Stropharia ambigua: Unquestionably One of My Favorite Fungi for the Table by storm

"With regard to tastes, it is always well to remember that they are individual; 'otherwise moths would not eat cloth.'"[1]

I am a naturalist and stone-age skills practitioner who became an amateur mycologist in 2002 after a friend took me mushroom hunting. We found a curious rainbow of delectable edibles (it took some courage to partake in that first fungal feast that evening). Among them were Shaggy Mane, Shrimp Russula, *Bovista plumbea*, Candy Cap, Coccora, Amethyst Laccaria, Blewit, Chanterelle and Horn-of-Plenty. My friend had exuded such enthusiasm over finding all these mushrooms, I would have thought that this moment could not have been surpassed. Then we encountered, "one of the most exquisitely beautiful of all mushrooms,"[2] *Stropharia ambigua*.

My nose beat me too it, although I did not know what "it" was...off trail, peeking out ever-so-slightly under a moist layer of California Bay Laurel and Coast Redwood leaves, just behind a small but heavily nut-laden Tan Oak. The smells of this coastal CA landscape enveloped me often on hikes: musky CA Sagebrush of the upper slopes; Vanilla Grass and CA Bay wafting carelessly on sunny afternoons; the alternating aromas of maple syrup and curry (depending on the amount of moisture and heat in the air) of the ornamental *Escallonia* shrub.

I had never smelled a mushroom before—why would you? But this fungus was unquestionably present from a downwind distance of five meters. This incredible explosion of rich, black, vibrant, mouldy humus hit my olfactory senses and became one of the first of 275 wild mushroom species I was to eat within the next three years. My three years in the Santa Cruz region and current residence on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington have provided me with the glorious opportunity to *stalk the wild mushroom* in a couple of the most mycologically rich regions of North America. As I search these forests for edible or otherwise useful botanicals, insects and geologic gifts, it is a delight to come across a fungus large enough to constitute a meal. Every bit of foraged nutrition helps when you choose to depend upon wild foods for sustenance.

The Questionable Stropharia has a silky, white stalk approaching 3cm in thickness and 20cm in length. The stalk is usually covered in soft white flakes. The broad (up to 19cm), dull-to-bright yellow, bald-viscous cap seems unabashed about sporting the tattered cottony remains of its ample white veil along the margin and around the stem. The gills are adnate and the color of early spring slush. The spore print is purplish-black, and without one for reference, the careless hunter might mistake a Death Cap for a Stropharia. Around here, I find this mushroom in second-growth Douglas Fir-Western Hemlock rainforest, usually on the periphery of human habitation and trails. *S. ambigua* functions as a secondary decomposer—it prefers to grow in mulch, compost and duff that has been rotted by primary decomposers like the Oyster Mushroom.[3]

To taste this succulent morsel of a mushroom is to experience a rich, thick tang of rainforest duff, slightly salty with a hint of olive oil (that is, after you sprinkle it with salt and fry it in olive oil). This full-flavor fungus rivals in earthy magnificence any species one can haul to the table. Stropharias have a firm, meaty texture and don't seem to be plagued with excess moisture (which would be evident upon frying it). It is a very satisfying dish. But what do others say about the edibility of this species? Arora offers "?" in his tome[4], then in a later publication condemns this *Stropharia* to a certain purgatory by saying "not recommended."[5] Lincoff writes, "of uncertain edibility."[6] "Generally considered edible, but very mediocre"[7] pens Michael Wood. Matchmaker[8] agrees with Arora's earlier work. No wonder it's called "questionable."

This brings me to the issue of eating fungi of uncertain edibility. I feel a certain excitement when, upon looking up the edibility of a freshly keyed-out specimen, I'm offered the succinct disappointment, "Unknown," which is oft-tempered by that fickle admonition, "Do not experiment." The miraculous gifts inherent within hundreds of otherwise edible species are being snubbed by condemnations such as: too slimy; rank odor; acrid or bitter taste; not recommended due to its resemblance to species of unknown edibility; too tough or gelatinous in texture; of no consequence due to small size.

There are a few remedies that I employ to overcome hurdles to palatability. One can pound and dice species with tough flesh (*Tyromyces*, *Cryptoporus*, *Ganoderma* and *Fomitopsis* come to mind) to render their beneficial chemical constituents more available (by breaking cell walls) in the form of a hot tea. Pickling can dispel many acrid or bitter tastes, especially within the genera of *Leucopaxillus*, *Lactarius*, *Agaricus* and

Russula, though it may not counter low-level toxicity effects in every case. Personally, I try to be mindful of expanding my acceptance of wild foodstuffs through the purging of culturally-imposed food prejudices.

One should never explore the field of mycophagy beyond the scope of one's comfortability. But there are those of us who, while deeply respecting the powers of Kingdom Fungi, wish to *replenish a body of knowledge lost in part by the past ravages of cultural displacement*. Some assert that experimenting with mushrooms is unnecessary, for, "our ancestors have already provided for us, through trial and error, a comprehensive list"[9] from which we can glean. While I agree that we should take the time to learn about wild organisms before stuffing them into our mouths, the available body of knowledge is far from complete, if not unavailable. For example, I am hard-pressed to find such information on mushrooms eaten by pre-historic First Nations people.

I am not advocating that you go out and eat a Questionable Stropharia...unless *you* are comfortable in doing so. I usually eat no more that two large specimens during any given day. I am merely supplementing the existing literature with my experience: "Each one of us is a trustee of the past; we have the task of living up to our heritage – and adding something to it."[10]

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[1] Louis C. C. Krieger. "Common Mushrooms of the United States." In *National Geographic* 37(5), 1920.
[2] David Arora. Mushrooms Demystified (1986--p. 378).
[3] Paul Stamets. The Role of Mushrooms in Nature in The Overstory Agroforestry Journal: http://www.agroforestry.net/overstory/overstory86.html
[4] Arora (1986).
[5] David Arora. All That the Rain Promises...and More (1991).
[6] Gary Lincoff. The Audubon Society Field Guide to North America Mushrooms (1981).
[7] Michael Wood. www.mycoweb.com (13 July 2004).
[8] Matchmaker Database. www.pfc.forestry.ca/cgi-bin/matchmaker/latin.asp (13 July 2004).
[9] Ray Vizgirdas. "The Mystique of Mushrooms" in *Wilderness Way* 6(4), 2000.
[10] Roy Chapman Andrews. "Letter to the Editor" in the *Bulletin of Primitive Technology*, Issue 24.