

## The First Time We Saw Mushrooms

by Bob & Barbara Sommer

'Cortinarius glaucopus' (1858), watercolor by Mrs. T. J. Hussey

Thirty years ago, we were hiking in the woods and took shelter under a tree during a downpour. There was little to see as the rain continued, and we happened to look at the ground. Suddenly there was fungus (sound crescendo), all sizes, colors, and shapes, like none we had seen before. They were fruiting above ground, under the duff, on fallen logs, and on trees. Where had they been hiding all these years? We felt like the woman in Thornton Wilder's "Our Town", who returns after death to observe a day in her girlhood. She cannot bear to watch more than a few moments, and asks rhetorically, "Were we all that blind?"



We visited a local bookstore to purchase a field guide, which we hoped would identify the fungi we had seen. (Notice the naïve wording of the statement, the hope that a book would identify the fungi.) Knowing nothing about mushroom guides, we chose Lange and Hora's *A Guide to Mushrooms and Toadstools* for its realistic water color illustrations. We relied on this book for several months, with limited success. Eventually, we noticed in the fine print that the book was originally published in Denmark. It did not cover some varieties common in our area and many of the technical names differed from those used locally.

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*Mycena pura* (1858), watercolor by Mrs. T. J. Hussey

The next step was to attend a meeting of the nearest mycological society. By happy coincidence, this was the time of the annual fungus fair. We were amazed by the variety of mushrooms displayed. The docents at the tables were knowledgeable and helpful; the guru at the ID desk, no mere mortal. This must have been what a visit to the Delphic Oracle was like. Supplicants lined up at the temple door to present their meager offerings, and with a glance, the guru made an authoritative pronouncement, "You found this under oak (or manzanita or in a grassy area)," followed by an unintelligible Latin phrase. Truly we were blessed to be so close to such wisdom. The



docents at the displays seemed six feet tall; the high priest at the ID table nine feet tall. In our ignorance, we were tiny mycena.

At the book section of the fungus fair, we obtained field guides more suited to our region, including "David" and "Gary." Both were current, well-written, comprehensive, and usable by beginners, although each had its strengths and limitations. "Gary" emphasized East Coast fungi while "David," especially in his first edition, focused on the West Coast. "Gary" employed stilted popular names that no one seemed to want or care about; "David" coined humorous phrases or provided neologisms. "Gary" was more helpful for keying by shape, while "David" by spore color. This made "Gary" more suited to Bob's match-the-picture strategy while "David" required step-by-step keying, for which only Barbara had the patience and temperament.

We left our first fungus fair with heads spinning - so many genera, species, and varieties, each with its own technical name, all those imposters and look alikes; where to begin? We forayed, asked questions, listened, and read. We found that sketching helped us learn species names. Our image files expanded with each new fungus drawn, making it easier to identify new varieties.

**Chicken mushroom (*Laetiporus sulphureus*), photo by John Denk**

We made mistakes - though obviously none deadly. We thought we had discovered a new species, but it turned out to be a curled up banana slug. On the day before his wedding, we inadvertently caused gastric distress in our son by feeding him undercooked Chicken Mushroom (*Laetiporus sulphureus*). Another minor gastric incident arose from misidentifying *Agaricus xanthodermus*. Eaten raw in a salad, it did not reveal its telltale yellow stain. Dyer's polypore (*Phaeolus schweinitzii*) and honey mushroom (*Armillaria mellea*) take on a variety of hues, depending on maturity and environment. We have re-discovered and re-identified them many, many times. Barbara wept openly when a ranger made her dump a dozen carefully wrapped specimens collected over a period of hours spent scrambling steep slopes through poison oak.



## Fast Forward to 2003

Our library of mushroom books and periodicals has expanded to include field guides from distant places where we have forayed, classic reprints like McIlvaine and Krieger, coffee table books bought at moments of weakness, a few technical monographs beyond our ken, numerous cookbooks, and back issues of newsletters and magazines. We have a box of mushroom memorabilia containing a bumper sticker "We brake for fungi," mushroom-dyed wool strands, an artist's conk with names inscribed, assorted ceramic mushroom kitsch (mostly red or green replicas of *A. muscaria*) given to us by friends, a dried up ten-year old hygrophanous earthstar that still opens when immersed in water, and woolen gloves that smell like maple syrup, even though the candy caps were collected years ago.

We organized forays and served as fungus fair docents as repayment for the help given to us. The gurus we thought were so tall have shrunk in stature. They are no longer giants or gods, but mortals like ourselves.

We tried and failed to master microscopic ID. Our children's 120X microscope wasn't up to the task of differentiating spore characteristics. We continue to rely on macroscopic features. We have a lot of drawings classified as *Cortinarius* sp. and *Inocybe* sp..

Family and friends no longer regard our hobby with grave apprehension. Seeing that we are still alive and healthy after decades of mushrooming, and noting the frequent presence of forest mushrooms on restaurant menus, they concluded that we are neither suicidal or homicidal. We have introduced several friends and family members to the pleasures of foraging.

We keep "David" in the trunk and "Gary" at home for reference use. We never go anywhere (other than on airplanes) without a pocket knife and paper bag. We have lost the obsessive desire to add new varieties to a list or to identify every LBM. If a mushroom isn't edible or sketchable, we leave it alone. We are inured to debates about technical nomenclature. If the common name remains the same, we don't care if the white coats call it *Lepista nuda*, *Clitocybe nuda*, or *Tricholoma nudum*.

The glen where we first "saw" forest mushrooms is closed to public access. We continue to think of this magic place in reverential terms.

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Note: "Gary" and "David" refer to the two major field guides for North America: Gary Lincoff's *The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mushrooms*, and David Arora's *Mushrooms Demystified*. See Harley Barnhart's Guide to Guides for more information.

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