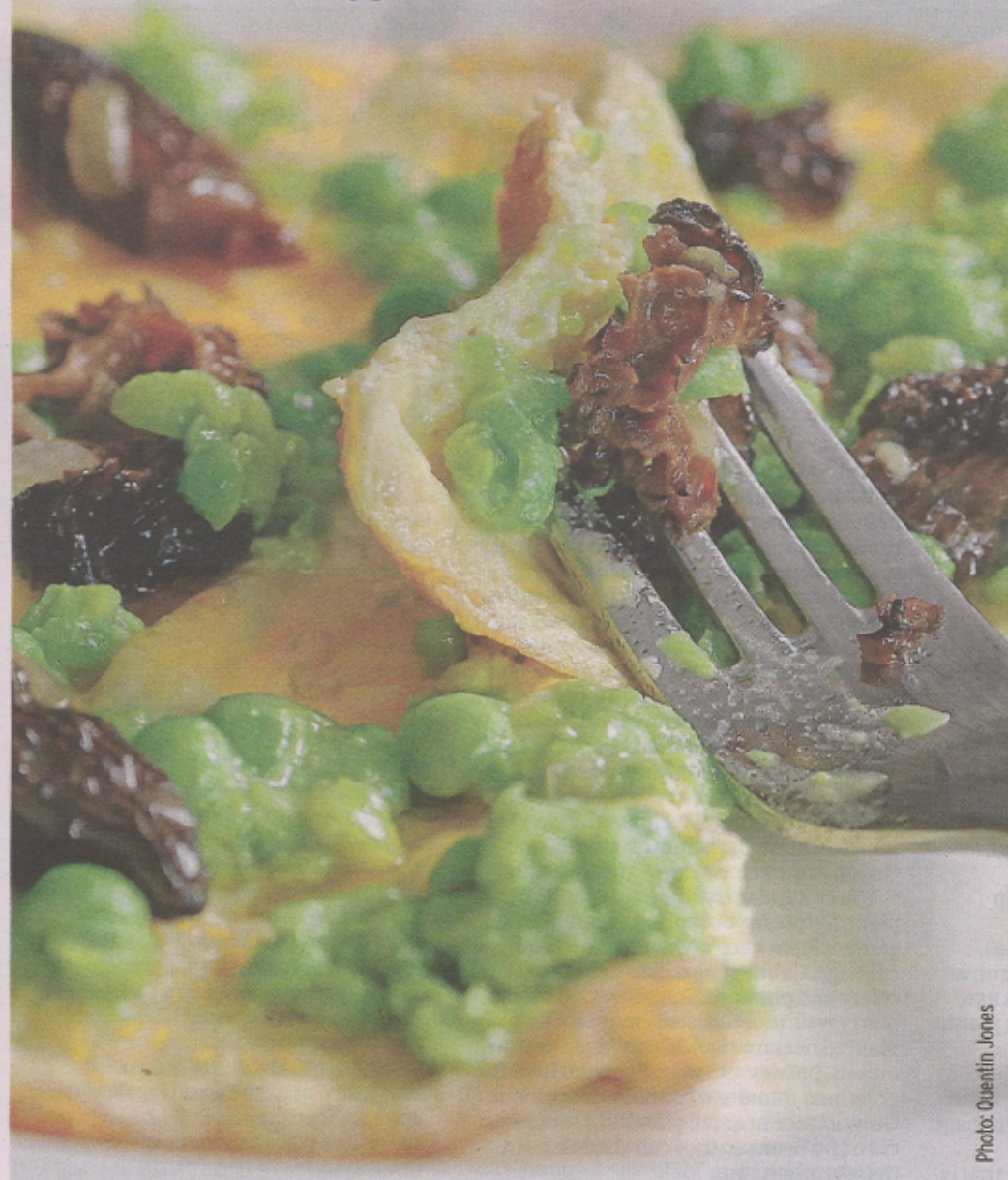
 Seasonal cook


Photo: Quentin Jones

# A morel crusade

This eye-catching mushroom delivers memorable spring meals, writes **STEVE MANFREDI**.

**E**dible wild mushrooms are almost always found in autumn but some, like the morel, turn up in abundant quantities in spring. The morel (*Morchella esculenta*) is famous in Europe and North America but it's in season now in parts of southern Australia.

Of all the edible mushrooms, the morel is perhaps the strangest looking. It has a hollow stem leading up to a head of crinkled, honeycomb-like cavities, making striking patterns ranging in colour from light grey to brown and even jet-black.

