ATW-32

Mushroom Hunting in Oregon I: One Hundred Pounds of Chanterelles

Tucson, Arizona
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
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535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

The first time I crossed the Oregon Cascades was in October of 1971 when I was on my way to Mexico. I could scarcely believe the exuberance of fungal growth I saw in those mountains, and since mushrooms are one of my passionate interests, I decided to come back sometime to study them seriously. In October of 1973 I kept that promise to myself when I arrived in Eugene at the height of the fall mushroom season.

As I drove across the country from New York, I studied a number of mushroom handbooks to acquaint myself with the species I was likely to encounter. The one that particularly caught my fancy was the chanterelle, a large, fleshy, yellow-orange mushroom that grows abundantly in the fall in the Douglas fir forests of the Pacific Northwest. It is a prized delicacy, hunted down enthusiastically by all true mycophiles. I had tried canned chanterelles a few times, (we import them from France and Germany), but knew that was hardly a substitute for eating them fresh.

In the middle of Nebraska, where there were few mushrooms to be seen, I called Eugene to talk to Tim and Jane, friends who had invited me to go mushrooming with them.

"Where are you?" Tim asked.

"Nebraska. Are there any mushrooms yet?"

Andrew T. Weil is an Institute Fellow exploring altered states of consciousness in our own society and elsewhere.

"We just got a hundred pounds of chanterelles in one afternoon," Tim said gleefully.

"No!"

"We've given lots away," Jane said.

"And we're eating lots, too," added Tim. He smacked his lips in a way that made me especially unhappy to be in Nebraska. "Mmmm, pan-fried chanterelles with lots of butter."

"Will there be any left when I get there?" I asked.

"We'll try to save some for you," Jane said. "Hurry up!"

I hurried to Eugene and got there on a Saturday afternoon in time to eat some crisp, spiced chanterelle chips and a small plateful of marinated chanterelles -- all that remained from the huge haul. As soon as I finished these treats, Tim and Jane handed me a plastic bucket and a sharp knife and drove me to a nearby pasture to collect meadow mushrooms.

Meadow mushrooms (Agaricus campestris) are the closest wild relatives of the commercially cultivated mushroom (A. bisporus). They have creamy-white caps, pink gills, and crisp, sweet flesh that is stronger-flavored than that of their domesticated cousins. I have heard some Oregonians call them "meadow muffins." Tim and Jane led me over a barbed-wire fence into a lush field where dairy cows grazed peacefully. It was late afternoon. We had previously asked permission of the farmer to enter his fields, and he had given it, advising us only "to be careful of the bull."

In a short time we had filled our buckets. Meadow mushrooms are not very difficult to spot, and there were so many of them in this pasture that we picked only the choicest, tightest buttons and just-opened caps, leaving the older, darker-gilled ones in the ground. There is nothing quite so tasty, I discovered, as a button-stage meadow muffin, freshly plucked from the ground, neatly trimmed, wiped clean with the fingers, and popped into the mouth. I have since found that the flavor of this fungus varies greatly, and that mushrooms in one meadow may taste quite different from those in another.

I was about to go after one more patch of mushrooms when the bull took exception to my presence in its territory and charged. I beat a hasty retreat to the fence and got over it very efficiently, losing only a few of the collected treats from my bucket. Bulls and barbed-wire are the chief hazards of meadow mushroom hunting. Good exercise, fresh air, and beautiful surroundings are some of the benefits, not to mention the prospect of a delicious meal afterward.

On our way back, we stopped again at the farm house to offer some of our collection to the farmer. "No thanks," he said, trying to conceal his horror on looking into our buckets, "I wouldn't touch those things." How convenient it is, I mused, for mycophiles to collect mushrooms on the property of mycophobes. We drove home as night was falling and prepared a wonderful repast of fresh meadow mushrooms, sauteed in butter and sour cream, served over toast with a fresh green salad.

Sunday morning dawned sunny and clear. Jane and I and a lady friend of Jane's went off to a state park west of Eugene to collect Slippery Jacks. Slippery Jacks are members of a large tribe of mushrooms called boletes that have tubes instead of gills. Most of them are edible, although only a few are excellent, and some are definitely poisonous. Poisonous boletes generally have red tube mouths or stain blue or blue-green where their flesh is bruised. Slippery Jacks have beautiful canary-yellow tubes and chestnut-brown caps that are slimy when wet. We found them growing in profusion out of rich green moss at the bases of pine trees. Some were the size of a fist.

