

John Poch

On Mushrooms

I love the word “forage.” It sounds far better than saying, we went out in search of mushrooms. Or looking for mushrooms. You could say, “mushroom hunting” to be a little more active with the verb, but that’s silly. Picture Elmer Fudd with a shotgun blasting puffballs. Foraging, I get a good hike in at ten to twelve thousand feet, and it’s peppered with little adrenaline rushes every time I see one of those firm fungus jewels bursting forth to say hi. Hi! Why hello, friend! Yum. You can eat puffballs when they first emerge, I read. So I foraged a few I found on the side of a trail. I brought them home, cut them up, and cooked them in butter. It was like eating Styrofoam cooked in butter. Unless it’s the apocalypse and I’m desperate, from now on I’ll leave the puffballs.

No matter what this essay might suggest or hint at, no matter how seductive or poetic my prose: DO NOT EAT WILD MUSHROOMS. Ignore the tantalizing descriptions, and obey the capitalized words of this short prose paragraph.

I started foraging mushrooms about seven years ago in the mountains of northern New Mexico. To escape the hellscape nothing of Lubbock, Texas, my family and I tend to spend a month or two of the summer in Taos each year. At one of the stalls at the farmer’s market on the plaza, I saw this guy with a table full of mushrooms, and he was selling them for more than twenty dollars a pound. He had quite a spread, and there were six or seven varieties, some of which I had thought surely poisonous what with their outlandish colors and shapes. I was positive I had seen some of these species on a hike the day before up in the mountains, and the value of the fungi along with the fact that this was real food that I like to eat made me realize I should pay more attention. I’m a poet. Most people understand that a poet in general pays more attention to the world, as well as the words for the world, than your average Joe.

Foraging, I’m a hunter-gatherer, a primitive, a minimalist, not having to create nearly out of nothing, but only to find. I also garden and fish, but I don’t hunt. The thrill of foraging, of finding what’s already there, is what I like most. And I admit like getting something for free. The providence of it is spiritual. The harvest is not always bountiful. One year, in a month of over one hundred miles of hiking we found one. One bolete. It was ridiculous. There was little rain that summer, but I kept thinking we would strike it rich. No such luck, until on that last hike before we headed back to Lubbock my wife spotted the king bolete that tasted better than any I’d ever eaten simply because it was the only one. A few weeks later I heard from a friend in Taos that finally a small amount were popping up. I was back in Lubbock writing my syllabi trying to figure out a way for a quick trip to the mountains, but it was seven hours each

way, and early fall is the busiest time of year for me. I stayed put and imagined others foraging my mushrooms.

Even if there weren't mushrooms up there, we would hike. We did for years, on our own, with children in slings and on our backs, with children trailing behind, and now with teenagers leading the way. Just NOT to be in the dry summer heat and blazing sunshine of Texas, but to be alive up in the national forest, in the cool air, to see the flora and fauna, to hear the hermit thrush calling from deep in the woods, to soak in the views of the mountain streams and alpine meadows. And sometimes if we made it all the way, the vistas from the peaks was more than enough. But now our life was even richer: not just spiritual sustenance, but foodstuffs!

Fishing is similar to mushroom foraging. The fish are there waiting to be found. And with experience you eventually get a good sense of where they're most likely to be and what they want. Honestly, I can fish for hours without a nibble. Just to be walking in and along the rivers of Northern New Mexico, I almost don't care if they're biting. Almost. The beauty of moving water (it doesn't really exist on the Southern Plains) is intoxicating to me. It is no surprise to anyone who knows me that I wrote a book of poems about rivers. But what makes rivers is mountains and watershed, and in those mountains we find the mushrooms. And you don't need artifice to trick a mushroom. You only need a knife and a bag to put them in.

My daughters act like they don't like to find them. It's a thing with teenagers to sometimes heartily dislike what the parents are passionate about. I get that. They need to be their own people and like what they like and figure out why. But my passion is contagious. They get a little thrill when they see one and they point to it so I can come along with my Opinel and cut it, clean it up, and put it in the canvas bag along with the others. They know the boletes, and a few more varieties, but otherwise, they don't know what's edible.

A few years back, my youngest was collecting these little plastic toys called Shopkins. We consider ourselves nature lovers, so I was pretty horrified at the whole enterprise of collecting anything called a Shopkin. We mostly don't like shopping and try to avoid the American way of feeling good about ourselves because we can buy things. But you gotta let kids be kids, and she was into these Shopkins. One of these little Shopkins is a mushroom called Milly Mushroom which she brought along on our trip to Taos. The entire purpose for her to bring it was to go on the trail ahead of me, to place it strategically among the leaf litter and mosses so I might be fooled for a second, and indeed I was. Kids can be so cruel.

