



HUNTING MUSHROOMS

By Stephen J. Rock; photos courtesy of author

I come by my love of mushrooms honestly. Some of my earliest childhood recollections involve weekend afternoons in late summer and fall when the entire house would fill with a particularly noxious odor—one that can be created only by what I now consider to be a cardinal sin of mycophagy (eating mushrooms): the boiling of mushrooms.



For many people, like the author (top of page) and his father (pictured here with *Xanthoconium separans*), mushroom hunting is a tradition handed down through the generations.

I was raised in Cohoes, NY by a first-generation Carpatho-Rusyn Lemko who hunts primarily two to three species of “bolete” mushrooms for his culinary purposes. My father’s method of preparing the species of mushrooms that he collects was handed down to him by his parents, both of whom emigrated from villages in what is now southeastern Poland. My Lemko ancestors would go into the woods at particular times of the year seeking these delicacies to prepare (as my father does) and also to dry them for use during the winter holidays.

Likewise, when I was a kid, Dad would go out for a morning walk and often return with a grocery bag full of these odd-looking and earthy-smelling mushrooms. I never forgot the look of them. Dad would use the mushrooms to make zypraska (a gravy made from rendered-down pork fat, onions, peppers, garlic, flour, spices



The author's wife with hen-of-the-woods.

and, of course, mushrooms), following the family recipe of boiling his mushrooms before preparing the gravy. It smelled horrible, but I later learned that it tasted wonderful. After finally getting over the mushrooms' scent and tasting the delicious gravy (usually served over egg noodles), I immediately re-assessed my displeasure at the exotic aromas, and my interest in mushrooms in general.

I'll never forget how my pursuit of the fungal wonders of the New York forests got jump-started by that memory. My wife Margaret and I had just come out of a favorite woods in Pawling, NY when I spotted a mushroom that looked like the ones my father picks. The following weekend I attended a lecture that was given by a member of the Westchester County, NY-based Connecticut-Westchester Mycological Association (COMA). My first mycology mentor, Marge Morris, told the assembled group about many species of mushrooms that we could find in our area. After the lecture, I returned to my car and found a mushroom similar to the one I'd seen the previous weekend. I brought it back to show Marge, who immediately held it up in the air like a priest with a chalice and declared "King bolete! King bolete!" I'd apparently found a keeper! It was a specimen in the *Boletus edulis* complex,



Boletus edulis

Photograph them to your heart's content, but never eat a wild mushroom that has not been identified as an edible species by an expert mycologist.

one of the most highly prized wild mushrooms in the world. That was it: I was hooked!

Fortunately for me, Marge lived nearby and was happy to share both her hunting spots and years of mycological expertise. Marge and I spent many weekends hunting on our own and with other COMA members. I was indeed fortunate to be in the company of so many skilled and knowledgeable amateur mycologists who mentored me and became good friends. Most of them had studied at the New York Botanical Garden under the author of the Audubon guide to mushrooms, Gary Lincoff. Their combined expertise was both inspiring and intimidating, but their ability to gradually (and patiently) bring a person from novice to skilled amateur overrode my trepidation. I enjoyed each walk more than the previous, and I was soon leading walks, editing the club newsletter, and producing a club promo video for YouTube.

Within a few short years, I felt totally capable of foraging on my own, finding various species of delicious edible

mushrooms as each fruited through the seasons. I quickly realized that although my interest and fascination with all species of mushrooms was high, I was for all intents and purposes, a "pothunter," a person whose primary interest is in collecting, and cooking with, wild edible mushrooms. However, one of the great things about learning about mushrooms from experts is that they do not focus only on the specific species that they want to eat. I learned not only to seek certain mushrooms at specific times of the year, but also to be open to discover all that nature provides as I hunt my highly prized edibles. On most walks something unexpected or not previously encountered surprises me, all because I'm looking for particular mushrooms.

Finding mushrooms and collecting mushrooms are two different things, however, so amateurs must ensure that there are no restrictions on the harvesting of fungi before taking any out of the woods. Many local and state parks put restrictions on what can be removed and these rules must be followed. Even when restrictions are in place, though, I have

found that I have been allowed to take a sample or two, as well as an infinite number of photographs for study. Finding those places where edibles can be collected is similar to finding that great secret fishing spot, and it can take many years of hiking and hunting to do so. (There are even stories of people leaving the location of their morel spots and hen-of-the-woods trees in their wills!)

As was the case with me, foraging for wild mushrooms is a tradition that is typically started by an immigrant ancestor and then handed down through the generations. Those of us, like myself, who are fortunate enough to have parents who are still able to pursue this delightful and rewarding hobby revel in each opportunity to engage in it with them. In August of 2011 my father told me that he had an incredible crop of “prawdiwek” (the “true mushroom”) growing in a lot that he owns. He was bringing them home by the shopping bag full and giving them away to family and friends because he just could not cook any more!

Fortunately I had a high school reunion two weeks later that brought me back to Cohoes, and I set out with my father to see what remained. I was stunned to see the most beautiful fruitings of lilac bolete that I’d ever encountered. Although there were dozens of gorgeous, healthy specimens growing under the oak trees, my father assured me that it was nothing compared to what had been there earlier. The reunion was an event that I’d looked forward to for many months, but that time spent with my father was the highlight of my year.



Boletus frostii

No matter where you go in New York, if there are trees, there will be mushrooms.



