

From Disgust to Desire: Changing Attitudes toward Beringian Mushrooms¹

SVETA YAMIN-PASTERNAK

Department of Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University, 404 Macaulay Hall 3400 North Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21218, USA. rechichanka@gmail.com

From Disgust to Desire: Changing Attitudes toward Beringian Mushrooms. Separated by national borders and the International Dateline, the native communities inhabiting the Bering Strait regions of Russia and Alaska share a common natural environment, myriad cultural similarities, and long-standing social ties. Their subsistence diets also are similar, except that wild mushrooms are revered on the Russian side of the Bering Strait (Chukotka) and are feared and avoided in Alaska. This paper explores the origins of this dietary difference and probes the social dimensions of food and cuisine with respect to the culinary utilization of wild mushrooms.

Key Words: Mushrooms, cookery, ethnomycology, Yupik, Chukchi, Chukotka, Bering Strait, social life and customs.

Introduction

The social ties between the Russian and Alaskan shores of the Bering Strait date far into prehistory and are well documented by historians and anthropologists. In addition to similar physical environments, the Beringian communities also share most subsistence food preferences, including the meat of land and sea mammals, fish, birds, berries, and greens. Wild mushrooms, however, form a prominent exception. A survey of literature and museum collections was conducted prior to fieldwork; it provided insights into the medicinal, recreational, and spiritual uses of mushrooms in the Chukotka region of the Russian Far East and in Alaska (Bogoras 1904–1909; Nelson 1983 [1899]; Ray 1975; Wasson 1968). Information on culinary uses, however, was rather scarce. For the Alaskan side of the Bering Strait, Jones (1983:144) suggests that Inupiaq people generally do not eat mushrooms due to a long-standing “strong taboo” fostered by shamans. In Chukotka, on the other hand, Kerttula (2000:109) observes that: “Only Chukchi and Yupik ate greens, but everyone enjoyed mushrooms and berries... during mushroom season the [Sireniki] village’s obsession

with fungi borders on fetishism.” The strong contrast captured in these references, indicating fear of mushrooms on the Alaskan side and a strong affinity for them on the Chukotkan side, inspired interest in Beringian ethnomycology.

Setting

Although a Beringian focus is not uncommon in circumpolar ethnography (Schweitzer and Golovko 1995, 1997), the boundaries of what constitutes the Bering Strait area are variably defined. This study includes the islands of Little Diomed and St. Lawrence, as well as the Seward and the Chukchi peninsulas, which face each other (Fig. 1). Chukchi people live in the tundra areas of Beringian Russia—a region also known as Chukotka—as well as on the coast, which they share with the Siberian Yupik (pl: YUPIIT) people; the latter inhabit both sides of the Bering Strait. On the Alaskan side, Siberian YUPIIT live on St. Lawrence Island and, to a lesser extent, on the Seward Peninsula, which is predominantly occupied by the Inupiaq (pl: INUPIAT) people. Marine mammal hunting is a traditional occupation that provides a primary source of animal protein for the native coastal populations in Chukotka and Alaska, while reindeer herding is a traditional subsistence activity of the tundra Chukchi and was adopted by