This same child later found a big patch of chanterelles. They are unmistakable because they have a fluorescent yellow-orange-gold underside in which the gills reach down well into the stalk. There is a false chanterelle whose gills suddenly stop near the top of the stalk, and the color isn't as bright underneath. They're sort of poisonous to some people.

But true chanterelles, their tops are beige or beige-orange at best, and I had been looking for that fluorescent color, which mostly you don't see except at the farmers market when they are all on display with their beautiful undersides showing. My daughter was much more able to spot them because she was probably only four foot nothing at the time and I am five foot ten and too far removed to see what she could. She was right down there with them. Lucky child. My girls would find a few, but then they were done. Come on, they say. Hurry up, let's go. This is BORING. You go on ahead, I say. I'll catch up. The past two years there has been an abundance, especially of boletes, so it takes me a while to catch up. My heart gets to pounding, and it's not the elevation. It's the thrill of the forage.

When you find one, you harvest it by cutting it at the base as far down as you can. The stalk usually has a lot of the meat that you want to eat. But if you are going to put it into a bag with the others, you need to clean it up from the dirt it's growing in, so you wipe off the debris from the cap and cut away the dirt from the bottom of the stalk. You do that as you go. The first time I brought mushrooms back, I had only half cleaned them up and then I had to clean them all over again because of all the dirt in the canvas bag that had re-attached itself. You learn.

My wife is more patient than my daughters and even somewhat interested. This summer, she told me she was about to buy me a new Opinel mushroom knife complete with brush for scraping away the dirt when you harvest one, but the forest was closed because of the drought and fires, and we thought maybe we couldn't hike at all this year. So maybe Christmas? She humors me. Once, I lay down on the hiking trail beside a bolete and had her take my picture. It was a monster twice the size of my head. She actually will eat the chanterelles I cook and take a nibble of the boletes, though the other night she swears the porcini pasta messed up her throat and kept her awake half the night. She points them out along the trail. There's one. Wait, that's a false bolete. She's getting good. Oh, there's another *Suillus lakei*. She's making fun of me now, even though she's right. I brought home some *Suillus* the other night and cooked one and nibbled at it, afraid to die. The internet says they're edible. But was it a *Suillus*? Sure it was. But was it? Tasted pretty good, actually. Porous underside like a bolete, but a little slimy on the top. Seems poisonous, but it isn't.

This year I found a new one. New to me. A shrimp *Russula* with a white stalk and a pink cap the size of my whole hand. I was nervous to try it. There are many different *Russulas*, so how was I to tell? One is called *Russula emetica*, and that name should have warned me away. Any mushroom with gills makes me nervous, but I texted a Taos friend an image and I also looked it up. He asked does it smell shrIMPy. Smells a little shrIMPy. OK, I sauteed it, and it had this very tender texture and a flavor of sweet apples and the slightest hint of shrimp. Delicious.

You do learn a lot beyond distinguishing between mushrooms and the Latin names. You learn their various habitats, how boletes really like not only the pine trees they work alongside, but the edge of the trail. Why, I'm not sure, but you do tend to find more of them in mid-July there on the edge of any given human trail or deer trail than just off in the more hidden parts of the woods. It's like they *want* to be found. You learn how the chanterelles like to come up among the mossy areas near larger boulders or in clearings where they can get a little sunshine to help them do their thing in late July or early August. There's a lot some of us non-scientists can't know, because the mushrooms spend most of the year underground. For instance, how does the snow factor in? The temperatures. How much snowmelt? What about the long hot fall after they've already spread those spores? What about the brutal, high altitude winter? Maybe it's not that you can't know, and it's more about just saying I've got other stuff to do and know. I have my limits unless I am going to have a career in mycology. But then, I realize I should know much more than I do because it's not exactly a safe hobby.

