

The Flesh of a Fragrant Flower

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North of the Rio Grande, there was a time when hallucinogenic mushrooms were the object of such extensive university research that it seemed they had become a sort of magic key, the “open Sesame!” to any diploma in social anthropology. For young Americans who balked at the idea of a pilgrimage to India, Mexico was far more accessible and had plenty to offer. Those were the years in which people fondly believed that self-awareness and knowledge of Life could be fostered by the exotic action of psychotropic substances. Seeing mushrooms only as a hallucinogenic agent tended to push the alimentary aspect backstage. Even now the most elegant books on Mexican cuisine devote little attention to mushrooms as such (the *hongo*, or *seta*) and basically refer to cultivated mushrooms (given the lack of wild ones, you can always resort to the canned variety), or to the very delicate *cuitlacoche*, a delicious parasite of maize which covers the fields with dark splashes as soon as the rains come.

So, is it true that mushrooms – a sporadic and always unpredictable godsend – are very rare? Or could it be that they are so ambivalent to be virtually ignored and hardly mentioned by worthy citizens? A mere glance at the small urban markets in Mexico are proof to the contrary. In certain periods of the year, peasant women come down from the mountains to sell the fruit of their endeavors – a handful of those same “wild plants” that Francisco Hernandez, in the 16th century, claimed to have found in such many different varieties that he gave up trying to classify them in his *Treatise of Natural History*. Furthermore, in the *nahuatl* language, the term “meat” (*nacalt*) and the term “mushroom” (*nanacalt*) are notably similar, testifying to the special values attributed to this vegetal organism by Mexican tradition.

Nonetheless, mushroom tasting has always been restricted to private milieus, probably because mushrooms are rare – or perhaps because the very fact that they grow out of decaying matter raises the obscure suspicion that whoever eats them entertains a privileged relationship with nature. The Aztecs actually began their most exclusive banquets with mushrooms: the divine black mushrooms, the ones which inebriate and «shape before your very eyes visions of combat or devils, and encourage lust»; mushrooms eaten with chocolate in the small hours of the night and mixed with honey to sweeten the taste. Now, exclusiveness in this case was certainly due in part to the actual cost of *paneolus campanulatus*. However, it was also related to the very special precautions required for consumption, since such fungi trigger behavior in whoever ingests them which is hardly tolerated by society. No wonder, therefore, that teonanacalt is nowadays mentioned with a knowing smile (or that around Palenque it is also sold in pill form...). The fact is, of course, that for the ancient peoples of Mexico consumption of this kind of fungi was the prerogative of specific social classes. This explains why, as Father Sahagun affirms, it was common knowledge that «those who are arrogant, presumptuous and vain most certainly get “mushroomed”».



Women and mountain folk

As it happens, not even other types of mushrooms – edible varieties such as cockscomb, shoestring fungus, *iztacnacame* and others – are particularly common. Though they may reach the city from the Michoacan forest in a battered pick-up, their consumption is restricted to family meals. Fungi provide welcome relief from the apparent monotony of daily food, bringing culinary change and tasty savors that embody the infinite goodness of nature for those who respect it. Mushroom picking largely pertains to the sphere of knowledge and skills of the womenfolk. Such expertise is clearly not without consequences, suggesting that the family belongs to a mysterious universe where reality often eludes control, and where women - who can tell edible and medicinal plants from poisonous mushrooms – occupy the subliminal regions between popular therapeutic practices and the dubious realm of witchcraft. Whereas wild mushrooms are invested with symbolic significance, this is not the case with the *cuitlacoche* of maize, another intermediate product, but one that is so closely related to actual farming that it belongs to the

sphere of men and can be canned and sold.

The enjoyment of similar gifts of nature is thus largely the privilege of those who, in the modern perspective, are under-privileged. Everyone is aware that the “knowledge of mushrooms” is risky, and that “sensible” people – specially city-dwellers – are well advised to keep clear of them. How sweet it must be for mountain people, often despised and derided as savages, to delight in the gastronomic excellence that derives from the intimate knowledge of the land. No wonder the city-dwellers only get the left-overs.

In Mexican society and culture mushrooms and meat are closely associated. Mushroom-picking is thus likened to hunting: both game and mushrooms are difficult to see – or better they camouflage themselves, surrendering only to those who succeed in finding them and thus providing an occasion for celebration. Such rejoicing is largely an inner experience, a recondite pleasure springing from the depths of the soul, with no regard whatsoever for the social conventions of the well-to-do. After all, the only meat that ordinary folk were ever likely to eat was game, so it is not surprising that they unconsciously established an association between the two practices.

Edible symbols

Another element that contributes to the nature of mushrooms in the semi-arid region of central Mexico is their partiality for the green wooded slopes that attract clouds and humidity. This helps explain why the plain nanacalt became one of the most important symbols of nahua ideology. After all, according to local mythology the mountain is the source of all wealth necessary to the community as a whole. In the metaphysics of Mexican fungi, these mushrooms are associated with the symbol of a “fragrant flower”.

Obsessed by the fleeting nature of material things, the ancient Mexicans extolled the beauty of existence through an elaborate metaphor: a flower which seduces, not so much for its outward appearance, but for its scent. All that is really precious belongs to the realm of immateriality, the realm of things that individuals must discover by searching for themselves. The compact and scented flesh of mushrooms – which always grow in the same place – reveals to man that individual life counts only to the extent it assures, with its ephemeral earthly passage, essential life – that is, the survival of the group, life that renews itself in death (the cold dryness of every night), to return with the morning dew.

But symbols can be palatable too. Yet only when duly cooked: hence the sickness of the barbarian gorging on nature in the raw. Nothing exalts such gifts better than being roughly chopped up into little pieces, mixed with green peppers, garlic, tomatoes and wild herbs, seasoned with salt and lard so that they can be used to fill maize crêpes, rolled or folded, steamed or fried. Close to the fireplace, in the shade of a poor shanty or around the table in a city dwelling, each family member gets his *tacos* or *quesadillas*, and fully enjoys a taste of that mountain meat. And every single delicious morsel of wildness - cooked, stripped of flesh, turned to indistinct pieces – recalls ancient origins and a sense of cultural belonging. It is rather as if the mistress of the house, in her tiny universe, repeated the feat of the God Quetzalcoatl, the “Plumed Serpent”, who picked the scattered bones of long past generations from the depths of hell, and then ground them, covering them in his blood and sperm to give life to a new mankind. The apparent chaos of life, the total dissolution of death – decomposition – provide the substratum necessary for life and for all the primary cooking ingredients. Through this process they are turned into elements of survival, into cultural principles of social integration.

Will the awareness of these values survive for long in Mexico? Will it stay alive when forests are shrinking to make space for cultivated land and tracts of barren soil? What will become of all of this as mushroom beds dwindle and elegant restaurants serve cultivated mushrooms as though they were mountain-picked? After all, *cuitlacoche* are now available in a tin.

Amigo, each of us has the lost paradise he can afford...

This article was written with the valuable help of Yuriria Iturriaga, an ethnologist, diplomat, cook and proprietress of the restaurant A la Mexicana in Paris.