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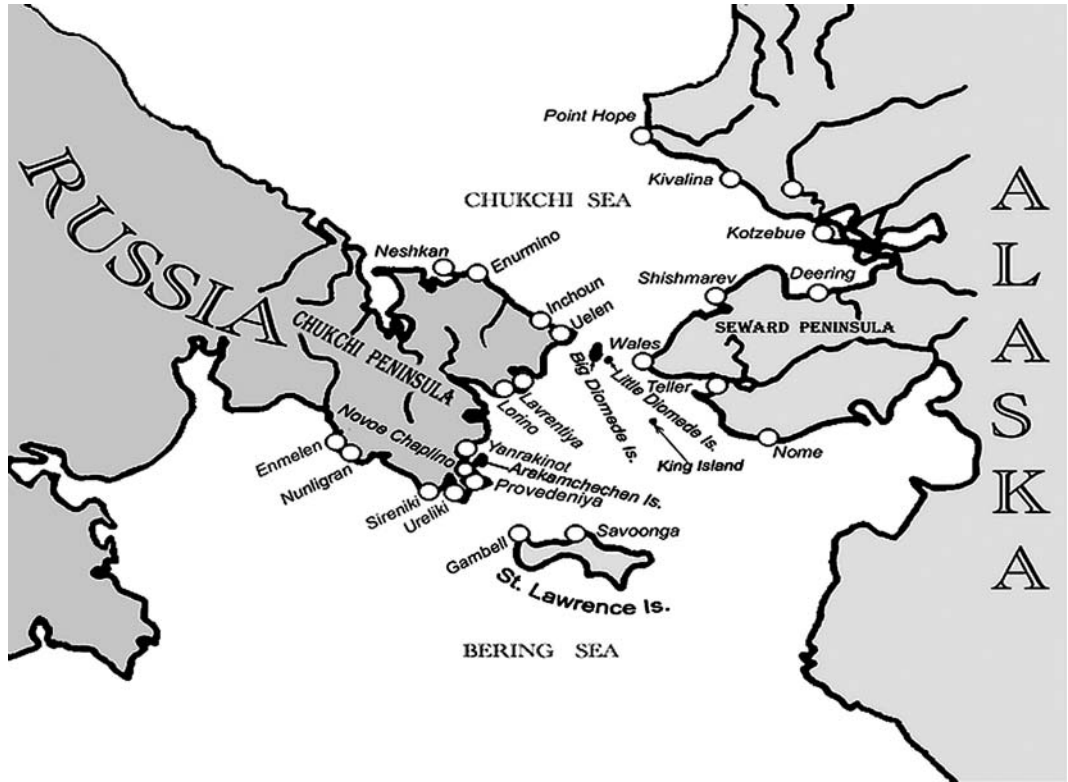


Fig. 1. Map of the Bering Strait area. The Chukchi peninsula, located on the Russian side of the Bering Strait, is part of a vaster territory called Chukotka, the farthest northeastern subject of the Russian Federation.

some Inupiat at the turn of the 20th century. In addition to native populations, newcomers and settlers from the Russian and U.S. mainlands have established temporary residences or permanent homes on their respective sides of the Bering Strait.

Fieldwork

In the summer of 2001, I conducted preliminary fieldwork on both sides of the Bering Strait. On the Alaskan side, as suggested by Jones (1983:144), wild mushrooms appeared to belong to a prohibited category, as echoed in multiple stories that were related. Many informants recalled being instructed throughout childhood to never touch mushrooms; they explained that mushrooms are poisonous and strongly advised against picking and eating them. A few people recalled incidents of observing someone “experimenting” with mushrooms. These individuals were viewed as “daring,” their behavior regarded as rule breaking and “asking for trouble.” Several elders repeatedly mentioned the meaning of the

word for mushroom in the Inupiaq language: *araignaq* (“something that makes your hand come off”). Not all people in Beringian Alaska, however, regard mushrooms as prohibited food—some simply don’t regard them as food. In other words, the idea of consuming wild mushrooms was met with an expression of indifference rather than outright aversion. On several occasions, however, my own cultural identity came into play: “Mushrooms? You must be Russian!” was the informants’ response. That is because those people in Nome, Alaska, who know, pick, and, with great pleasure, eat wild mushrooms, are former residents of Chukotka, who now, either permanently or temporarily, live with their relatives in Alaska. During interviews, several of these Chukotkan immigrants shared stories of the panic they generated in the homes of their Alaska-born relatives by returning from the tundra with a fresh harvest of wild mushrooms.

During my fieldwork, I collected and consumed various wild mushrooms, but especially

species of *Leccinum* and *Lactarius*, which fruit abundantly on the tundra on both sides of the Bering Strait. In Alaska, people largely insisted that all of the region's mushrooms are poisonous, and therefore there is no reason to distinguish one kind from another. On the other hand, in Chukotka wild mushrooms are an integral part of the subsistence diet and the people maintained that mushroom picking is entirely safe. They would explain that while all of the local mushrooms are edible, mycological knowledge is still useful in differentiating between the more desirable and less desirable types. Intrigued by such opposing attitudes to an abundant, shared resource, I decided to focus my research on the history, beliefs, and practices surrounding mushroom uses in the Bering Strait and, in particular, Chukotka. In 2004, I returned to Chukotka to develop a more elaborate ethnographic study.

