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Wilderness Survival

Exploring the Horizons of Mycophagy on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington

Part 1

Text and Photos by [Storm](#)

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Mycophagy --The eating of fungi; esp. of those species usually neglected or avoided.



Tooth Jelly

Mushroom Mystique

As I sit down to compose this article, a new generation of fungus gnats emerges and takes flight in my cabin, flittering around my desk lamp like myco-foragers combing a promising new patch of wet, lush ground. A seething conglobate of their future cohorts writhe across my desk, desperate to return to the wild. I oblige them via an index card. Fungi of various shapes and sizes, and in various stages of health and decay (hence the insects), wait to be identified while scattered upon sheets of white printer paper. Having spent the last three years in the San Francisco Bay region, and now on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington, has provided me with the glorious opportunity to stalk the wild mushroom in some very mycologically-diverse regions of North America. As I forage for edible or otherwise useful botanicals, insects and geologic gifts, it is rare to not encounter the ubiquitous Yellow-Stemmed *Mycena* (*Mycena epipterygia*), the omnipresent, gelatinous Poor-Man's Gumdrop (*Guepiniopsis alpinus*) or the abundant troops of the delightfully slimy Oregon Gomphidius (*Gomphidius oregonensis*). During the cooler, rainy winters here the mushroom can nearly always provide a sizeable and reliable meal. It would be a shame to ignore such a feast for the eyes and stomach for the want of a little knowledge of how to incorporate these organisms into one's everyday foraging habits. You may even be rewarded by a hidden population of fungus gnat larvae that gracefully float to the top of any soup that your mushrooms may have become part of (delicious!). Why not learn about our fungal friends and partake of this woodland bounty?



Admirable Bolete

I decided to write this article in response to the richly diverse reactions I get from passersby while I hunt mushrooms. Basket and camera in tow, up in a tree or face-first in the dirt, whatever breed of spectacle I present inevitably elicits the fear, the fantasy or the fascination the general public holds for Kingdom Fungi. Here is a sample of comments people have offered me in passing:

- from a young man: "If you boil the mushroom with a piece of silver, the mushroom will be edible if the water doesn't turn black."—Does this mean that deliquescing *Coprinus* sp. (Inky Caps) are poisonous?
- from a young man: "I only eat mushrooms that don't taste sour."—unfortunately that closes the door on a lot of perfectly edible *Boletes*, and welcomes a host of deadly *Amanitas*!
- from a middle-aged couple: "They're safe if they aren't bitter, right?"—*Amanita phalloides* (Death Cap) and *A. ocreata* (Destroying Angel) aren't the least bit bitter...
- from an elderly couple: "You remind me of when we were children, picking mushrooms with our grandparents in France. That was during the war, you know, and people got sick trying to eat all sorts of mushrooms when the food supply was down. But Grandfather knew what he was doing, and mushrooms got us through."—I love these kinds of interactions.
- from a group of young men: "Hey, man...have you found any real good ones? You know, the kind that stain blue?"—I get tired of these interactions.
- from a middle-aged woman: "I never touch those things. They can kill you! One of my friends ended up in the hospital after touching one that grew in the woods!"—I've never encountered a mushroom that bites...
- from a group of pre-schoolers: "Awwww, they're so cute! Are they alive?"—That's why I'm a naturalist...



Black Morel

In light of these interactions, and many more, I thought it was time for me to educate myself on the various positive aspects of fungi, especially those related to edibility, and relate my findings and personal experiences to other mycophiles. I write this article from the perspective of a person who get bombarded with the anxiety and fear from students of all ages regarding fungi. I am also a student of all things Stone-Age, including paleo-nutrition and foraging dynamics: I have eaten nearly 300 species of fungi and value the consumption of wild mushrooms as a way to understand and directly interact with my environment. The pictures that accompany this article present some of the lesser-eaten species that I am particularly fond of.



Chocolate Tube Slime

The Joy of Mushrooms

Would it surprise you to hear that some evolutionary biologists consider fungi to be more closely related to Kingdom Animalia than Plantae? It appears that humans and fungi had a common ancestor around 460 million years ago. To wit: Mushrooms can store energy in the form of glycogen; some mushrooms contain vitamin B12 (very important for vegetarians); and mushrooms produce chitin, the substance that forms the carapaces of crustacea. While animals share these characteristics, there may be no plants that can perform such feats. A curious note: at least some slime molds' (Myxomycetes) spores, when released and having alighted upon a suitable substrate, transform into an animalcule equipped with flagellae (similar to sperm). It then has the animal-like capability of swimming to a desirable location and again transmuted to "a living envelope of cellular ooze."

If this isn't enough to endear you to rush outside and embrace the nearest fleshy fungal fruitification that adorns your compost heap, rotting outbuilding or the canes of your favorite armed berry-plant, then consider their proposed nutritional benefits. Although it is not within the scope of this article to fastidiously and independently verify each of the following claims (see References at the end of this article for more information), read on:

- The common grocer's brown button mushroom (*Agaricus bisporus*) and its slightly older self, the portabella, which is a cultivated form of the wild field mushroom (*Agaricus campestris*), is nearly equivalent to milk regarding amino acid content.
- Some mushrooms add fiber, niacin, riboflavin, vitamin B12, and all of the amino acids—complete protein.
- "The vitamin content of mushrooms resembles that of meat."
- "Scientists have only recently confirmed what ancient cultures have known for centuries: mushrooms have within them some of the most potent medicines found in nature. Long viewed as tonics, we now know that their cellular constituents can profoundly improve the quality of human health. Differing from most pharmaceuticals, these healing agents have extraordinarily low toxicity, even at high doses."
- Many polypore species, and some gilled mushrooms are great sources of anti-tumor, anti-viral and anti-bacterial metabolites. The cosmopolitan Turkey Tail fungus has been shown to impede the growth of *Candida* infections.
- A lot of mushrooms contain MSG, which can magnify the flavor of other foods. Some of you may recall the purported link between MSG and certain illnesses, but Professor William Wood of Humbolt State University explains, "This is the same chemical once believed to be responsible for the 'Chinese Restaurant Syndrome.' It is now known that histamines in soy sauce are the real culprit."
- Since many mushrooms contain chitin and its more easily digested derivative, chitosan, their consumption can elicit such benefits as: enhanced tissue repair, quicker burn and wound healing, increased resistance against some blood and skin pathogens, among others. Dr. Goodman also notes that, "Mexicans have used mushrooms with their chitosanaceous cell walls to accelerate laceration wound healing."

On to Part 2...

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