

## SPEND A DAY WITH THE MUSHROOM PEOPLE

Here we are at an undisclosed location, and pictured at right is the reason I was sworn to secrecy. You see that brown funnel poking up from the leaf litter in the middle of the photo at the right? It looks like a little curl of shaved chocolate that somebody stuck in the moss on the forest floor.

That is a black chantarelle, or black trumpet if you prefer. You can buy them dried in grocery stores in fancy parts of town for ten to twenty dollars an ounce. Or you can spend an afternoon with the Arkansas Mycological Society and fill up a Wal-Mart bag or two. Jay Justice, the chief mushroom enthusiast in these parts, convinced me that there's no sense in publicizing the gathering areas, that competition for black chantarelles is plenty 'nuff as it are.

If you want to go out 'shrooming with these folks, however, you can join the Arkansas Mycological Society and get their newsletter, and over the course of a year you'll be invited to all their habitual haunts. You'll also be taught the ecologically responsible ways to collect, preserve and prepare edible mushrooms. So it's not exactly a big secret, but I didn't want to mess with a guy whose very name is Justice.



Speaking of Jay Justice, here he is, the Indiana Jones of Arkansas mushrooms. The man who puts the "fun" in "fungus." If somebody turns up in an emergency room after eating bad mushrooms, this is the guy the doctors call to ID the offending fungus. That kind of thing doesn't happen as often as your mom would have you believe. I read in the AMS newsletter, March 2002 issue, that in 2000 only 61 cases of mushroom poisoning were reported in the U.S. and none were fatal. More people died from bad hamburgers than bad mushrooms.

Speaking of which, when you cook wild mushrooms, never cook them all. Keep a few in the icebox, so that if somebody gets sick you can show the doctor exactly what you ate. Also, mushroom toxicity is a weird, weird thing. With some mushrooms, you don't get sick the first time you eat them, but you do get sick the second time. Sensitivities and immunities can also seem pretty



Jay Justice: Mushroom Expert. Note the Handy Reference T-Shirt.

haphazard. You really should go gathering with an expert the first time or two. The good news is that wild mushrooms are safer to handle than wild plants. There are no thorns, no toxic odors or oils, as with poison ivy. You can pick up practically any wild mushroom and not suffer any ill effects other than maybe getting a little icky.

If you accompany Jay on an expedition, here's what happens: You show up and there's Jay with an entourage, which is pretty much anybody he can talk into showing up. We were a party of five on the day I went out, but the number generally varies from two or three to as many as a dozen. A good class size. Then everybody fans out looking for mushrooms, which end up in Jay's basket. If you're a novice, Jay will point out edible and poisonous varieties, and if anybody finds a big patch of choice culinary fungi, the group gathers them and that's their compensation for helping out with this survey.

Jay identifies and catalogs the varieties and what he does with that data is not for me to say.

I've got a couple of tidbits to give you before you sign up for your first foray. This could keep you from getting laughed at, so pay attention. Don't ask how to tell the difference between a mushroom and a toadstool. There's no such thing as a toadstool, and a mushroom is a fungus that either looks like a mushroom (with a stalk and cap) or that mycologists agree is a mushroom. Another thing Jay doesn't care for is some newbie running up to him with every little shelf fungus asking "Is this edible is this edible is this edible." If Jay identifies something for you as inedible you're supposed to remember it for the rest of the day and not bring in that kind any more. He also won't help you find psychedelic mushrooms. To his thinking those are just poisonous varieties and he doesn't want any blame for you getting sick.

Even though black chantarelles are expensive, when they're in season they're not all that rare. I went on my first foray over a year ago, and once I knew what to look for I discovered good eating everywhere. Those pumpkin colored blobs that pop up every year in my back yard under the red oak turned out to be yellow chantarelles, and they're much sought after as well. The Audobon Society guidebook says they're the most widely gathered wild edible mushroom worldwide. Yellow chantarelles go for about fifteen dollars a pound wholesale.

From the wildflower conventions I learned you can eat dandelions, chickweed and violets. Now I find these chantarelles are good to eat. I figure I waste a lot of food just by mowing it rather than picking it.

Depending on the season and Mother Nature's rain schedule, some forays are more productive than others. Here's one of this year's satisfied harvesters with a basketful of edibles, representing about a fourth of the day's harvest. The thing is, we could have visited this same spot a week before or a week after and come up with a tenth the harvest. The value of going out on an organized foray is that you'll learn the combination of weather, season, soil, site and associated trees that will keep you from wasting your efforts.



American Caesar's Mushroom -- This one's edible, although not especially desirable, and it has some toxic look-alikes.

mushrooms in certain designated wilderness areas, and that you are familiar with the ecologically responsible techniques of mushroom harvesting. Stop by the nearest ranger station on your way to the woods and ask for a "recreational use permit."

After the foray, the core members of the group gather at the starting point. Jay retrieves from the trunk of his car a cardboard box full of dog-eared reference books and then the fun begins. It's a quiet kind of fun involving magnifying glasses and tiny tools and the scraping of stubby pencils in notebooks. On certain forays, when the members expect to find the appropriate mushrooms, someone will pack a camp stove, saute pan and olive oil among the reference books.

If you want to gather mushrooms in the national forest, you'll need a permit. The permits don't cost anything, but the Forest Service likes to keep records as to what the public uses the National Forest for. They also want to make sure you don't gather

Write for a copy of the AMS newsletter at the Arkansas Mycological Society at 16055 Michele Drive, Alexander, AR 72202. Here's an [e-mail](#) address.

RTJ--6/1/02

I got a note from a reader who wishes to remain anonymous and who offers some cautionary mushroom anecdotes.

I don't doubt the stats. I do think the mushroom poisoning incidents tend to be clustered, at least in vague, semi-scientific sense. The cluster attributes tend to be: good mushroom year & location, and gatherers who are either (a) recent immigrants, or (b) clueless newbies, and sometimes (c) clueful but not quite clueful enough, or overconfident, oldtimers.

On the left coast, Northern California, for a few years it seemed that every season some newly arrived VietNameese family, or visiting Italian relatives, would either die from *Amenita Phalloides*, or become very ill and sometimes die from *Amenita Muscaria*.

The problem seems to be the very close resemblance that those two species have to particularly prized edible mushrooms in "the old country".

Death by *Amenita Phalloides* is particularly gruesome. As one 'shroom gathering friend said, "You've got maybe a day to set your affairs in order, then several more of wretching in agony as your liver, kidneys and every other system in your body dies." As far as I know, there isn't any cure once someone has ingested them.

Hideous, but true, story: Years ago a friend was a volunteer paramedic in La Honda, a mountain burg in San Mateo County, overlooking both the coast to the west and the SF Bay Area to the east. One spring weekend his crew got a call to pull a very sick man out of the forest and get him to hospital. Turned out that the man was a Stanford mycologist who had found some *Phalloides*, mistaken them for something else, and nibbled. My friend said he was doubled up in pain, wretching, losing consciousness, delirious, and just about everything it is better not to be if one can avoid it. He died some days later in Stanford Hospital.

I've been on a few forays in northern Cal. over the years, with knowledgable friends. They stick to the "tried, true, and absolutely beyond any shadow of a doubt known to be safe, you betchum, if you don't know for absolutely sure, don't eat." That usually means Chanterelles and "chicken of the woods". Both are really good eatin', and we usually found them by the ton, well by the tens of pounds anyhow.

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