The Mushroom Season

For most Chukotka residents, including natives, mushroom picking is one of the central summer activities and an important part of the overall subsistence cycle. The wild mushroom season, which typically begins around the third week of July with the appearance of birch boletes (*Leccinum scabrum* [Bull.] Gray or a very similar species), is awaited with much anxiety and anticipation. People speculate where and when the first sighting will occur, and once word of the first mushroom discovery spreads, "mushroom mania" explodes in full force. Knives in hands and large buckets tucked inside their backpacks, mushroom harvesters can be spotted zigzagging up and down the tundra slopes surrounding the settlements. In places like Provideniya, where the most productive grounds lie beyond walking distance from town, arranging for transportation becomes one of the central concerns. Since only a handful of Chukotka residents own a private vehicle, the majority has to organize groups to hire a tank-like track vehicle (*vezdekhod*) or a large flatbed truck. Riding in the backs of these two predominant modes of transportation provides for a slow, bumpy, and nauseating excursion across tundra, yet those who manage to get onboard appear to be at ease with the discomfort, particularly when the trip results in a bountiful mushroom yield. People often request time off from work to take advantage of a mushroom harvesting opportunity, or simply leave their workplace altogether. On one August after-

noon, for example, I tried to visit a village library only to find a locked door displaying a handwritten note, which read "Left for the Tundra." For the few individuals who happened to stop by the library at the same time, the note did not cause the least bit of surprise, as it was entirely understandable during the height of the season that the librarian, like any other sensible person, would rather be out collecting than sitting at her desk. In every settlement I visited that time of year, mushrooms were the talk of the town. In the words of another Chukotkan ethnographer (Kerttula 2000:109), "Everyone talked about mushrooms: When they were going to pick them, where they had picked them, whether there were more this year than last, how they would prepare them and why."

When asked why mushroom season is greeted with such overwhelming enthusiasm, people offered three general explanations. Personal preference was the first and most frequently offered response: People explained that they simply find mushrooms very tasty. Some added that the appearance of mushrooms marks the beginning of a productive summer, the time when the tundra regains its energy and comes alive. Several informants extended this association by saying that after a long winter, they were anxious to get out on the tundra, to walk on its snow-free surface and accept its first gifts of wild mushrooms (Fig. 2). The second explanation offered for the "mushroom



Fig. 2. The treeless arctic tundra is rich in mushrooms. Many of the larger mushrooms grow in ectomycorrhizal association with dwarf species of *Alnus*, *Betula*, and *Salix*. Inhabitants take advantage of the long summer days to procure as much food as possible; this woman is loading her bucket with species of *Leccinum* and *Lactarius* which she will store in brine or otherwise preserve for winter use.

mania” had to do with the short duration of the mushroom season and the arctic summer in general. “One has to take advantage of every opportunity to procure food before the winter returns,” they said. The third explanation was that fresh wild mushrooms represented a longed-for culinary innovation after subsisting for many months on monotonous winter reserves.

The first mushrooms do, in fact, become an immediate menu option. *Peruye vseгда na zharku* (“the first are always for frying”) is the rule I heard from nearly every mushroom picker. Thus it is the fried birch bolete or *podberezovik* that marks the first summer meal. Delicious milk caps and bearded milk caps (species of *Lactarius*), on the other hand, do not typically appear until the second week of August and are generally not consumed fresh; instead, they are preserved for the winter by salting or marinating. By the second half of August, collecting *gorniy grib* (literally, “mountain mushroom”—*Leccinum versipelle* [Fr. & Hök] Snell) gains preference among most pickers. While similar in taste to the birch bolete, *gorniy grib* is less likely to be infested with worms (insect larvae) and is much firmer in texture. Therefore, it is easier to transport and is equally suitable for frying, drying, marinating, and canning. While species of *Leccinum* and *Lactarius* are the most widely consumed mushrooms, fried russula (*Russula* spp.) are popular as well. Finally, one Provideniya resident is known on both sides of the Bering Strait as the LBM aficionado. For her, no delicacy measures up to pickled “little brown mushrooms” (Arora 1986:32), which she calls *poganki* and collects indiscriminately.

