

Mushrooming at Salt Point

by Simone Wilson

All mushrooms are edible, say fungi enthusiasts: "But some kinds only once." That saying proved tragically accurate last month when a member of a prominent Sonoma wine-making family died after eating poison mushrooms.

Sam Sebastiani, Jr., died at UCSF Medical Center Jan. 14, nine days after eating *amanita phalloides*, a mushroom so toxic it's nicknamed the "deathcap." The 32-year-old Sebastiani was the great-grandson of Samuele Sebastiani, who founded Sebastiani Vineyards in Sonoma in 1904; his father, Sam, Sr., is the owner of Viansa Winery in Sonoma Valley. He was foraging with friends after the recent rains and mistook the deadly amanitas for edible look-alikes. (Most amanitas are poisonous; the *amanita* family causes 90 percent or more of fatal mushroom poisonings.)



Fly Amanitas/*Amanita muscaria*, poisonous
Notice the gills on detail shown at left

Photo by Simone Wilson

Despite the potential danger, mushroom hunters are as zealous as sport fishermen



The *amanita phalloides*' flamboyant cousins, the fire-engine red *amanita muscaria* and the tawny "panther" *amanita* (see below) are common in North Coast woodlands. They're easily identifiable by their colors and by the oatmeal-like flecks generally found on the fully-formed cap. But the greenish-white *amanita phalloides* masquerades as a harmless field mushroom and can even fool experienced mushroom hunters.

Heavy fall and winter rains, followed sunny weather, provide ideal growing

conditions for mushrooms, including amanitas. After the latest winter storm, eight other grew ill from eating wild mushrooms but recovered. Last year 13 Bay Area people got sick from eating them, including a Petaluma farmworker who died and a Taiwanese immigrant who recovered after a partial liver transplant. (Amanitas destroy the liver's ability to function.)

Mushrooms thrive in a moist, warm climate; the wet temperate zone of the Pacific Northwest is a near-perfect nursery for fungi. Despite the potential danger, mushroom hunters are as zealous as sport fishermen, and just as reluctant to reveal their favorite spots. One commonly acknowledged hunting ground, though, is Salt Point State Park, two hours north of San Francisco.

It's a sunny weekday after mid-winter storms. My friend Marcus and I are combing the forested northern section of Salt Point Park, which taken in seven miles of spectacular shoreline. Marcus lived for awhile in southern France, where mushroom hunting is perfected as a high art. (For a wry look at cutthroat mushroom competition among the French, see Peter Mayle's "A Year in Provence.") Marcus' neighbors taught him to ferret out boletes and chanterelles, varieties which also grow here, and he's been my hands-on guide to these edible fungi.

To prevent overpicking, State Parks has limited sport pickers to a five-pound haul. Commercial picking is banned so the mushrooms will have a chance to reproduce. Some varieties, like hedgehog mushrooms, sell for \$13 a pound in North Bay markets, and they're hard to find at Salt Point these days; overzealous pickers probably wiped them out.

"We've come across people with crates full of mushrooms," says Caerleon Safford, interpretive specialist for Fort Ross, five miles down the road. That's way over the five pound limit; the rangers cite them for violating park rules and send them home with empty crates. For now, Fort Ross Park has put the lid on mushrooming altogether to let the mushrooms recover.

We would be wildly lucky to find five pounds, although one hefty, full-grown cep could hit the scales at a couple of pounds. The cep -- also called Steinpilz, King Bolete and *Boletus edulis* -- is the darling of mycophagists, as mushroom eaters call themselves. Like all boletes, the King has a spongy underside instead of gills, making it almost impossible to mistake it for anything else. The King Bolete has about 200 cousins in North America, most of them edible. (The rule of thumb is to avoid boletes with

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orange or red undersides, which don't pop up in coastal California anyway.)

The Kashaya Pomo, who have lived in this part of the coast for the last 40 or 50 centuries, call the King Boletus *cepohkol*, "mushroom hole on the bottom;" they baked it on hot stones. The amanita muscaria they call *ma-ti-hoce*, "poison oak mushroom," a name that implies they know to leave it alone.

"Look at those holes in the pine needles," says Marcus. "The Italians have preceded us." He points with chagrin -- and a trace of grudging admiration -- at several whorls where mushrooms have been plucked from the thick carpet of pine needles. Marcus lives in Occidental, a town largely settled by Italian immigrants who brought their mushroom lore to California. He imagines squads of Italian/Americans combing the woods, always just ahead of us, filling their baskets with boletes and chanterelles. It's his explanation for the ones that got away. For all we know, deer nosed up the missing mushrooms and ate them.



Edible King Boletes, found in the woods at Salt Point Park; notice the caps have a spongy underside instead of gills

Photo by Simone Wilson

We walk around all afternoon, our steps muffled by the thick pine needle duff, then thread our way through tall grass and tangles of blackberry and salal. Stopping on a wooden bridge over a coastal creek, we rest our elbows on the railing and look down at the shady banks. Directly below, hidden in the shelter of the bridge, is a whopper of a King Bolete -- smaller than a hubcap but bigger than a saucer. That evening it becomes the chief ingredient in two fragrant omelettes aux champignons.

Why do people hunt for mushrooms? A mushroom-studded forest is a natural gallery of shapes, colors, scents, and tastes, from the yellow goo of Witches Butter to the shiny rose and purple hues of the russulas, from tall

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skinny Shaggy Manes to funnel-shaped chanterelles. Even the names are entertaining. Some are whimsical: Orange Mock Oyster, Jelly Crep, White Cheese Polypore, Hen of the Woods. Others are just plain yucky: Slimy Lactarius, Turpentine Waxy Cap, Bleeding Agaricus.

Mushrooming is like fishing -- it's a good excuse to get outdoors amble around in a beautiful place, even if you never find a mushroom. And for mycophagists, a wild mushroom soup or a plate of mushrooms sauteed in butter and garlic evokes the scent of the pine woods.

Aside from picking and eating mushrooms, you can simply observe them in their natural habitat. If you're hoping to photograph them, a tripod is a plus, since mushrooms prefer dark moist corners where available light is dim.

The mushroom is a sly, elusive quarry -- it grows in dark corners, and if it isn't picked quickly, it vanishes back into the soil. Hunting and gathering are generally frowned on in state parks, but some parks allow mushroom picking because the fungi pop up suddenly and turn to wet pulp within a few days anyway (that's the mush in mushroom).

Ethnic groups with a tradition of mushrooming, the French and Italians, for instance, also retain some of their spore lore. But transplanted folk wisdom can trip us up -- some California poisoning cases have involved Southeast Asian immigrants, who mistook deadly North coast mushrooms for innocuous ones back home.

If you want to get serious about mushroom hunting, get a good reference work with color illustrations like the Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mushrooms. Above all, go with a cautious experienced guide who knows what to pick.

Mycology societies are popular from Australia to Europe to the Pacific Northwest, and they've pollinated the web with myco-sites, from Mycologist On-line, to the Puffball (put up by the Willamette Valley [Oregon] Mushroom Society) and the jaunty Spores Afield, created by the Colorado Mycological Society. The [Mycology Society of San Francisco](#) is the nation's largest society for mushroom aficionados.

Most groups offer classes, slide shows and guided walks to initiate novice mushroom hunters. Enjoy the woods, but please, please be careful out

there.

NEXT 

["Nature's Grocery Store"](#)



Panther ananita, poisonous
Photo by Simone Wilson

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