Most wild mushroom hunters in Illinois recognize but one edible species: the morel mushroom. And while those sponge-capped spring fungi are easy to recognize, morels appear only once a year, for a few precious weeks. Most mushroom fanciers, therefore, get just one chance annually to collect edible wild mushrooms.

But here’s something to kick around:

Puffballs, those spore-packed dust bags of the Prairie State, are one of the most unmistakable of our wild mushrooms. And, when collected fresh, puffballs can be a surprisingly worthy culinary subject. Puffballs acquired their common name from the ability of mature specimens to discharge a cloud of internally produced spores when physically abused. If puffballs had no other redeeming qualities beyond shooting clouds of dust into the air, we’d still love them:

Most hikers can’t resist the temptation to ceremoniously stomp a dry puffball, just to see the cloud of spores blast outward.

Puffballs are called Gasteromycetes, or “stomach fungi,” because their reproductive spores are produced internally and aren’t dispersed until they mature and an opening in the outer wall of the mushroom occurs. While the Gasteromycete group contains edible, inedible and poisonous mushrooms, puffballs of interest to mycophagists (fungus eaters) are typically

Not only are those strange balls of fungi known as puffballs fun to stomp; many species are perfectly edible treats, ready to roll into your kitchen.
likely the “egg stage” of an Amanita mushroom and could be deadly.

The earthballs, members of the genus Scleroderma, also may be mistaken for puffballs. Earthballs differ from puffballs in that they have a thick or leathery outer skin, grow partially buried in the soil, and are dark purple to black inside early in their development. Most are poisonous, causing sweating, nausea, diarrhea and vomiting when eaten.

The pear-shaped puffball, Lycoperdon pyriforme, is one of the smaller puffballs collected for eating. It is common and is often found growing in large quantities on dead wood. Two softball-size puffballs, Calvatia cyathiformis, the purple-spored puffball, and Calvatia craniformis, the brain puffball, also are good edibles. The purple-spored puffball is commonly found in grassy areas and has purple spores at maturity, while the less-common brain puffball prefers to grow in forested areas and has yellow-brown spores.

It’s the giant puffball, usually called either Calvatia gigantea or Langermania gigantea, that attracts sensational reports from those who encounter these strangely fascinating mushrooms. These spherical to irregularly shaped oddities commonly grow to the size of a basketball or larger and are usually found from late July through September in low areas and forest ravines. The exterior is white early, turning brown in maturity, and their size can be overwhelming to compre-