Unless the year is one in which “winter is impatient”—a local reference to September snowstorms, the orange caps of the mountain mushrooms continue to adorn the rocky tundra slopes through the first week of October. Then, for the next nine months, a Chukotka cook must creatively supplement what is available in the chronically undersupplied village stores, reaching repeatedly for his or her canvas bags of dried boletes, rehydrating a handful, and making a hearty soup or a potato-mushroom casserole. Steam from the boiling pot will defrost the icy window, providing a temporary view of the snow-covered mountain slope that, come next summer, will generously offer its mushroom delicacies once again. New Year’s Day, International Women’s Day (March 8), and personal celebrations will

elicit the sound of a jar popping open, and having performed a smell-test of her special marinade, the host or hostess will nod approvingly and serve a plate of pickled *Lactarius*. Each of the guests will be served a few mushrooms, someone will pronounce a toast—to health, to parents, to children, to hosts, to guests, to friendship, and bottoms up—and the decadent hors d’oeuvre will chase the bitter taste of vodka. Anna Kerttula (2000:109) observes, “No holiday table, especially when the guests are invited, was considered complete without mushrooms.”

Ethnomycology in Cross-Cultural Perspective

Oral history accounts reveal that mushroom picking is a relatively new subsistence practice in Chukotka resulting from recent Russian influence. Further, mushroom picking began taking place around the 1960s, when intensive Sovietization efforts increased the influx of newcomers from western Russia to the Russian Far East. Prior to that, the Chukotka view of wild mushrooms was similar to the contemporary one on the Alaska side of the Bering Strait; namely, that the wild mushroom is a source of malevolence, an element of danger not fit for human consumption.

Mushrooms are central to Russian culture and cuisine—an observation made by numerous travelers, anthropologists, mycologists, and nature writers. Melissa Caldwell calls mushroom picking “the most evocative example of Russians’ appreciation for the countryside as a place where the economic, social, and spiritual merge” (Caldwell 2004:125). Valentina Wasson (Wasson and Wasson 1957:4) observes that mushrooms make an appropriate material for both kitchen and conversation, saying, “We Russians always find mushrooms wherever we go, even where our American friends tell us there are none.” With such deep affection for the sight, taste, gathering, and preparation of wild mushrooms, it is not surprising that Russians or Russified newcomers to Chukotka found mushrooms there and made them a subject of conversation with the local people.

While, prior to the Russian influence, mushrooms were equally shunned by all Chukotka natives, the Chukchi aversion to mushrooms was grounded in a worldview different from that of the Yupiit. For the Chukchi, mushrooms were exclusively reindeer food. Whether or not they are directly involved in herding, most Chukchi people

are aware that reindeer find mushrooms irresistible and “go out of their minds” at the sight or smell of wild mushrooms. Herders jokingly refer to mushrooms as “reindeer drugs,” as encountering rich mushroom patches presents the very real risk of losing control of the herd (Vitebsky 2005:138–143). Anna Kerttula (2000:109), who has worked extensively among the Sireniki-area herders, recounts that “reindeer would charge the field, jumping and frolicking until an observer could believe that mushrooms had a psychedelic effect on the animals.”

Yupik people, although aware of the Chukchi classification, do not view mushrooms as reindeer food. Moreover, until recently they did not consider mushrooms to be *any* kind of food. Before mushrooms were absorbed into the local culinary tradition, they were regarded as “devil ears” (*sygutmykytakh* in Chaplino; *tunigram sigutshak* in Sireniki) and/or “devil cane” (*tugnyram aiavik*), and were not eaten at all. All elders and most middle-aged adults whom I interviewed remember being cautioned throughout their childhood never to touch mushrooms. If one did accidentally make skin contact with the mushroom (while picking berries, for example), a person had to immediately blow at his or her fingers—a precautionary measure that was demonstrated to me during numerous interviews. People explained this practice as a technique to prevent the body from being contaminated by the malevolent underworld spirits—referred to in Russian as *cherti* (“the devils”), who cause rotting and decay. Nowadays, when a Yupik person comes back from the tundra with a haul of fresh mushrooms, others may remark that “all the devils have gone deaf” as a way of complimenting the hunter on his or her successful harvest.

To the Russian or Russified settlers living in Chukotka, neither reindeer food nor the spirit underworld has salient associations with mushrooms. For them, wild mushrooms always have been a delicacy, precious rewards for a day of forest scouting, bending down under every tree in hopes of a lucky find. Often nostalgic for their forested homelands, mushroom picking is one occasion when Russian settlers do not miss the tall trees, for many of Russia’s forest mushrooms also fruit prolifically on the tundra in association with low shrubs belonging to the birch, willow, and heath families. Walking through the vast open spaces, the air cool and crisp and the view

unobstructed, they marvel at the sheer abundance of mushrooms in the tundra regions. “I have never seen this many mushrooms in my life!” was a sentiment that a number of settlers and newcomers expressed during our discussions.

