

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ATW-13

A Mushroom Omelette II: San Ysidro

Pasto
Colombia

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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017
U.S.A.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Probably the best mushrooms to use as psychedelics are those containing psilocybin, a drug that is relatively gentle on the physical organism yet strongly capable of inducing visionary experience. A number of species contain this substance, many in the genus Psilocybe, for which it is named. Of the several kinds of psilocybin mushrooms available in Mexico, where their ritual consumption is an old Indian tradition, I have tried only one: the species Stropharia (or Psilocybe) cupensis, known colloquially as San Ysidro.

This mushroom grows widely throughout tropical and subtropical America. It has a light tan cap, darker at the center, dark gills, and a black veil around the stem; any part of it that is bruised turns blue within seconds. It grows in open cow pastures at the edges of clumps of cow manure, and its size is variable, (I have seen caps more than six inches in diameter). Because its appearance and growth habits are so characteristic, one can easily learn to distinguish it and collect it.

The San Ysidro mushroom is eaten by Mazatec and other Indians in the Sierra Mazateca of northeastern Oaxaca and by many outsiders who come to the area to "do mushrooms." It is available during the rainy season from May to August and also at any time rain falls during the rest of the year. I arrived in Huautla de Jiménez, the main town of the area, just after a fortuitous out-of-season downpour last January and so was able to obtain and eat a quantity of San Ysidro mushrooms.

Huautla is where Gordon Wasson, twenty years ago, met Maria Sabina, a priestess who introduced him to the ceremonial use of hongos -- sacred mushrooms. Today, Maria Sabina lives in seclusion high on a ridge outside the town but offers to sell autographed pictures of herself to visitors. And the Indians of the area, who once zealously guarded their secret rites from outsiders, now embroider shirts with mushroom motifs and phrases like "Magic Mushroom" and "Peace and Love" (in English) for sale in the Oaxaca city market.

Starting about five years ago, Huautla was flooded by thousands of mushroom-seeking hippies from Mexico, the U.S., and Europe. On several occasions, government troops were sent in to clear the hippies out, and there were ugly confrontations between armed soldiers and defenseless seekers of highs. Today, a sullen mood hangs over the Sierra Mazateca; outsiders are not welcome. Occasional long-hairs wander in and by paying "voluntary" donations to the local school get permits from civil authorities to hang around and try for mushrooms. They may or may not be chased out by the military.

I had the good fortune to be taken into the house of Julieta, a curandera who lives in a tiny village near Huautla and who uses mushrooms in religious services and medical curings. But the village council was not happy with my presence and told me I would be put in jail if I stayed beyond sunset. After much arguing (not easy since almost no one spoke Spanish), I wangled a 24-hour permit to stay, and Julieta said she would keep me hidden away in her kitchen to minimize my visibility. Because her house was directly across the street from the little town hall, I was constantly aware of the tension surrounding my presence and of the need for secrecy in all things to do with the mushrooms.

The Sierra Mazateca is a breathtakingly beautiful area of Mexico, with steep green peaks, rushing rivers, and hillsides of coffee and banana trees. The little villages are clustered on the very tops of the mountains so that going from one to another means long and difficult descents and ascents over rough roads.

From Julieta's house one could see Huautla on a neighboring peak and other settlements in the distance -- a splendid vista. The house itself had three rooms: a tiny kitchen, a large, sparsely-furnished living room, and a bedroom, where eight or nine persons slept at night. Julieta was the head of the household; her husband seemed to defer to her in all important matters. They had five children, and a young girl who tended the house also lived with them.

From morning till night a constant stream of patients came to be treated by Julieta, to chat, to drink coffee. Mothers with sick babies, children with bad cuts, grown-ups with stomach trouble all wandered in, stayed for minutes or hours, got their medicine, and left. Julieta had a garden of medicinal herbs growing in back of her house, and she talked much about hongos as the gran remedio that cured all ills, but in the everyday situations that confronted her she relied on modern drugs. A table in the living room was heaped with antibiotics and other chemicals, mostly in injectable forms. Like many curanderas in Mexico, Julieta is skilled in giving injections, and most patients who come to her want injections -- even of drugs that can just as well be given by mouth. The Mazatecs have come to see injection as a magical technique -- more magical than their traditional practices. Antibiotics and other powerful drugs (many of them dangerous in my view) are widely available without prescription in Latin America and wind up in the hands of non-professional therapists like Julieta. But although I disagree with her methods of treatment, I must say that she knew what she was doing and that she inspired faith and confidence in people who had no one else to turn to when they were sick. And there seemed to be a lot of sickness in and around Huautla -- much of it apparently the result of inbreeding in an area long isolated by difficult mountains from the outside and much of it from the damp chill that permeates the region whenever clouds block out the tropical sun.

