

Hunting the mushrooms in our midst

Campus is fertile ground for fungi, from deadly poisonous to choicely edible

By Cathy Cockrell, Public Affairs

22 January 2003 | For Anna Moore of Environmental Health and Safety, there's nothing more exciting than the first drenching rain of fall, and no better forecast, come January, than a high chance of further precipitation. Moore is a fungophile. For a quarter of a century, she's been stalking the wild mushroom — long enough to have developed a third sense about when to don mud boots and where choice edibles, as well as icky-tasting-to-deadly-poisonous species, are likely to be sprouting.



Anna Moore displays prized specimens of porcini (*Boletus edulis*) harvested from an undisclosed location on the northern California coast. The species has long been appreciated by mushroom lovers for its meaty texture and fine flavor.

Noah Berger photo

Moore will talk at length on the subject of mushrooming, an avocation she calls "science and art together." But like most mushroomers, she turns circumspect when pressed for details about where to harvest choice fungi. Of her weekend forays, she speaks vaguely of "the coast" or the foothills of the Sierra. For local expeditions, the latitude and longitude are a bit easier to calculate: dozens of species of mushrooms — from the ubiquitous and famously poisonous *Amanita phalloides* ("death cap") to culinary favorites like porcini, a.k.a. *Boletus edulis* — populate Richmond Field Station, Strawberry Canyon, and the East Bay hills, which are among Moore's hunting grounds.

Not to mention the central campus itself, where mushrooms are known to fruit throughout the year. "The problem with mushrooming in California is that there's a dry season from May to October," says Moore. The Berkeley campus, which has tasty

shaggy parasol (*Lepiota rachodes*) and even prince mushrooms (*Agaricus augustus*) nearly all year round, “keeps us going in summer.”

December foray

Last month, in anticipation of the Mycological Society of San Francisco’s annual Fungus Fair, Moore surveyed the campus for sprouting mushrooms, in order to add campus information to the species database compiled by the society. With Moore were a half dozen of the campus’s large cohort of fungophiles — who run the gamut from horticulturalists, groundskeepers, and self-taught hobbyists to scientists probing the phylogeny of gelatinous-stalked puffballs or the role of fungi in reforestation after fires.

Starting at the west edge of campus, staff mushroom hobbyists visited stands of oaks and conifers and other fungus-friendly sites — parting patches of groundcover, surveying mulch with hawk-eyed attentiveness, poking suspicious bumps and lumps with fingers and the toes of boots.

“The saying is, ‘you knock 99 lumps, the 100th is a mushroom,’” said Campus Recycling and Refuse Manager Lisa Bauer, a mushrooming buddy of Moore’s and an ardent fungus booster. In Bauer’s opinion, the United States is a fungophobic society, and fungi — famously implicated in sudden oak death and athlete’s foot, but little known for their beneficial relationships with the vast majority of plants — have gotten a bad rap. “We’re the only first-world nation that does not have a love affair with mushrooms,” Bauer said. “In Europe, they’re part of the common folklore. My grandfather, who was from Germany, knew all about mushrooms and herbal medicine; but my dad, a surgeon who was born here, lost the knowledge, and I have to regain it.”

The foray’s first mushroom find is a tiny puffball from the genus *Lycoperdon* — sprouting, it turns out, from the moisture emitted from a crack in a PVC irrigation pipe buried just inches below ground. Nearby grows *Lactarius rubrilacteus*; foragers stop to try its “milk” — peppery tasting, and burning, after a few seconds on the tongue — before continuing their informal assay of campus species.

Species finds

The group makes its way uphill, spotting hard, inedible conches (used to make dyes); an artist mushroom (easy to draw on); *Gomphidius glutinosus*, a.k.a. Hideous *Gomphidius* on account of its signature slime; George Washington’s inkwell (whose black “ink” was used to sign the Constitution); mock meadow mushroom or *Agaricus californicus* (one of four poisonous species of *Agaricus* often mistaken for edible look-alikes, and referred to consequently as the “lose your lunch bunch”); intrepid *Coprinus comatus*, called lawyer’s wig or shaggy mane (known to grow even from blacktop); a large, feisty Satan’s bolete (*Boletus satanas*); prodigious clumps of honey mushrooms, or *Armillariella mellea* (which hasten the demise of compromised trees, especially in highly irrigated areas like the Botanical Garden’s Asian section), and a deadly species of *Amanita*.

"I'm always nervous to see them on campus," Bauer says of the latter. "I could see someone thinking they're a big, juicy mushroom, so let's eat them."

It's typical, on such forays, for experienced fungophiles to offer edifying riffs for less experienced mushroomers — on fungi's complex ecological relationships with plants, animals, and soil (as symbionts, parasites, and recyclers), and the vast world of fungi that live underground, never seeing the light of day.

This week, as the rains return, mushroom lovers are eagerly anticipating a new flush of fungi in their favorite campus sites. "Rain is a minor annoyance for a major enjoyment," says Bauer, as she ticks off the many culinary uses of chanterelles — alone, in soup, in vodka, even in sorbet. "They've already got chanterelles in Marin," she says, "but I bet within a week we'll start finding them on campus."

For photos of fungi, information on fungal research, and links to mycological sites, see the websites of faculty members doing research on fungi, including Tom Bruns, John Taylor, Louise Glass, Matteo Garbelotto, and Ignacio Chapela. Classes on edible and medicinal mushrooms and on mushroom cultivation, taught by research associate Mo Mei Chen, are offered through the Jepson Herbarium.

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