How Chukotka Took Up Mushroom Picking

Within the overall attempt to document Beringian ethnomycology, my primary goal was to uncover the specific circumstances of the cultural transition from mushroom antipathy to mushroom consumption: When, where, why, and how did Chukotka natives come to embrace mushroom picking and make it an integral part of their subsistence cycle? Among the themes that emerged during my interviews with Chukotka natives were recollections of boarding schools and their first Russian teachers, of fox farms, and of militarization and collectivization. There also were shared experiences of moving from traditional dwellings (called *yaranga*) into apartments and houses, of being relocated into new settlements from villages deemed unviable by the Soviet government, or, for those who spent most of their lives migrating with the reindeer, of living in permanent villages for the very first time.

From their earliest days in Chukotka up to the present, village schools have engaged in a wide range of activities extending beyond the academic curriculum (Dikov 1974; Menovshchikov 1959, 1977). Among such activities are hiking and collecting trips that take place during summer months, when teachers and students spend a significant amount of time out on the tundra. It was during excursions of this type that many native children were exposed to mushroom picking. While there was much variation in the responses of individual children to the taste sensations of wild mushrooms and even to the idea of picking them, reactions of their parents and elders speak clearly to the cultural differences in the Chukchi and Yupik perceptions of mushrooms. Chukchi people considered it strange for humans to be so excited about eating reindeer food. A Nunligran woman quoted her mother who, having learned of the mushroom-picking newcomers, asked, “Why do they eat those mushrooms, what are they, reindeer?” The Yupik children experienced a different scenario: When recounting their new tundra activity to their older relatives, many were reprimanded and cautioned against picking

mushrooms. A woman who grew up in Sireniki recalled how her mother and grandmother had repeatedly woken her up in the middle of the night to make sure she had not fallen ill from eating mushrooms at school earlier that day.

Initially, neither the Chukchi nor the Yupik adults allowed their children to bring home their mushroom harvest. Once having grasped the situation, the teachers then encouraged the children to turn their harvest over to the school cafeteria instead. It was only after incidents of direct exposure to wild mushrooms that the adults also started eating them. Some engaged in mushroom harvesting at the direction of locally stationed military personnel, state farm leaders, or Russian co-workers. Others learned it from personal friends and acquaintances, or at various communal feasts where mushroom dishes were on the table. This was particularly the case at the fox farms, when the end of a productive season called for an all-worker banquet celebration featuring local wild mushrooms.

Although the Yupik worldview was seemingly more prohibitive, it is the Chukchi reindeer herders who, to this day, are the least enthusiastic about mushrooms. With the exception of one Russian herder (who picks mushrooms alongside his animals!), the majority of *tundroviki* (people regarded as dwellers of the tundra, rather than dwellers of the coast) I met continue to regard mushrooms as reindeer food. One possible explanation is that the Chukchi herders, due to their remoteness from the village settlements, have been less exposed to the worldview of Russian newcomers compared to the coastal groups of Chukotka natives. However, this is not always the case, as illustrated by a number of Russian newcomers who had been employed as assistants with the herding brigades, especially during the Soviet era. Many of these Russian assistants were devoted mushroom pickers who took advantage of every harvest opportunity, sometimes even leading to a conflict of interest. For example, a retired Chukchi herder told me a story about a Russian *tractorist* (tractor driver) who, having collected and cleaned several bucket-loads of mushrooms, spread them out on a large piece of tarp to dry and then lay down for a nap. He awoke later to find that the reindeer had swallowed every last one of his mushrooms. The tractor driver was angry for not having been warned that a herd was about to pass through.

The herder, in contrast, felt sorry for causing the upset but could not have envisioned a scenario where a human being would collect reindeer food for his own consumption.