At first, I could only identify the bolete, but that is complicated by the inedible boletes (poisonous) that seem pretty much the same at first glance. But when you cut the stalk, streaks of neon green or blue or purple give you a warning. Those have a scabrous stalk, as well, perhaps a little slimier cap, and maybe a weird edge. The aspen bolete also has a scabrous stalk, but you can eat them. Mostly. Some people are allergic. I tried them. Edible, but they didn't taste great. A little too funky and bitter. If I'm trying a new mushroom that I'm not sure about, I just have a little bit that I fry up in butter. I don't want to destroy my liver, as some poisonous mushrooms will very well do. I figure if I start feeling bad or hallucinating after just a nibble, I'll make myself throw up and it probably won't kill me. My wife shakes her head. My kids are horrified. I can't blame them. They need me around. They're teenagers, so they often don't necessarily *want* me around. But they also don't have the appreciation of the taste for them. People don't have a decent sense of taste till they're at least thirty or so, right? I know that when I was younger I didn't. And I'm a sensitive poet. But now I love wine, though I can't afford the really good and precious wine because I'm a poet.

When I first came back with a small bag (a few days after I'd seen the mushrooms that first time at the farmer's market), I took photos of the mushrooms with my phone and texted them to a mycologist professor I know back at Texas Tech where I teach. I wanted to eat them but not die. I'd been in touch with him before about some mushrooms that grew up in my yard in years past, and he had actually come over to my house to harvest a few for his classes. Stinkhorns! They do live up to their names, and they look like a dog's penis with a black slimy head. You can smell them from a block away. Nasty things, but amazing in their capacity to offend in multiple ways.

This professor texted me back about the boletes I'd found. Yeah, it looks like a bolete, but don't eat it. He knows many people who have gotten really

sick from mushrooms. He has stories. He's a mycologist with a Ph.D. He texted: I'd have to put it under a microscope to be sure. Now, that's not really true, I thought. I bet he'd know instantly. But I'm sure he didn't want to be liable for death or damaging some vital organ. I kept sending him photos. And he was basically: John, stop. Stop. Find someone local who is an expert. Do not trust Google. You don't know what you're looking at. And he was right, unless I was lucky. I'm not going to tell you what is edible or not, he said. He finally just quit responding to my texts.

But years later, now, this technology called Google lens is amazing, and I can get a much better sense of what it is I'm looking at. However, there's not always connectivity up there on the mountain. And even if I bring it home and photograph it and look it up, the Google lens might tell me I've found goose feathers and not a wild oyster mushroom. This happened. Oh, but I'd figured out by then this *Ostreatus* has a slight fennel smell and it must be fried in butter and eaten with eggs. Amazing. Have I mentioned the butter is important?

I wonder about the Native Americans from days of yore and the ones now on the reservation here, or even about the Asian, Greek, and Italian miners or other frontiersmen who had to live off the land. What did they know or even risk? What do they put up in winter? Did they have butter? You can dry these puppies, and put them in soup, and the edible ones are nutritious. I've read that mushrooms are rich in the B vitamins, which is useful for heart health and good skin. Even thicker hair. I'm 56, and my hair is thinning, and I swear that, with all these mushrooms I'm eating, my hair is thicker. I tell this to my wife and girls, and they roll their eyes. Of course, I've been in Taos for two months without a haircut, so I just have more hair. But maybe it really is thicker. I want to believe. After all, I'm eating mushrooms just about every day now. I do get tired of them, sadly. I try to trick myself and say it isn't so. But day after day, yeah. They're too rich. And because I've found so many, I'm putting too much on my plate each meal.

I'd heard that you can sell them to the local restaurants. Last year I tried, and you quickly find out that the ones who make a living off this are one step ahead of you and already have relationships with all the local restaurants and chefs. I tried. But there is this one guy I know who runs a bakery, and he was happy to buy them from me. The really good ones he uses for fancy pastries and the rest he dries in his big ovens and uses the rest of the year for soups and who knows. We traded, actually. He set up an account for us, and we could come in and get bread or cookies or croissants for the fair price he offered for our mushrooms. Last year we'd foraged such a ridiculous amount, we had hundreds of dollars in credit when we left town. We stopped by the bakery and he gave us a fifty pound bag of local organic flour for our trip back to Lubbock. My wife bakes all our bread, so that was perfect.

How do you know where to look? Well, no one is going to tell you, at least not exactly. You can pay wilderness survival guides who do these medicinal

foraging tours for a little extra cash, but they aren't going to take you to their best spots. You have to find out for yourself. It's a kind of tradition to NOT tell anyone where you've found your mushrooms. You can say, up in the ski valley I found some king boletes yesterday, but you would never say: Yesterday right before the Long Canyon trail forks off from Bull of the Woods, over near the stream, that's where I found five pounds of chanterelles in a clearing. You would never say that. It's a code of honor not to say. Everybody wants to have their own spots where they go. Well, the few of us who go. Most of you should not go. You should be terrified. I had a colleague in technical communication who ate some bad mushrooms once in the mountains and he said he drove the whole way home back to Lubbock through a tunnel of lights and they had to rush him to the hospital to pump out his guts. There's that.