When you learn to identify the different types of edible mushrooms, there’s no telling the amount of delectables you could be carrying home from the woods.

Leccinum versipelle



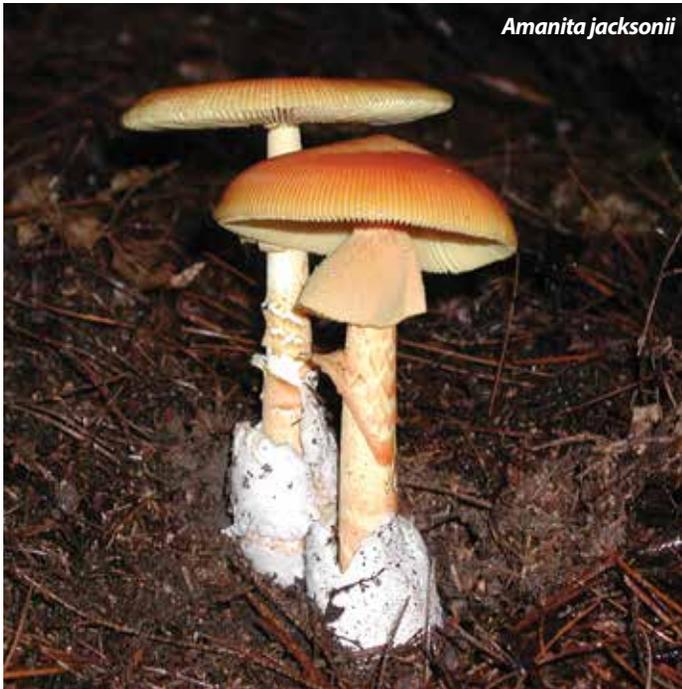
Boletus edulis



Amanita jacksonii



Boletus bicolor



Amanita jacksonii

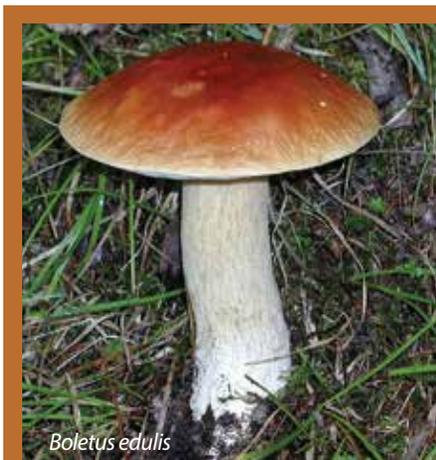
Hunting in various parts of the state has been an eye-opener for me, too. I'll never forget the first time I encountered a giant king bolete on the northern edge of the Pharaoh Wilderness in the Adirondacks. It stopped me in my tracks, took my breath away, and brought me to my knees in amazement and adoration. In my neck of the woods I might find them anywhere from 3- to 10-inches tall; this one was at least 16 inches in height with a cap that was a foot or more in diameter! Other encounters with Adirondack mushrooms taught me that, despite thinking that they were new to me, they were (for the most part) simply larger specimens of mushrooms that I'd studied 150 miles south of there. The substrata in those ancient forests make for some amazingly large and healthy mushroom specimens.

With the unusual weather patterns that we have been experiencing, I have not seen a "typical" year in the 15+ years that I've been hunting mushrooms. Each year, though, seems to be "the year of" one kind of mushroom or another. A few years ago, for instance, members of my club were harvesting amazing amounts of morels. Then there was the incredible summer of the chanterelle when the temperatures and rainfall had them fruiting in great abundance. In 2011 it seemed you could not take 20 steps in an oak forest without encountering another hen-of-the-woods at the base of an oak tree—sometimes five or six of them! And that was on top of the delectable boletes that I'd picked with my father.

No matter where you go in New York, if there are trees, there will be mushrooms. As I heard on one of my first COMA forays: "You see what you look for." So keep an eye out for those beautiful and fascinating fruiting bodies that we call mushrooms—they're not hard to find. After all, Mother Nature has assigned a wider color palette to the kingdom of fungi than she has to flowering plants. Photograph them to your heart's content, but never eat a wild mushroom that has not been identified as an edible species by an expert mycologist. Soon, you too can be finding and cooking with wild mushrooms!

Stephen J. Rock is a publishing technician for Boehringer-Ingelheim Pharmaceuticals, Inc. He and his wife enjoy foraging for and photographing mushrooms.

Author's note—The following two sources were used:
 Shernoff, L. *Mushroom: The Journal of Wild Mushrooms*.
www.mushroomthejournal.com
 Kuo, M. *North American trees* www.mushroomexpert.com/trees.



Boletus edulis

Come join the hunt!

If you'd like to explore the world of mushrooms and mushroom hunting, there are many clubs and organizations throughout New York that offer classes, talks, hikes and much more! Here are some of the many mushroom clubs you can explore:

- Central New York Mycological Society, Baldwinsville: www.cnyms.org
- Connecticut-Westchester Mycological Association (COMA), White Plains: www.comafungi.org
- Long Island Mycological Club, Ridge: www.limyc.org
- Mid Hudson Mycological Association, Albany: www.midhudsonmyco.org
- Mid York Mycological Society, Rome: <http://mymsnet.org>
- New York Mycological Society, New York City: www.newyorkmyc.org
- Rochester Area Mycological Association, Rochester: <http://rochestermushroomclub.org>
- Susquehanna Valley Mycological Society, Endicott: www.svmsonline.org

