

Seasonal Eating
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Rice Stuffed Mushrooms Make a Main Dish
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Last week I went on a professional development tour to Arkansas with 21 other Extension Agents. One of the stops was at a rice cooperative, Riceland, and it was very interesting. First of all I had no idea that they grew rice in Arkansas. In fact, Arkansas is the top rice producing state. Secondly, I didn't have any idea how you grew rice, except that it liked water. The tour explained the whole process and they have a blog on their website that follows the farmers through the season.

Rice is actually one of my favorite foods. My Mom always made a really good rice pilaf and we had a lot of fish and seafood which goes really well with rice. We had yellow rice with fish and Spanish rice with Mexican food and sticky medium grain rice with Asian dishes. They say you are either a potato person or a rice person and although I like potatoes, I'm probably more of a rice person.



The cooperative farmers grow many varieties of rice and types of rice, including long grain and medium grain rice. Long grain is what we normally think of as rice. It cooks up into fluffy, distinct grains. Medium grain rice is shorter and has a higher starch content so it is good for Asian dishes where you want the grains to stick together more or for risotto where you want the starch to form a creamy consistency by stirring and adding liquid slowly (short grain is also good for risotto). Brown rice is the whole grain rice with just the outer hull removed but the bran still intact on the grain. White rice has the bran removed and both brown and white come in long grain and medium grain.

We also learned from the tour that they produce a rice bran oil which has a high smoke point, meaning it can reach high temperatures without breaking down and burning. The rice grains have a waxy substance on the outside so the oil looks a little cloudy but is normal. It is flavorless, which makes it good for a variety of culinary applications.

They gave us samples of all the products so I made a Rice Stuffed Portobello Mushroom with the long grain brown rice that also has spinach and asparagus for spring. The brown rice has a chewier texture and nutty flavor that is perfect with the meaty Portobello mushroom. It is also a whole grain so it has more fiber and is more nutritious. It takes a little longer to cook, about 35-45 minutes, than the white but it's worth the wait.

I'm looking forward to experimenting more with the different types of rice, especially mixed with the spring vegetables! For more recipes and information about seasonal eating, visit the Bedford County Extension website (bedford.tennessee.edu).

Rice Stuffed Portobello Mushrooms

1/2 pound pork sausage
1/2 onion, chopped
4 ounces button mushrooms, chopped
1 cup brown rice
2 1/4 cups water
1/2 packet savory herb with garlic soup mix
1 teaspoon kosher salt, plus more for sprinkling
1/4 teaspoon black pepper
5 ounces fresh spinach
1/2 cup grated Parmesan cheese
4 Portobello mushrooms
Olive oil
16 asparagus spears, trimmed
1 1/3 cups shredded Monterey Jack cheese
1/4 teaspoon garlic powder
1/4 teaspoon onion powder

In a Dutch oven, cook the sausage until no longer pink. Remove to a bowl with a slotted spoon. If there are a lot of drippings in pan, drain all but 1 tablespoon. Add the onion, mushrooms and rice to the pan and cook until onion turns translucent and mushrooms start to cook down, about 3 minutes. Add the water, soup mix, salt and pepper. Bring to a boil, reduce to a simmer and cover and cook until liquid is absorbed and rice is tender. Add the spinach and cook another few minutes until spinach is wilted. Add the reserved sausage and Parmesan cheese.

Meanwhile, remove the stems from the Portobello mushrooms and using a metal spoon, scrape out the dark gills on the underside and discard. Rub a little olive oil over the mushrooms and sprinkle with a little salt. Set the mushrooms, gill side up on a baking sheet. In a bowl, combine the Monterey Jack cheese with the garlic powder and onion powder.

When ready, spoon the rice mixture into the prepared mushrooms. Lay four asparagus spears across the top of each filled mushroom and sprinkle with cheese mixture. Bake at 400 degrees for about 20 minutes, until the cheese lightly browns and the mushrooms and asparagus cook down.