Shortly before my arrival, Julieta had picked a bunch of

San Ysidro mushrooms. They were obviously meant for me, she said, although I had arrived out of the blue with no forewarning. The mushrooms were wrapped up in a sheet of newspaper, hidden in the bedroom, waiting for the right moment to be used. That moment came after midnight on the night after my arrival, which was also the night of the full moon in January, after the last patient had gone home, the children had been put to bed, and the house boarded up for the night. Julieta, her husband, the servant girl, and I clustered together in the kitchen by candlelight. Julieta unpacked a bag of paraphernalia for the ceremony while her husband set up a small altar on a low table. The centerpiece of the altar was a framed portrait of San Ysidro.

San Ysidro is the patron saint of agricultural workers and a popular household saint throughout Mexico. Julieta explained that he was her husband's patron saint and that she used him to preside over her mushroom ceremony. It was just "coincidence" that the variety of mushroom we were going to use also bore his name. The standard depiction of San Ysidro is striking: in the midst of a beautiful pastoral scene, an obviously holy man in brown robes kneels in prayer beside a cart and oxen, looking up to heaven. Above, through an opening in the sky, psychedelic rays pour down upon him from some other dimension. Julieta told me to concentrate on the picture while she got things ready.

In front of the altar was a small charcoal fire and on it Julieta burned incense -- copal (frankincense) and palo santo, a resinous wood. She sat beside me on a woven mat, purifying her hands and face in the aromatic smoke while whispering prayers. She asked me to cleanse myself in the smoke in the same way. Then she took up the mushrooms in the sheet of newspaper, studied them for a long time, picking up one and then another, all the time praying and wafting incense smoke over herself. The mushrooms were about two days old by now, somewhat wrinkled and dry, with many larvae and little winged in-

sects crawling over them. Julieta bathed them in the smoke, praying more fervently. Her husband and the servant girl had retired several paces to a darker area of the kitchen and waited in silence.

When the incense was consumed, Julieta took a small dried chili pod and placed it on the glowing charcoal. She passed the mushrooms through the acrid smoke that went up from the chili, and instantly the larvae and insects crawled out of the mushrooms and died on the newspaper. The chili was removed, and more copal put in its place.

Now the time had come. With great deliberation, Julieta took the two largest mushrooms (three-inch caps), arranged them on a little dish and handed the dish to me. She told me the mushrooms were like the Eucharist and that taking them inside me would enable me to participate in the mystery of the service. Then she smiled sweetly and asked me where my parents were and whether it was all right with them that I was doing this. I told her they were in Philadelphia and trusted me. She seemed satisfied and told me to eat the mushrooms.

I began chewing the cap of the larger mushroom. It was a bit dry but surprisingly tasty: a strong, penetrating, wild mushroom flavor that became more intense as I chewed. I had not anticipated how good these things would be to eat. So many Indian drugs I have tried are intensely bitter -- replete with warnings to the senses that are not supposed to be put into the body. But here was something really delicious. Before I knew it I had finished both, stems and all. Julieta now prepared another dish, this time with seven or eight smaller mushrooms. She bathed them in incense, praying as before and handed the dish to me. I ate them one by one, chewing thoroughly. This operation was repeated two more times so that I ate a total of about twenty smaller mushrooms. Julieta then fed several mushrooms to her husband and to the servant girl, asking them first to wash their hands and faces in the scented smoke and praying over them quietly as they ate. She then told me to sit still

while she made sure all the children were asleep.

