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Wilderness Survival

Exploring the Horizons of Mycophagy on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington Part 2

Text and Photos by [Storm](#)

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"There is but one way by which to determine the edibility of a species. If it looks and smells inviting, and its species cannot be determined, taste a very small piece. Do not swallow it. Note the effect on the tongue and mouth. But many species, delicious when cooked, are not inviting raw. Cook a small piece; do not season it. Taste again; if agreeable eat it (unless it is an Amanita). After several hours, no unpleasant effect arising, cook a larger piece, and increase the quantity until fully satisfied as to its qualities. Never vary from this system, no matter how much tempted. No possible danger can arise from adhering firmly to it."



Deer Truffle

Those Before Me

Although I disagree with that last sentence, I am inspired by the sheer volume of Captain Charles McIlvaine's mycophagic experimentation (nearly 800 species!), especially when considering the relative paucity of information back then regarding the possible dangers of this undertaking. The modern "toadstool tester" can now thankfully peruse the pages of such books as David Arora's *Mushrooms Demystified* and note the various accumulative (*Hygrocybe punicea* concentrates cadmium within its tissues), synergistic (*Coprinus* and alcohol shouldn't be mixed), or latent (serious symptoms of *Cortinarius* poisoning can delay up to 20 days) dangers that may have been little-known a century ago. But perhaps there are still those of us who, while deeply respecting the powers of Kingdom Fungi, simply wish to replenish a body of knowledge lost in part by the past ravages of cultural displacement. Some assert that experimenting with mushrooms is unnecessary, for, "our ancestors have already provided for us,

through trial and error, a comprehensive list" from which we can glean. While I agree that we should take the time to learn about wild organisms before stuffing them into our mouths, the available body of knowledge is far from complete, if not unavailable. I am hard-pressed to find such information on mushrooms eaten by past tribes in the whole of North America. I feel a certain excitement when, upon looking up the edibility of a freshly keyed-out specimen, I'm offered the succinct disappointment, "Unknown," which is oft-tempered by that fickle admonition, "Do not experiment." Woe cometh the day when I do not heed such judgment as a charge to step forth and claim my right—No, my privilege!--to push the horizons of current wisdom surrounding the species at hand (and soon at mouth!). The miraculous gifts inherent within dozens, if not hundreds, of otherwise edible (in my experience) and quite common—to the experienced eye--species are being inadvertently snubbed by condemnations such as: too slimy; rank odor; acrid or bitter taste; not recommended; not edible due to its resemblance to species of unknown edibility; too tough or gelatinous in texture; of no consequence due to small size. Many of these misconceptions can be remedied thusly: pounding of species with tough flesh to render them more palatable; cooking and pickling can dispel many acrid or bitter tastes, especially within the genera of *Lactarius*, *Agaricus* and *Russula*; infusing tough, woody species with hot water in order to ingest nutrients, essences and flavors as a tea; be sure of your identification; and, lastly, my favorite—expanding acceptance of diverse foodstuffs through the purging of food prejudices.



Red-Belted Conk

"With regard to tastes, it is always well to remember that they are individual; otherwise moths would not eat cloth."

A Word of Caution

I suppose a disclaimer of some sort would be prudent regarding the theme of this article.

Although I respectfully consider the monumental amount of experience and wisdom that the readership of this journal possesses regarding the dangers of experimenting with wild edibles in general, I sternly warn everyone who may consider experimental mycophagy: Eating mushrooms of unknown edibility can result in illness or death. There is no room for a cavalier attitude nor for intermittent attention to detail. I have studied a myriad of warnings and case histories on this subject from a plethora of authorities. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have never experienced deleterious effects—thus far. There is that infinitesimal, lingering concern in the far corner of my psyche regarding possible long-term effects of this research. But as with mountain climbing, para-sailing, or stepping outside (even inside) one's dwelling, there is an inherent risk involved with every activity. Study. Be careful.



A variety of edibles

Evaluate your reasons for doing what you do. I am a Naturalist by vocation and hobby—I am driven to acquire primary experiences and then share them. I am not, however, predisposed to acquiescing when someone attempts to corral my actions based upon their prejudices or murky, nebulous claims perpetuated by fear. I am not advocating that you go out and pick the mushrooms I mention in this article and eat them. I am merely supplementing the existing literature with my knowledge. I invoke the words of Roy Chapman Andrews, "Each one of us is a trustee of the past; we have the task of living up to our heritage – and adding something to it."



Oregon Varnished Conk

Methods

What follows is the procedure I use when determining the edibility of a species of mushroom, whether it is generally regarded as inedible, hallucinogenic, or unknown. I do not necessarily endorse your use of this method—I do not know what will work and be safe for you. This method is constantly undergoing improvement, so waiting periods can change from species to species for me and can depend upon the time of day I start the process. When in doubt—I go without (for a while longer, anyway)!

1. I am absolutely confident of the specimen's identity—doubt can manifest itself physically. Recently I keyed out a

specimen of Tubaria furfuracea, a mushroom generally regarded as dangerous to eat due to its relation to potentially deadly genus Galerina and similar appearance to a myriad of other poisonous LBM's. When it came time to eat it, I had doubts. So I put it in the refrigerator and "slept on it." The next morning I went into the field and collected another couple specimens and keyed them out to T. furfuracea again, examining the spores, which eased my doubt and I consumed it in the manner described below. Other than the acrid-burnt taste, no harm was experienced (cooking dispels most of the displeasing flavor, however).

2. I consider what the field guides have to say about the species in question.
3. I eat a dime-sized piece of raw cap on an empty stomach. I choose to test mushrooms "in the raw" because I think if any adverse reactions are to occur, this will expedite matters. I'd rather know sooner than later.
4. I wait about 12 hours.
5. I eat half of the remaining raw cap.
6. I wait about 8 hours.
7. I eat rest of raw cap and stem.
8. I wait about 8 hours.
9. I eat one whole, cooked mushroom on an empty stomach.
10. If I'm better for the experience, then I'll eat the mushroom once I encounter it again and give thanks to the aborigines and the McIlvaines of the world who have done this for us with hundreds of other species!

At any point during this procedure that I sense ill effects, I would discontinue the experiment on that species. To date, I've never noticeably suffered from any of these trials.

On to Part 3...

(Part 1 Part 2 Part 3)

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