

# Man claims Santa Claus mushroom delusion

APPLGATE, Ore. (AP) — Even among mushroom experts, David Arora stands apart.

Arora hopes someday someone will document his theory that the legend of Santa Claus sprang from the toxic and hallucinatory mushroom *Amanita muscaria*, used for centuries by shamans to bring on dreams of revelation.

"These mushrooms come from the Far North," Arora said while tramping through the southern Oregon woods. "Santa Claus is dressed like them," with a red cap. "He's always going, 'Ho, ho, ho,' as he might if he had eaten this mushroom."

"Reindeer are also fond of eating them, and getting sort of drunk and wobbly, and Santa Claus has got these reindeer that fly."

The story is one of many startling departures from the grim standards of mycology to be found in his latest book, *All That the Rain Promises and More ... A Hip Pocket Guide to Western Mushrooms* (Ten Speed Press).

The cover sets the tone with a photo of a chamber musician in a tuxedo with his trombone under one arm, his hands filled with chanterelles, and his face bearing a look of devilish joy as he stealthily steps through a clump of live oaks.

"I firmly believe in stressing the fun in fungi," Arora writes.

The book is salted with jolly mushroom hunters dancing through the woods with mushrooms on their heads and telling stories of memorable hunts.

Arora tells of a murder solved by a clue left on a fungus called Artist's Palette, and a mushroom society lottery decided by which patio brick is displaced by the annual eruption of a puffball known as Dead Man's Foot, or pisolithus.

People recount how they dye sweaters, a dog and even their own hair with mushroom pigments.

"Initially, I think his work was resented by many of

the professional mycology group. He was not a trained professional mycologist. Yet his key is the best out, by far," Mike Amaranthus, an ecosystem team leader for the Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station said.

Patrons of The Book Stop in Grants Pass concur, voting with their wallets.

"We sell tons," said co-owner Helen Scott, many to people who hope to make extra money picking wild mushrooms.

Arora, 40, first became interested in mushrooms while growing up in Pasadena, Calif.

Arora now lives in Santa Cruz, Calif., giving private classes on identifying mushrooms and selling his books.

Arora spends a lot of time on the road, whether in southern Oregon selling books out of the Toyota hatchback he shares with his two dogs, Haycorn and Tina, or in the African country of Malawi, where he communicates with local mushroom hunters by showing them pictures.

"I believe in creatures doing what they are designed to do, and one of the things we are really good at is foraging," he said. "The most ancient questions our mind asks, even before we started inventing tools, would be questions like, 'Why is there all this fruit on this tree, and none over there?'"

Arora has less in common with scientists than with Siberian villagers who fill crocks with mushrooms they find in the woods and salt them to make a crunchy condiment for vodka.

"I'll eat a lot more nuts if they're on a tree and I have to pick them and crack them, than if they're just sitting there," he said.

Arora dismisses the fear many Americans have of wild mushrooms.

"If kids in Africa and Mexico can learn them and pick them without getting poisoned, there is no reason to fear

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Pacific Northwest Research Station

them," he said.

Mushroom hunting attracts people who tend to be bold and curious, and sometimes a little strange.

Arora recalls one time when a woman called asking if he would lead her to a patch of matsutake, a mushroom that is relatively rare in the West and highly prized in Japan for its spicy cinnamon aroma. Knowing of only one patch near his home, he agreed to take her, but only if she agreed to be blindfolded.

"I said that thinking she would refuse, but she said, 'OK,'" Arora recalled. "We were really afraid the cops would pull us over and want to know why these two men had a woman blindfolded lying on the floor of their car."

They drove around in circles and led the woman through the woods to the secret patch, where they let her pick some. Then they put the blindfold back on and took her home.

"Two years later, this woman who knew her called me. By this time I had found some nicer patches, and this one had been discovered. So I said, 'I will take you there. And I won't have to blindfold you.'

"When I said that, she lost interest."

## WSU seeks to ban racist comments

PULLMAN, Wash. (AP) — The Commission on the Status of Minorities at Washington State University is again seeking to ban racist comments.

The commission last week asked university President Sam Smith to adopt a tougher racial harassment policy.

The panel last year backed off seeking a ban on racist comments after a U.S. Supreme Court ruling shot down so-called "speech codes." The university instead prohibited sexual and racial harassment without directly banning racial remarks.

But after some racial incidents this autumn, including the appearance of a white supremacist flier on campus, the commission came up with the new request.

The new proposal would prohibit racist or discriminatory comments or epithets that demean someone's race, nationality or ancestry; comments that "create an intimidating, hostile or demeaning environment"; or comments that tend to incite "an immediate breach of the peace."

"We always felt there is a need for a statement on racial harassment, to first of all send a strong message to the university community regarding the commitment to nondiscrimination," said Alex Tan, director of Washington State's Murrow School of Communications and chairman of the commission.

**'You can have sanctions there, but is it really going to end bigotry... I don't think so.'**

—Dawn Reynolds  
President Pullman ACLU

Tan said another goal is to clarify what racial harassment is, "so people will know what should not be tolerated."

Punitive sanctions were not part of the recommendation, but violations of the policy likely would be referred to the campus conduct board, Tan said.

The American Civil Liberties Union said a ban on free speech is the wrong way to fight racism.

"You can have sanctions there, but is it really going to end bigotry?" said Dawn Reynolds, president of the Pullman chapter of the ACLU. "I don't think so."

Reynolds said the university could do more to create diversity by hiring more minority faculty members.

Reynolds said the proposed policy probably would not stand up to a legal challenge.

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