I remember my first taste, some 30 years ago. I was working at Jenny Ferguson's You and Me restaurant in King Street. She'd poached the morels in cream and they'd absorbed the pan

juices of the accompanying meat like a sponge. The texture was soft to begin but then had the most wonderful firmness and a deep, rich, mushroomy flavour.

Back then, local morels had not yet been found, so we used dried French ones. These dried imported morels remain the most intensely flavoured but when the fresh Victorian crop is around I like to use them in as many dishes as possible.

Morels are particularly good with roast veal or chicken, in a cream sauce tossed with pasta and in egg-based dishes.

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## MOREL AND SPRING PEA FRITTATA

If fresh morels can't be found, use dried ones. Place dried morels in cold water for 15-20 minutes to re-hydrate. Drain and pat dry before using. Dried porcini or ceps can also be used.

**130g fresh morel mushrooms (or 50g dried)**  
**Salt and pepper**  
**½ cup freshly shelled peas**  
**4 tbsp unsalted butter**  
**1 eschalot, finely diced**  
**1 clove garlic, minced**  
**4 eggs**  
**2 tbsp grated parmesan**  
**2 tsp extra virgin olive oil**

Remove any twigs or dirt from morels. Bring a pot of salted water to the boil and cook peas until tender. Drain and place in a bowl with 2 tbsp butter, salt and pepper. Mash with a fork, cover and keep warm. Heat remaining butter in a pan and gently fry eschalot and garlic for 30 seconds. Add drained and dried morels and fry, stirring constantly, for 2-3 minutes. Season and set aside. Beat 2 eggs in a bowl with 1 tbsp parmesan and a little salt and pepper. Heat 1 tsp olive oil in a 15-18cm crepe pan or skillet and pour in beaten egg. Move egg around to cover pan. It will take less than 1 minute to cook through, and should be a little creamy. Don't turn it. Add some cooked morels and peas on top. Place on a warm plate and quickly repeat to make another one. Serve immediately.

**Serves 2 as a first course or breakfast (pictured)**  
**Wine** Chardonnay or viognier.


## MOREL AND ASPARAGUS BRUSCHETTA

This dish is adapted from Mario Batali's *Simple Italian Food*. It can be made up to a day in advance by omitting balsamic, adding it at the last minute.

**4 tbsp extra virgin olive oil**  
**400g fresh morels**  
**2 tbsp balsamic vinegar**  
**½ tsp chilli flakes**  
**2 tbsp basil leaves, thinly sliced**  
**1 garlic clove, thinly sliced**  
**Salt and pepper**  
**250g asparagus, woody ends trimmed**  
**8 2cm-thick slices country bread**

Heat half olive oil in a pan and gently fry morels for 2 minutes until wilted. Place in a bowl with remaining oil, balsamic vinegar, chilli, basil and garlic. Season lightly with salt and pepper. Blanch asparagus in boiling water for 1 minute. Drain and cut into 2cm-long pieces. Mix in with morels. Grill or toast bread slices and arrange 2 on each plate. Divide morel mixture evenly on top and serve.

**Serves 4 as a first course**  
**Wine** Light-bodied pinot noir.

 Full bottle

### QUAFFING

**ROBERT STEIN HARVEST GOLD 2009, \$25**



This sensational little Mudgee sweetie is made from botrytised semillon grapes, so it's intensely flavoured and full of saffron spice mixed with honey and toasty notes. There's plenty of citrus freshness and candied peel, too, plus a touch of ripe apricot. The palate is rich, luscious and complex without being mawkish. With great length and superb balance, it's a really gorgeous drink and a style that's fabulous with blue cheese and pungent washed rinds.

### TRYING

**MASTROBERARDINO GRECO DI TUFO 2010, \$40**



Greco di Tufo is an astonishing white variety native to Campania in southern Italy. For more than 130 years, Mastroberardino has been a champion of the region's wines. This is not a fruit-driven wine. It's quite savoury, dry and mineral on the palate, with a hint of floral and citrus notes but nothing overt. There's soft acidity and a fresh finish. While it's great chilled on its own, it matches really well with seafood.

### CELLARING

**JOHN DUVAL WINES ELIGO 2008, \$105**



John Duval is a respected winemaker thanks to his 29 years at Penfolds. In 2003, he set up his label showcasing Barossa shiraz. His top wine, Eligo, is dense, powerful and laden with dark, ripe plum fruit, chocolate, spice and firm tannins. The full-bodied drop has plenty of new French oak, yet it's well integrated, adding to the wine's structure. There's a lot going on. It needs decanting to open up; better still, put it away for at least a decade.

**Jane Faulkner**