



F oraging or ungi



by Mick Austin

There's an old saying that the best things in life are free and that's never truer than when you're foraging for wild mushrooms, or *champignons sauvage*.

Collecting mushrooms in France is a national pastime, an important part of rural life. The French will eat almost anything – frogs' legs and snails, for example – and are very partial to wild mushrooms. But they can, unfortunately, be dangerously ignorant on the subject. Hundreds of cases of mushroom poisoning are recorded every year in France, with a couple of dozen fatalities.

With some 3500 species and varieties of the fungi group, of which some 800 to 1000 species and sub-species occur in France, it can't be stressed enough the very real danger of careless picking. Broadly speaking, 5-10% of mushrooms are deadly or potentially deadly; 40-50% are toxic; 30-40% are unpalatable but harmless; and just 5-10% are really edible.

Beware of old wives' tales like "all white mushrooms are safe," or "all mushrooms with a ring on the stalk are good," or even "mushrooms that have been attacked by slugs are edible." Don't even go there! And don't think that if you haven't developed any symptoms soon after eating wild mushrooms you are safe. Some mushrooms have a delayed action and symptoms can appear 24-48 hours later. By which time your liver and kidneys will be



so damaged you'll be suffering a long and incredible agony. And there is almost no treatment. If you've eaten wild mushrooms and any of these symptoms appear – stomach cramps, dizziness, fever, sweating – call the SAMU immediately. Keeping the remains of your meal will speed up the diagnosis.

Right, that's the scary bit sorted! Now for the good part. Collecting mushrooms is a fascinating pastime that gives you the chance of some healthy exercise and an opportunity to enjoy the local countryside. You'll also have the added bonus that the mushrooms you find will be far tastier than the cultivated ones found in your local supermarket.

The Poitou-Charentes is well known for the quality and quantity of its wild mushrooms and when the mushroom season arrives – usually between September and December – hundreds of people can be found with their little wicker baskets moving carefully through woodland and meadows. It's a scene repeated throughout France.

In some areas the local Mairie or tourist office organises a *journée de découverte des champignons*, when a local expert will join a group of foragers to help with the identification of the different types of mushrooms found on the day.

** See separate story for the DSM's Magic Mushroom Day.*

If you're new to mycology (the study of mushrooms and fungi) a field guide is essential. Some experts recommend you have two as descriptions can sometimes be contradictory (and therefore unreliable) and appreciations as to the level of toxicity often varies. Read the descriptions carefully and don't rely solely on the pictures as they can be misleading - as a mushroom's colour and shape can be affected by weather, age and habitat.

Where you go foraging is important. Yes, it would be helpful if it was somewhere you had a chance of finding mushrooms, but remember that picking on private land without permission is stealing and therefore an offence. Each commune or landowner can decide where, when and if mushroom picking is allowed and the amount of mushrooms allowed per person, and sometimes they can make additional restrictions on certain types of mushrooms. If you're not going on an organised day it would be sensible to contact your local Mairie or Préfecture beforehand and always get the prior consent of the landowner.

What to wear and what to take? Sensible clothing and footwear is a must. Think mud, nettles and brambles. Then a basket, ideally a wicker-type one. Never carry your harvest in a plastic bag because mushrooms tend to rot quickly (particularly if the weather's damp and/or warm) and they will be crushed, making identification impossible. A pocket knife is also a must-have. Mushrooms should never be pulled out as the mycelium matting (the underground part) will be damaged and the next season's growth may suffer. Cut the stalks as low down as possible.

Until you feel you've gained enough experience to recognise mushrooms at first glance, pick everything you find – except those that look too old and those obviously too small – just so you get your eye in. Avoid picking during rain or just after as the mushrooms will deteriorate more quickly and will need to dry before going into the pan. And don't rush madly in when you see a mushroom. It won't run away and there might be others around you could trample on.

When you get home, spread your mushrooms on a cloth or newspaper and leave them to dry so any excess surface moisture evaporates. Then clean them with a rag or soft brush to get rid of any leaves, grass, soil or grit. Don't wash them!

Then it's time for your field guides. Check carefully every mushroom you have found. You can't afford to be lazy. Just because you think you've identified one mushroom, an apparently similar one needs just as much scrutiny. Don't just look at the pictures, make sure you read the text.

