About – Mushrooms are a plant that grows from a spore rather than a seed. In technical terms, it is the above-ground, fruiting body of a fungus. While that may not sound appealing to some, mushrooms are among the most flavorful and versatile of all vegetables, having been around since the time of the Pharaohs. The Pharaohs were so enthralled with their flavor that they banned “commoners” from touching them, thus insuring an adequate supply of this delicacy for themselves. In the United States, mushroom farming started in earnest in 1896 in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. Today nearly 60% of all the mushrooms grown in the United States come from Pennsylvania. California ranks a distant second in production at 14%. A testament to their popularity, the per capita consumption of mushrooms in the United States is nearly three pounds annually.

Varieties
There are more than 38,000 varieties of mushrooms, however, only about 2,500 are actually harvested for consumption and, of those, only a handful make up nearly all of the US consumption. Here are some of the most popular varieties:

White: Accounting for approximately 85% of all mushroom consumption, it is by far the most popular variety. Ranging in size from button to upwards of 3 inches in diameter, it is available bulk as well as in a variety of packaging options including whole, sliced, and caps. As these mushrooms darken and the veil opens, they take on a richer flavor. Use them raw in salads; sautéed, grilled or stuffed for appetizers.

Crimini: They are similar in shape to white mushrooms but tan to dark brown in color. They have a richer, earthier flavor than whites and can be substituted in any recipe calling for white mushrooms. They are excellent with beef.

Portabellas: A relative of the Crimini and white mushroom, it can grow to impressive size. Portabellas up to 6 inches in diameter are common. Again, tan to dark brown, they have a dense meaty texture and flavor. This “meaty” attribute makes them a popular ingredient in vegetarian sandwiches and entrees. Portabellas are excellent for stuffing as well as in sauces and soups. A variety of package choices are available.

Shiitake: Tan to dark brown in color, they look similar to a Crimini but they have an umbrella-shaped cap with an open veil. Once cooked, this rather spongy variety becomes meaty and takes on a woody flavor. The stem of these mushrooms is, in fact, quite woody so it is best to remove it before use. Great for stir fry, pasta and soup.

Enoki: This mushroom is unique in that it appears almost flower-like with a cluster of long stems ending in small caps. They store almost twice as long as most other varieties - up to 14 days. Enoki mushrooms are used raw in salads and as a garnish. They have a mild flavor and are slightly crunchy.

Oyster: With a delicately fluted cap and color that ranges from gray to light brown, these mushrooms have a very mild flavor and soft texture. They are best used in cooking and are a great alternative for white mushrooms. They go especially well with chicken, pork and seafood.

Selection – At the supermarket, look for mushrooms that are free of major blemishes and spots. They should be dry but not dried out and they should look smooth and fresh. The thin membrane under the cap, known as the veil, has more to do with flavor than freshness. A closed veil indicates a delicate flavor and an open veil indicates a richer, more robust flavor.

Storage – Mushrooms should always be stored in the refrigerator. Unopened packages will store for several days, but once they are opened, it is best to store them in a porous paper bag to allow moisture to escape. Avoid air-tight containers and handle them gently as mushrooms bruise very easily. Mushrooms do not freeze well.

Preparation and Uses – Never wash mushrooms until just prior to using them. Rinse with cold water making sure to remove any soil particles, then pat dry with a paper towel. Following washing, mushrooms can be used as they are, although you may want to trim the stem if roots are present. They can be used whole, sliced or chopped and the variety of recipes available for mushrooms is virtually endless. Sautéing is the simplest form of preparation, but they can also be roasted, grilled and even microwaved. In fact, microwaving requires no oil or butter and an eight-ounce, covered bowl of thickly-sliced mushrooms takes just two to three minutes to prepare in the microwave.

Nutrition – Mushrooms contain limited amounts of several B vitamins, potassium, copper and selenium. Their biggest nutritional asset is the fact that they are a versatile, low-calorie, fat-free food that add superb flavor to an abundant variety of foods.