

CLOSE TO HOME

# In praise of FUNGI



The *Amanita muscaria* is a poisonous mushroom.



Lobster mushrooms can be found in August.

“Dig a shallow hole in the ground and all you get is dust!”

That is one of my buddies proclaiming mushroom apocalypse. Indeed, this has been a dry season, and mushroom gathering fears run rampant. It remains easier each season to lay the blame on climate change. Particularly, if one is a mushroom addict and scientifically inclined. Such a person believes that these wonderful vibrant delectables produce health and happiness. I do.

Mushrooms are kind of an earth-borne fruit, not sweet like a peach, but pungent and unique. Each mushroom has its own singular flavor and texture. Essentially, they emerge in the Pacific Northwest during the fall, though this year chanterelles fruited in May, and then disappeared. The lovely oyster mushroom is frequently collected in the spring, and lobster mushrooms are sometimes found in August. East of the mountains (morels) are another story, but let’s stay close to home.

Mushrooms stem from long invisible veins called mycelia, which can tunnel for a hundred yards underground, webbed like a road map across the terrain of our own Columbia-Pacific landscape.

There are hundreds of varieties. Perhaps I know a hundred. That is not at all remarkable. Along the way, I gather and eat about 40. These are called delectables. Of the other 60, most are less tasty, often chewy, woody, bitter or simply unexceptional. Ten of those will make a buddy sick; call that gastrointestinal upset. Three might kill you, destroying the liver in just a few

hours. Four or five make you critically sick. One must learn to be cautious. One should be knowledgeable before sticking just any mushroom in his or her mouth. Trust the experts on this.

Over time, one friend became allergic to chanterelles. Another bout might well send her to the hospital. The golden chanterelle is probably the favorite and most coveted mushroom in the Pacific Northwest. There should be no firm rules to mushroom consumption. But be careful. First time out, eat just a few bites, and then wait several hours before devouring the rest. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure for sure, in this case.

I prepare and eat wild mushrooms like a crazy man. A few celebrated mycologists claim they never met a mushroom they didn’t like or couldn’t eat. Please don’t go there. For centuries, First Peoples ate psychedelic mushrooms (psychoactive basidiomycete fungus) in an attempt to chase spiritual enlightenment. Perhaps some arrived! The *Amanita muscaria* does produce a high. But listen please; the little white dots on top of the cap are strychnine. Eating this mushroom is a very bad idea. There are around 15 varieties of the *Amanita* mushroom. Several are extremely poisonous.

Let’s drop-kick back to the first 40. Here lies bliss. The delicate earthy taste emanates certain euphoria, certainly for me — not that Native American high, but a deep resonating pleasure. No, this is not a religion.

This morning I cooked and ate two bright yellow-yoked farm eggs accompa-

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nied by my wife’s sourdough rye bread. On that same plate were perched a delicate pile of *Boletus edulis*, the King Bolete or Porcini mushroom, simply coated with virgin olive oil and sea salt, and then grilled. Nothing could be much better or tastier. Porcini make me happy.

Taste and smell and texture are unique among mushrooms. They are an antitoxin, and that theory is built on much research. For dinner, I chopped and sautéed the *Lactarius deliciosus*, deglazed the pan with Calvados brandy, and slopped in a splash of heavy cream. When the cream bubbled and gurgled and thickened, I poured this bit of heaven over clam cakes fried in olive oil. Tell me, when is life any better?

This is indeed a bad year for mushroom collecting. Little to no rain has dampened my spirits but not the great outdoors. Three autumns ago, it rained six inches in three days. This was September. Mushrooms were everywhere. I stood in one shady spot. Under the Sitka spruce, there must have been 40 boletes. I filled my basket and left the larger, softer Porcini to germinate. I left the babies, a sound practice. Mushrooms also drop spore prints or spores. Wind takes them. Scatters them. These spores make babies that next fall. Mushrooms with closed caps don’t drop spores, don’t reproduce. Leave them for a couple of days and then harvest perfect mushrooms. In other words: help yourself, but don’t take too much.

Toward the end of this October, rain was falling softly. Under the spruce trees, rainwater dappled the boughs like so much silver paint, sang a sweet wet song. Lollygagging, I shuffled through bramble until, 20 to 30 yards ahead, I spotted the telltale signs of my favorite mushroom, a large fawn-colored cap or hat, a stem thick as a fist. As I got closer, I identified three more. These were Porcini. They stood tall and proud. Pushing through a field of moss,



Two perfect Matsutake mushrooms.

they rose up nearly a foot. I offered up a thanksgiving to the mushroom gods and cut the stems close to the ground. I placed them gently in my Balinese basket, and then covered the earth depression with pine needles and duff. I was sealing off the mycelium, protecting it from drying and dying.

After a long trek of several miles, I had a half-full basket. I was happy. It had been a good walk. Expectations of a fine repast wafted through my brain. I thought about preparations, a lovely glass of pinot noir.

If seasonally late, the rain was back. The earth greeted it like an old friend. It would be a short season, but what the heck! One should never complain about bliss, or dish it out in measured proportions. How lucky we are, here in this damp corner of the world and so close to home.

## Coastal Life

Story and photos by DAVID CAMPICHE