Reject any mushroom you're not certain of. If you have any doubts at all, you can take your find to your local pharmacy. Pharmacists across France are trained in fungi recognition, but sometimes it can be less than reassuring if he digs out a reference book to try and identify your day's bounty. A common answer can be: "I don't know, but best not." If that's the case, don't eat it. Your life may depend on it!



1

© Wikimedia/ AndreasKunze



2

© Wikimedia/ JerzyOpiota JerzyOpiota



3

© Wikimedia/ LordMayonnaise



4

© Wikimedia/ Strobilomyces



5

© Wikimedia/ RaftilInstituteMsHavisham

Three safe mushrooms to look out for...

1. Field mushroom (*Agaricus campestris* and others of the same family. French name *Agaric/Psalliote*). Probably the best known of all wild mushrooms with its pink gills that turn browner with maturity. The gills are not attached to the stem, which is common to all *Agaricus*. Delicious for breakfast with bacon and eggs!

2. Shaggy parasol (*Macrolepiota rhacodes*. French name *Coulemelle/Lepiote déguenillée*). One of the parasol group of mushrooms, this has an aromatic smell and dries very well. Reconstituted it is excellent in soups and stews or mixed wild mushroom dishes.

3. Fairy ring (*Marasmius oreades*. French name *Mousseron/Marasme des Oréades*). A classic fairy ring is usually a few metres across, but they can reach over 100 metres! Tastes as good as it looks, but beware, there is a poisonous lookalike (*Clitocybe rivulosa*). There's little similarity once they are full grown and they are unlikely to be found in the same environment, but it's important not to make any mistakes.

... and three to definitely avoid

4. Death cap (*Amanita phalloides*. French name *Amanite phalloïde*). Each year accounts for most of the fatal poisonings caused by eating mushrooms. It looks fairly innocuous, smells pleasant and can be peeled. However, it is deadly and only one cap is needed to cause serious – possibly fatal – poisoning.

5. Destroying angel (*Amanita virosa*. French name *Amanite vireuse*). Deadly poisonous and well deserves its name, being white and fatal. Occurring together with field mushrooms, but has white gills. Symptoms of the poison are the same as for the Death cap.

6. Deadly dapperling (*Lepiota brunneoincarnata*. French name *Lepiot brunincarnat*). The name is a bit of a giveaway. A small, tasty-looking mushroom that can be confused with a small edible parasol mushroom. Accidental consumption leads to severe liver toxicity and can have lethal consequences if immediate treatment is not received.



© Wikimedia/Strobilomyces



Join the DSM's Magic Mushroom Day

Love the idea of foraging for mushrooms but wary of the consequences of getting it wrong? No problem. The Deux-Sèvres Monthly has teamed up with bilingual mushroom enthusiast Henri de Baulny for an exclusive Magic Mushroom Day in the extensive grounds of his home at Château du Theil, at Saint-Aubin le Cloud, near Parthenay.

A choice of two afternoons are available: **Tuesday 27th October** or **Saturday 7th November** for a group of between 5 and 15 people and will cost just €7,50 per person. You'll meet up at 2.15pm for a 15 minute presentation from Henri (in French and/or English) followed by a full afternoon working both the fields and the forest at the chateau. All mushrooms collected will be taken back for identification and explanations, after which the participants can take home all they want. The safe ones of course!

Numbers are strictly limited so you need to book early to avoid disappointment. Contact Sarah at The DSM on 05 49 70 26 21 or email: info@thedeuxsevresmonthly.fr.



Above left and right: Monsieur de Baulny at his grounds. Photos: Sarah Berry.

Useful Websites

- www.rogersmushrooms.com Lots of information in English.
- www.atlas-des-champignons.com From La Société Mycologique de France.
- www.reve-de-chateaux.com/demeure/991-parc-du-chateau-du-theil Check out visiting times for M. de Baulny's chateau and park.

Mick Austin would like to thank M. de Baulny for his invaluable help in the compilation of this article.

Mick Austin is a freelance journalist based in the Pays-de-la-Loire. He has had his work published in several expat magazines and newspapers and has also written the Mayenne Tourist Board's only English-language brochure. He also runs a gîte business at www.gitfortwo.com.