

The Popularity of Edible Mushrooms in Geneva

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In Europe, there is wide interest, sometimes approaching a mania, for collecting wild mushrooms. This pastime has deep roots. With berry picking, it is the last chance for the city dweller to gather food from its native environment. Mushroom collecting here is mostly a masculine hobby, quite the contrary to primitive societies where men are hunters and the women and children have charge of providing vegetal food. For many people, it has replaced hunting and fishing, always expensive sports. Wild mushrooms offer the possibility of getting something of value for nothing.

Many less enthusiastic people limit their quest to restaurants that serve mushroom specialties or to the market. Twice a year (in spring for *Morchella*) and in late summer and fall (peak of growth for most species) the devotee becomes mushroom conscious. Local authorities have had to pass many kinds of regulations to protect the health of the population in the face of such a craze.

Let us take Geneva, Switzerland, as an example. Open air markets are organized every day but Sunday, in different parts of the city. These markets, at the appropriate time of year, reserve a section for wild mushrooms. No wild mushrooms except truffles can be sold anywhere else. In addition to mushrooms, only wild flowers may be offered for sale on the same premises. These mushroom markets are under the supervision of an inspector, a local mycologist responsible to the state government.

It is forbidden to peddle wild mushrooms anywhere in the State, and minors are not authorized to sell mushrooms. No mushroom may be sold on the market without first passing an inspection. The mushrooms must be presented whole easily to be recognized scientifically, but the inspector may order that the bases be removed in those specimens in which it is too tough to be eaten.

Each species sold at the market must be clearly labelled with its vernacular name. After examination of the merchandise and payment of a tax, the inspector delivers a permit with the name of the vendor, the kind of mushrooms offered for sale and the quantity. Policemen in charge of the markets are responsible for enforcing these controls.

Mushroom vendors are professionals. Not only do they sell what they collect themselves, which would not be sufficient to make a living, but they also retail mushrooms which they have bought wholesale from far-away places. The woods of the Geneva countryside, broken up as they are for agricultural purposes, would not be able to provide the thousands of pounds of wild mushrooms consumed each year. To supply this demand, the larger forests of the German part of Switzerland and of central France contribute heavily. Since they have a slightly different climate, they likewise help to make certain mushrooms available over longer periods on the markets.

These importations of mushrooms retailed exclusively by a few people tend to create more stability in the personnel of the vendors who, year after year, are seen at the same wooden tables. These people know the product that they sell, as well as the inspectors in charge of checking them. The only unfortunate drawback with retailers is their temptation to sell mushrooms not perfectly fresh, and nothing spoils so fast as damp mushrooms during the summer. Perfectly innocuous species rapidly become as dangerous as ptomaine meat. Several regulations especially to prevent this have been enacted; two are directed towards control of the two commonest and most highly appreciated kinds: the *chantarelles* and the *boletus*.

Chantarelles, even when abundant, always maintain a certain price. In order to make them heavier, they are often soaked in water before being sold. When wet, they spoil if the heat be high and become unsafe in a few hours. For health protection of would-be

¹ Hunt Library, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
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buyers, chantarelles are now sold by the measure: one liter or half-a-liter; they are no longer sold by weight; this custom has curtailed much of the danger. In defense of the vendors, we may say that soaking was usually done to "refresh" mushrooms unsold at the preceding market, a common practice among vegetable dealers.

With boletus, the problem is different. These fungi are often inhabited by insect larvae, sometimes to the point where the mushrooms cannot be eaten. After being presented entire for inspection, they have to be sold cut in half, permitting buyers to see at a glance whether or not they are wormy.

Besides these regulations to ensure the safety and freshness of the mushrooms, there are others which encourage the sale of quality products. The number of species sold in markets, in all parts of the State of Geneva, is limited to those species appearing on an official checklist. This list has been established to include only edible species of very safe qualities. If all kinds of safe mushrooms were included, many, such as *Armillaria mellea*, would cause allergic reactions in some individuals. Excluded also are the species which, though excellent for eating, may be easily confused with deadly species, such as *Amanita rubescens*, a species very similar to the poisonous *A. pantherina* and *A. vaginata* that resemble *A. phalloides*, the most dangerous toadstool. These species, as well as others collected by amateurs, are inspected free at each market for anyone

who cares to have his harvest checked before preparing it in his own kitchen.

Highly and traditionally appreciated, though potentially dangerous, guesswork and superstitious beliefs to separate edible mushrooms from poisonous toadstools have been replaced by an effective, scientific control. In 1963, a bumper year, about 70,000 pounds of mushrooms were inspected and sold in the markets of Geneva, at an average price of \$1.50 a pound. More than two-thirds of this quantity was represented by *Cantharellus cibarius*, the chantarelle. To these official statistics, we must add the thousands of pounds collected by amateurs, bringing to well over \$100,000 the conservatively estimated value of wild mushrooms consumed in a city of about 200,000 inhabitants.²

Beside the free services of a state inspector, several mycological clubs provide popular education in the form of classes, lectures and exhibits instructing the layman in the technical characters of mushrooms. In spite of all these facilities, there are still those who think they know better by themselves. The safety record held by the State of Geneva has been marred by several deaths among newcomers to the area, who in this exceptionally good year for mushrooms were caught unawares by the unprecedented abundance of the deadly toadstool, *A. phalloides*.

² The information presented herein was kindly provided by Mr. Aloys Duperré, inspector of the mushroom markets of the City of Geneva.

CHECKLIST OF MUSHROOMS WHICH MAY BE SOLD IN THE MARKETS OF THE STATE OF GENEVA

<i>Amanita caesarea</i>	<i>C. cornucopioides</i>	<i>Polyporus confluens</i>
<i>Boletus aereus</i>	<i>Fistulina hepatica</i>	<i>P. frondosus</i>
<i>B. appendiculatus</i>	<i>Gomphidius glutinosus</i>	<i>P. umbellatus</i>
<i>B. aurantiacus</i>	<i>Hydnum imbricatum</i>	<i>Psalliota arvensis</i>
<i>B. edulis</i>	<i>H. repandum</i>	<i>P. augusta</i>
<i>B. granulatus</i>	<i>Hygrophorus caprinus</i>	<i>P. campestris</i>
<i>B. luteus</i>	<i>H. marzuolus</i>	<i>P. silvatica</i>
<i>Cantharellus cibarius</i>	<i>H. obrusscus</i>	<i>Tricholoma aggregatum</i>
<i>C. lutescens</i>	<i>H. puniceus</i>	<i>T. colombetta</i>
<i>Chaeromyces meandriformis</i>	<i>H. virgineus</i>	<i>T. Georgii</i>
<i>Clitocybe cyathiformis</i>	<i>Laccaria laccata</i>	<i>T. irinum</i>
<i>C. geotropa</i>	<i>Lactarius deliciosus</i>	<i>T. nudum</i>
<i>C. gigantea</i>	<i>L. sanguifluus</i>	<i>T. paneolum</i>
<i>Clitopilus prunulus</i>	<i>Lepiota excoriata</i>	<i>T. personatum</i>
<i>C. orcella</i>	<i>L. procera</i>	<i>Tuber sp.</i>
<i>Coprinus comatus</i>	<i>L. rhacodes</i>	
<i>Cortinarius praestans</i>	<i>Marasmius oreades</i>	
<i>Craterellus clavatus</i>	<i>Morchella sp.</i>	
	<i>Mitrophora sp.</i>	
	<i>Pholiota aegerita</i>	