Last year, we ran across a woman who was harvesting boletes but also some of what we call fairy mushrooms. They have a big bright red cap with white spots (gills on the underside) towering over a white stalk. Beautiful to look at but not good to eat. Fairly poisonous. Some people call them toadstools. *Amanita muscaria*. You see these pictured in illustrations of Alice in Wonderland. Because of hallucinations? Anyway, I asked this woman what she was going to do with those. I warned her, even though she seemed to know what she was doing (she had a full bag of boletes and an Opinel with which she'd been cutting them). She said, oh you can eat them if you boil them a few times. Maybe if you're desperate, I thought. But there were so many boletes last year, it seemed absolute nonsense. I wanted nothing to do with her. I gave her a worried look, and that was the best I could do. Take care!

Mycorrhizal is a great word, too. The mushrooms and toadstools and such are in a relationship with their surroundings. The fungi feed off the roots of the various trees or even off the bark in some cases, and the fungi in turn can extend and fortify the root systems to be able to absorb more nutrients or moisture. I figure it's a bit like the relationship between poetry and prose. They both make each other a little richer when in a good relationship.

Last year one of the last mushrooms I found was a matsutake. I'd heard tell about these. This year I've been on the hunt for them, but I haven't found any. I keep saying to my girls: I will pay you five dollars if you find a matsutake. I should be offering more. People pay outrageous prices for these. My girls just say to me, you just like to say *matsutake*. They know that I am a poet. They make fun of me, *matsutake, matsutake...*

I also wonder about how this foraging is shaping them as young adults and what they'll pass along to their own kids one day when they're out there on their own. Hiking, likely. Foraging, less so, perhaps. The love of words? I mean, I just used three different homophonic variations of "there" at the end of the first sentence in this paragraph. I hope you didn't miss it. Will they forage for other things in life? They already very much enjoy thrifting at used clothing stores, finding the deals and the fashions unknown to most. But the experience of foraging for mushrooms is different, of course, in that you can't

do it anywhere, anytime, and you need a wealth of knowledge and experience beyond a sense of taste. And the senses of taste for mushrooms, or vintage clothes, or poetry all require time and for experience to take hold. My girls are just beginning to taste life in its greater complexities and deeper aesthetics. In some ways, so am I. We can keep finding new things which we've overlooked all these years.

Of the dozens of hikes we did last year, I found two matsutakes. Uncommon, to say the least. I wasn't sure I'd found one, but my baker friend told me that they smell distinctly of cinnamon under the cap, and I'll be darned if that weren't the case. Serious cinnamon action on the one I'd found. So I brought him home and cooked the dude in butter. My wife said don't eat it. She's not like the woman in the film *Phantom Thread* (spoiler alert) who is bent on poisoning her man because she loves him. I know, WHAT? Right?

My wife is the opposite of that. Meghan has saved me from a lot. She is very much a rule-follower, whereas I am definitely a rule-breaker what with being a poet and all. This maverick streak of mine works to my benefit in small ways, but mostly it is a detriment to my life, I admit. I'd likely be far better off if I followed more thoroughly the regulations that benefit mankind and my family.

But now and then there are cases where my risk-taking pays off. Every year when we're hiking, I come across a few springs in the mountains where the water is bubbling up out of the ground. There is no way this water has giardia. Impossible, I say. And I've never gotten sick from it. Not once. In twenty years of drinking from these three different springs that I've found on our hikes, it has been nothing but a pleasure. My wife, she will not drink this spring water, and neither will my kids. They're probably right to refrain and stay safe, but there is little more refreshing to me in this life than this water sent from God and purified by mother nature's gravity moving and straining the water through rock and sand.

But the matsutake...my wife was just like No, no, no, no. Nevertheless, I cut it up into small portions, and little by little, carefully, savoring, praying, I ate it and was all yes, yes, yes, yes. It is the best mushroom I have ever eaten. The saliva welled up from under the back of my tongue, and the flavor kept coming and coming, and I understood why my baker friend raved about it and why that insane price I'd found for them online. I waited and waited anxiously for the tunnels of lights or even the upset stomach, but those never came. Only that taste that is unlike anything I've ever tasted in this world except for the tiny hint of cinnamon. I recognized that. And a meatiness, and the hint of a whiff of the smell of a dank basement where they store precious wine.