While collecting Slippery Jacks I became aware of some of the singularities of mushroom hunting. I noticed, for example, that at first I could not see the mushrooms. Jane would run from pine tree to pine tree, exclaiming, "Oh, look, here are more!" while I would be scanning the ground not seeing any until she called my attention to them. But after a short time I began to see them, too, and before

an hour was up, I was able to spot Slippery Jacks yards away. In fact by the time we left the park with full buckets, I was so attuned to them that I would know one was at the base of a distant tree and would go right to the spot with my knife ready. On arriving I would sometimes find nothing more than a slight crack in the moss with the tiniest patch of brown showing through. But there below, sure enough, was a choice, large button, just about to emerge in the morning sun.

Once in Colombia while collecting the large psilocybin mushrooms known as Stropharia cubensis or San Ysidros, I had observed something similar. At first I could not find any of them, even though they were large mushrooms growing in open pastures. One of my traveling companions was very good at seeing them and to my annoyance would find mushrooms in places I had just looked. I particularly remember him coming up behind me, saying, "Hey, you just passed five of them." I turned around and saw a cluster of large tan mushrooms. I would swear they had not been there a moment before. I also noticed that if I walked together with my friend I would see mushrooms but that if he got more than a few feet away from me, I would no longer see them. After some time and frustration I began to see them on my own.

The same thing happened regularly in Oregon. Each time Jane, Tim, or another hunter would introduce me to a new species, at first I would see it only in the immediate presence of the other person and not by myself. But after a period of non-seeing, the mushroom would gradually reveal itself to me, and in a little while I would be able to know where a mushroom was even with minimal sensory cues, just as I was able to spot Slippery Jacks coming through the moss from great distances.

I was looking forward to Cream of Slippery Jack soup when we got home and helped Jane clean the mushrooms. We removed the slimy peels and cut away the tubes leaving the white flesh. Raw, it tasted sour and somewhat fruity. The acid flavor disappeared

on cooking, but Cream of Slippery Jack soup turned out to be disappointing. I did not care for either the texture or taste of the boletes. Tim agreed with me. "They're not my favorites," he said; "I'll wait for pan-fried chanterelles." I learned later that my gustatory intuitions were sound, because the Slippery Jacks gave me painless diarrhea. I ate them again to make sure they were the cause. They were. Slippery Jacks are now, for me, things to be admired by handling, smelling, and looking rather than by eating. Tim gets the same effect from them, but Jane, who likes their taste, does not and can eat them with impunity.

My intensive course in mushrooms continued that afternoon at a spectacular mushroom show put on by the Eugene Mycological Society in the mall of a suburban shopping center. On long tables covered with beautiful fresh moss, actual specimens of most of the prominent species of the Northwest were set out for viewing, smelling, and touching. To see in the flesh all of the mushrooms I had known only from pictures was a wonderful experience. It made me feel much nearer to knowing many of the species I wanted to learn. One table was loaded with chanterelles and their close relatives, all of them delicacies. Another held the stately and deadly Amanitas. There were Shaggy Manes and inky caps, milky caps and coral mushrooms, puffballs and boletes. Among the boletes was a giant King Boletus (B. edulis), the best of the group, ranked by gourmets along with the chanterelle as one of the choicest edibles. There were mushrooms that smelled like hay and mushrooms that smelled like flour, and a blue one that smelled strongly of anise. There were mushrooms of all colors and the most fantastic shapes. As I studied the display on one table, a young woman next to me gasped and exclaimed, "Oh, mushrooms are just incredible!" We looked at each other and smiled.

I went back to the chanterelles and tried to fix in my mind the differences between them and similar-looking mushrooms. There is, of course, a False Chanterelle, an orange mushroom that is toxic for some persons and not for others. As I was making my

observations, a young man with long hair sidled up and said to me in a low voice, "Funny, there aren't any psilocybin mushrooms here." We exchanged a few words and it became clear that there were psilocybin mushrooms out in his car, which he would be happy to sell me. Now, I had heard a great deal about psilocybin mushrooms in Oregon and was eager to learn them. A number of different active species had been reported in the region, and there was no end of second-hand information about them. But I had not yet met anyone who actually knew them.