Discussion

The geographical and social similarities between the different sides of the Bering Strait allow us to compare how different colonial influences transformed the worldview and everyday practice in similar cultures. For example, conversing over a hot beverage, nowadays, is a common pastime in both Chukotka and Alaska, but the vast majority of Chukotka natives prefer a porcelain cup of tea (which they serve in the best Russian tradition) to the pan-American mug of coffee found throughout Alaskan villages. Unlike tea and coffee, however, mushrooms are not an imported commodity—they fruited on the tundra long before becoming “ears of spirits,” “reindeer food,” or a delicious edible in the human realm. It took a particular set of circumstances—the intertwining of the social, culinary, and sensory—to radically alter the mushroom’s place within the spectra of human food preferences, economic value, and socio-symbolic significance. This transition speaks to the importance of understanding the roles that historical circumstances play in the shaping of resource perception, ecological knowledge, and social identity.

In his essay on ethnomycology, Levi-Strauss (1976) related an anecdote where he discussed the works of ethnomycological pioneers Valentina Wasson and R. Gordon Wasson (Wasson 1968; Wasson and Wasson 1957), with a British colleague. In response to the notion of mycophilic and mycophobic societies outlined by the Wassons, the British scholar commented that the distinction is absurd and attributed the English lack of interest in mushrooms to their scarcity in England. For Levi-Strauss, a Frenchman socialized in a mushroom-loving culture, this was a perfect example of his colleague’s “national mycophobia” because, he observed, there are “as many, if not more, mushrooms in England than anywhere else” (Levi-Strauss 1976:244).

Compared to the case of the British and the French, Beringian ethnomycology provides an even stronger caution against the idea of environmental determinism. In places where a subsistence lifestyle is prevalent, local ecology determines most of what is possible. But that is all it does. While the

natural environment provides a range of options, as Krupnik (1993:169) points out, “The human ability to make good use of these possibilities ultimately depend[s] upon whether and how particular triggering social conditions conjoined at any moment in time.” A model of ecological determinism tends to exclude non-environmentally driven mechanisms of culture change, such as intercommunity contact and knowledge expansion (Krupnik 1993:189). At the same time, a slight difference in a total “constellation” of factors can play a key role in shaping “the baseline response to the external change” (Schweitzer 2003:95).

Mushrooms are admired by some people, hardly interest others, and literally sicken still others. Often, they are ascribed an aura of danger or mystique. Moreover, mushrooms are low in calories, and harvesting, processing, and preserving them are time-consuming tasks. Cumulatively, these qualities place mushrooms well within the discussion of materialist versus symbolic approaches to food. Cultural materialists (Ferguson 1995; Harris 1985) would argue that mushroom consumption, which in exchange for hard labor yields a low caloric return, is impractical and, therefore, traditionally not valued in the Arctic. However, as observed in Chukotka, in the second half of the 20th century harvesting and preserving wild mushrooms has become a prime summer procurement activity, at least in the areas studied. Proponents of interpretive approaches (Douglas 1966; Heston 1971; Levi-Strauss 1969; Sahlins 1976), i.e., those who insist that food must be “good to think” before it becomes good to eat, would probably conclude that caloric insufficiency serves only to enhance the symbolic significance of mushrooms and their changed status in the worldview of Chukotka native peoples.

In reflecting on the perception and use of wild mushrooms throughout Eastern Europe, Russia, and the Russian Far East, the two viewpoints summarized above emerge as complementary, rather than mutually exclusive. First of all, mushrooms, though low in calories, can be high in protein and trace elements (Boa 2004:43–47). More to the point, mushrooms are *perceived* by Russians as nutritionally valuable: They are regarded as filling foods (*tiazholaia pishcha*) and an equivalent of meat, especially when stewed with potatoes. Potatoes and mushrooms, in fact, are a self-sufficient dinner entrée. Therefore, within the emic, or insider schema of Slavic

cuisine, which the settlers brought from the mainland to Chukotka, mushrooms are “good to think” not only in the social and the sensory realms, but also in culinary and economic terms.