It must have been one in the morning. Through a crack in the kitchen window I could see that the lights of the town hall were still burning; doubtless, the council was still debating whether or not to put the intrusive gringo in jail. But out the other side of the house all was dark -- the eerie blackness of the Sierra Mazateca and now the brilliant splendor of a full moon, high over the mountains in a cloudless sky. I sat watching San Ysidro in the flickering candlelight, feeling extraordinarily content and well. Julieta's husband leaned over from time to time, asking if I was all right and assuring me that his wife would soon be back. I told him I was fine.

By the time Julieta reappeared, I was just beginning to feel unusual. The effect of the mushrooms was very gentle, definite, and progressive, beginning as a sensation of lightness and well-being. Julieta placed more incense on the charcoal. Now her husband and the servant girl left us alone. I was kneeling in front of the little altar; Julieta knelt to one side, praying continuously to San Ysidro and other intercessors to help me in my life's work. She asked me to repeat the Lord's Prayer three times. I began to see color hallucinations -- pastel spots and gentle undulations of surfaces -- all delightful.

My recollection is that we prayed together for some time during the peak of the effect of the mushrooms (probably from forty-five minutes to an hour and a half after I had eaten them.) I felt fresh, alert, healthy, and cleansed. Then, the formal part of the service over, Julieta and I chatted for a long while about personal matters. She communicated to me much of her own vitality, optimism, and goodness of spirit, leaving me elated and more confident in my own abilities and powers. Finally (it was now quite late). she told me to go outside and "learn from the moon." She said she had to go to bed and that I should stay up as long as I wanted and then sleep late the next day.

In back of the house the night was magnificent. I felt extremely privileged to have arrived at such a spot on such a night, feeling the way I did. The mushrooms were still strongly working on me. I could taste them more powerfully than ever, and the taste seemed to be diffused throughout my body, making me feel in a very real way that the spirit of the mushrooms had entered into me. I recalled Wasson's suggestion that the word "bemushroomed" would be a good term for this state. I was bemushroomed, all right, and it felt very good.

I gazed at the moon and the landscape for perhaps an hour, then spent some more time with San Ysidro in the kitchen; he, too, seemed bemushroomed out there in the field with all those heavenly rays raining down upon him. Then, after another interval, I went back out. But now it was much darker, and a great many stars were out, whereas only a few had been visible before. And I could not find the moon at first. Then I saw it, low over the western mountains: a crescent of silver along a dull gold disk. It was being eclipsed. I waited, breathless, as the eclipse progressed to totality -- an unexpected, wonderful spectacle. The stillness of the night was complete; I doubt that very many people were awake to see the show in the sky.

Then the moon began to set behind the mountains, still eclipsed, and I felt tired for the first time. I went back inside, said goodnight to San Ysidro, blew out the candles, crawled into my sleeping bag, and fell quickly asleep.

In the morning, I awoke refreshed, feeling better than I had in a long time and went off for a day in Huautla of shopping and negotiating with the military authorities. (The council in Julieta's village was making more threats of jailing me, and I wanted some sort of safe-conduct pass.). When I got back, Julieta told me there were some mushrooms left over and that I might as well finish them that night. I really did not want to since I had just had a perfect mushroom experience, but instead of telling her that, I said O.K. So that night we repeated the service, complete with incense, prayers, and San Ysidro,

and then Julieta went to bed. But everything was different. A heavy bank of fog and cloud closed in, the temperature dropped, and suddenly nearly everyone in the house was sick. There was much crying and coughing from the bedroom, and I began feeling unwell, too. A great sense of depression and isolation came over me. I could not get to sleep; the mushrooms seemed to be working against me, not with me; and I felt very far away from where I was supposed to be.

Towards dawn, still awake, I began to realize that this experience, too, was part of the lesson: that mushrooms, like any other trigger of psychedelic experience, must be used in a proper context; that their magic is strong but neutral and can produce evil as well as good. To take them just because they are available, when the time is not right, is a mistake. The negative experience of this second night did not in any way detract from the goodness of the first night. If anything, it made me more aware of the value of that experience and more eager to retain it and use it in my life. I hoped that I would be able to be bemushroomed again, but I resolved to be patient until the right moment came.

At the first light of dawn, I got up and packed my things. We had decided it would be best for me to leave before the sun was up so that I could be out of the clutches of those officials who wanted no outsiders on their mountaintop. I said goodbye gratefully to Julieta and started down the mountain toward the world outside.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Andrew T. Weil". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name.

Andrew T. Weil