By now I had realized that one learns most mushrooms in one way only: through people who know them. It is terribly difficult to learn mushrooms from books, pictures, or written descriptions, however careful. Mushroom books are notoriously unreliable and inconsistent, even to the extent of disagreeing as to whether the same species is edible and choice or poisonous. Some of this confusion reflects a general lack of mycological study, for the world contains few qualified mycologists, and their work is limited. It may also be that mushrooms vary greatly in their properties from one part of the world to another and that books written about the species of one region do not apply to those of another. In any case, books are sometimes helpful after one knows mushrooms, but they seldom help you get to know them. The problem is compounded for psilocybin mushrooms, because virtually nothing is written about them, and what there is mostly applies to kinds that grow in Mexico.

The way to learn a mushroom, then, is to find a person who knows it and persuade that person that you are the sort who deserves to be introduced to it. Once you have met the mushroom in the field, learned to see it for yourself, and collected it, you can then introduce other worthy people to it.

My new friend at the mushroom show was named Mark, and I hoped he might be a lead to the fabled psilocybin mushrooms of Oregon. But when we got to his car it turned out that what he had were small plastic bags filled with unrecognizable, frozen, chopped

mushrooms. Mark was selling these for $15 a bag and said they were "very trippy" in doses of half a teaspoon. They had come from Washington State, supposedly from a commercial mushroom grower who was cultivating psilocybin mushrooms on the side. I was skeptical, but it was some sort of lead. That night Tim, Jane, and I each ate half a teaspoon of the frozen mushrooms. They tasted suspiciously like canned commercial mushrooms. Within 30 minutes we began to feel intoxicated and eventually had strong reactions marked by stimulation, muscular inco-ordination, and some visual hallucinations; the effects lasted more than ten hours. Subsequent analysis of these mushrooms showed them to contain a mixture of LSD and a veterinary anesthetic called phencyclidine (PCP), a drug that causes an alcohol-like intoxication and makes the muscles feel rubbery. PCP is a common adulterant of black-market psychedelics and often disguises the effects of LSD. Our mushrooms, undoubtedly, were Agaricus bisporus, "collected" from a supermarket can.

Undaunted, Tim, Jane, and I headed up the McKenzie River next day into the forests of the Cascades to hunt chanterelles. Forgive me if I wax a bit effusive on these mushrooms. The sight of a golden-orange chanterelle nestled in bright green moss beneath a giant Douglas fir is about as glorious as anything could be. Chanterelles have veins on the underside instead of gills, and the patterns traced by these veins are quite remarkable. A fresh chanterelle is solid and meaty with a pronounced aroma of apricots. The flesh is white and fibrous, looking exactly like cooked white meat of turkey; raw it tastes peppery, but when slowly simmered in butter and its own juices, perhaps with a touch of sherry and herbs, it achieves a degree of culinary distinction worthy of the finest table. Enough said: you will have to try them for yourself.

We got 25 pounds of chanterelles that day, mostly yellow ones (Cantharellus cibarius) but also some white ones (a closely related species, C. subalbidus), and some Pig's Ears (Gomphus floccosus), another delicious relative that is brownish on top and

beautifully violet on the veined underside. We also came home with a nice collection of Bloody-Juice Milky Caps (Lactarius sanguifluus), mushrooms that exude blood-red fluid when broken, whose flesh stains brilliant green after handling. They look like cartoon caricatures of poisonous mushrooms but are an excellent edible species that makes delicious casseroles.

I could tell you tales of many more adventures in wild mushroom eating. There was the day a neighbor lady brought us a huge fungus called Hericeum erinaceous that she found growing on a tree trunk. It looked like a mass of white icicles and weighed 25 pounds. She gave us a five-pound slice, some of which Jane cooked up into a casserole with butter, onions, and bread crumbs. It came out with the texture of cooked crabmeat and a wonderful flavor. There was the huge King Boletus that served seven people as a pie, with the chopped, seasoned stem mounded as a stuffing into a "crust" made of the grilled cap. There were the masses of lovely, eggshell-white Shaggy Manes that Jane and I collected and converted into soups and sautees. I could tell you of chanterelle pizza and oyster mushroom and wild cress soup. And on it went through October as I made more and more mushroom friends. But rather than recount the details of these feasts, I wish now to leave the realm of gastronomy and venture into some of the darker territories of the Mushroom Kingdom.

Sincerely yours,

Andrew T. Weil

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