

This summer, Woody Collins was the darling of the farmer's market.



This Sheldon resident has always been a delightfully endearing fellow. His intelligence and pluck, combined with his self-effacing, aw-shucks attitude, make you want to hug him. And buy his stuff.

But the fondness that Collins evokes in shoppers turned to frenzy this year when he brought out his most prized offering -- fresh chanterelle mushrooms.

Captain Woody, as he is known by many, is a first-class fisherman, farmer and forager. I would go so far as to call him the Lowcountry's foremost eco-entrepreneur.

I've known him as a purveyor of oysters and of blueberries. But of all the edibles he has brought forth from this place, chanterelles are the most fascinating.

No one I know eats chanterelles, despite the fact that they grow in abundance in the Lowcountry. I had never even heard of them until this summer.

Now I'm fixated on them, and fixated on the fact that chanterelle-gathering has become a multi-million dollar industry in the Pacific Northwest. These mushrooms are such a big deal that the resource has become threatened, leading federal researchers to develop a chanterelle-management plan.

So how is it that we have ignored this fungal gold mine lying at our feet? I guess mushroom-hunting was just not part of the Lowcountry's cultural repertoire until recently. Supposedly it's not difficult to distinguish between the delicious and coveted chanterelle and the poisonous varieties it so closely resembles. There just aren't a whole lot of people who can tell the difference.

It was Capt. Woody's father who taught him how to gather the wild mushrooms. This kind of face-to-face, hands-on instruction is better than all the guide-books in the world.

I've recently discovered that there is niche travel market that revolves around edible-mushroom hunting. It's called "myco-tourism," and I'm not kidding. There are people who pay good money to walk around and look for funguses to eat.

Recently I tried chanterelles for the first time. I was fortunate enough to have them prepared by Richard Wilson, the owner and chef of Bateaux in Port Royal. He got them from Capt. Woody early one Saturday morning, and at lunch that day I had a plate-full of these golden beauties atop a bed of perfectly-seasoned fresh green beans. It was one of those culinary experiences you remember for a lifetime.

The meal was part of an outing organized by the SC Coastal Conservation League. The day started with a tour of Marshview Organic Farm, a USDA certified operation that does double duty as a training ground for Young Farmers of the Lowcountry. These are neighborhood kids who play an integral role in the operation of the farm. In addition to helping in the fields, they do the record-keeping and customer service work required to keep their community-supported agriculture project going.

And it's going so well that demand far exceeds supply. If you want to be a shareholder, get in line. There is a waiting list. And if you know anyone interested in farming, let them know opportunity is knocking. Community-supported agriculture is a business model that has reinvigorated the the profession of farming, making it attractive to a new class of young entrepreneurs.

Back to the meal. After visiting the farm, our group of 25 met at the SC Coastal Community Development Corporation at Corners Community on St. Helena Island. The CDC is located

behind Gullah Grub, and it runs a community kitchen and business incubator.

We joined Wilson was in the commercial-style kitchen, and he showed us the ingredients he was using to prepare our lunch -- including those beautiful chanterelles -- and spoke about his commitment to using South Carolina-grown foods.

We enjoyed an appetizer of local tomato gazpacho garnished with shrimp from CJ Seafood, paired with Francis Ford Coppola Director's Cut Russian River Valley 2005 Chardonnay. I'm not a wine person -- sweet tea is more my speed -- and I usually don't bother to read wine labels too closely, but this stuff was so good it made me look.

Thus tantalized, we retreated to the conference room to learn more about the Conservation League's efforts to promote the local food movement.

Then came the best part -- the meal. We walked over to an old packing shed on the CDC property, and sat down at a long table full of friends old and new, drinking more nice wine and dining on real china within earshot of bleating goats.

The menu included fresh free-range chicken from Walterboro, fragrant Carolina Gold rice from the PeeDee area, and the biggest benne wafers I've ever seen.

And of course, those enchanting chanterelles.