Even from an etic, or outsider’s point of view, the nutritional value of any food item can only be meaningful if measured within its culinary context. Fried mushrooms are prepared in liberal amounts of oil or animal fat and are consumed with a serving of carbohydrates. In Russian or Slavic cuisine, a mushroom turns any dish into a mushroom recipe. A soup made of barley, potatoes, and mushrooms is called “mushroom soup,” and stuffed fry-bread rolls are inevitably “mushroom *pirozinki*” as long as mushrooms are part of the filler. Pickled mushrooms are a delicacy that stands on its own. As mentioned earlier, they are essential on a holiday table. In Chukotka, a jar of pickled mushrooms is one of but a few items (like a box of chocolate or a bottle of liquor) that a guest can bring to a dinner party without offending the hosts. Pickled mushrooms, however, are not considered a self-sufficient food, and therefore presenting a jar of boletes is a gesture quite different from that of preparing a dish. “You don’t really *eat* pickled mushrooms, you mainly chase vodka with them, and then you eat [the actual meal],” is an explanation I heard time and again in Chukotka. A proper chaser is an essential part of drinking, which many in Russia consider a healthy activity as long as it performed in an appropriate social setting and is accompanied by generous eating.

To summarize, mushrooms can have an important dietary role whether as a “meat,” a key ingredient, a flavoring, a condiment, or a chaser. Like spices and sauces, they can transform a “monotonous meal into a banquet,” or “make basic starches ingestively more interesting” and thereby “increase the consumption of core foods” (Mintz 1985:11–12). Thus, the culinary and nutritional significance of wild mushrooms is physically achieved and socially acquired through specific consumption preferences and preparation methods, and the mushrooms become a pleasure to harvest and good to eat.

Like other single commodity studies (Mintz 1985; Ohnuki-Tierney 1993), ethnomycological inquiries also can shed light on broader social processes. In the case of Chukotka, narratives of mushroom use also shed light on the Sovietization period, providing a glimpse into the nature of

interactions between natives and Russian newcomers in the early days of cross-cultural encounter. What emerged in my interviews were accounts of identity construction, where perceptions of self and others were transformed in connection with the practices and beliefs about mushrooms. These stories brought to surface the Yupik imagery of the tundra as a place of danger and malevolent beings (Kerttula 2000) and the Chukchi ideas about human and reindeer food. For the Russians, who view themselves as modernizers of the Far North (Slezkine 1994), such ideas probably served to reinforce their own convictions about the cultural backwardness of the Yupik and Chukchi. Explicitly, Soviet modernization entailed industrial development and the rise of secularism. Implicitly, however, the definition of modernity was rooted in the Russian way of life, which included a love for mushrooms and mushroom hunting. Introducing local people to mushroom picking was one of the many ways for modernization to enter the everyday. This seemingly small change accomplished a variety of goals: It involved abandoning or modifying certain aspects of indigenous worldviews, helped institutionalize Russian consumption patterns, and created a generation gap where younger native people no longer agreed with their elders.

As in other colonial situations (Kelm 1998; Vitebsky 1995), Soviet modernization efforts have kindled a modernity quest among the younger generations of Chukotka natives. And while becoming modern, or Soviet, or Russified was a complex, multi-faceted process, mushrooms offered one possibility to connect the components of local, familiar landscapes with the procurement and culinary practices stemming from Russian culture: Chukotka natives could now eat Russian food harvested from the Chukotka tundra. The Yupik and Chukchi people who first learned from the Russian newcomers how to identify, collect, and prepare wild mushrooms have incorporated these tasks into their annual procurement cycle, taught them to their children and grandchildren as their own, and made mushrooms a regular part of their subsistence diet. Nowadays, the younger generations of Chukotka natives take mushroom picking for granted as an ever-present tradition, a part of the regular workload in living off the land. Only during encounters with their relatives living on the Alaska side (and perhaps with ethnographers) do they consciously reflect on the history of ethnomycology in Chukotka.

Conclusion

Drawing on the works of Valentina and Gordon Wasson, Levi-Strauss (1976:224) observes that “our attitudes to mushrooms would... reflect very old traditions, going back no doubt to Neolithic or even Paleolithic times.” This study suggests that his conclusion may not be true, or may be only partially true. On the Chukotka side of the Bering Strait, the strong mycophilic tradition is relatively recent, while people on the Alaskan side of the Bering Strait continue to adhere to the indigenous Siberian Yupik and Inupiaq beliefs. The native languages, however, shed light on pre-colonial ideas, and thus preserve the collective memory of Beringian ethnomycology on both sides of the Strait.

The Bering Strait area of Alaska was not dominated by a colonial presence during the Russian period and was hardly visited by mushroom connoisseurs after being purchased by the United States in 1867. That is likely why we have yet to see a major change of attitudes toward mushrooms among the Alaska’s Siberian Yupiit and Inupiat. Perhaps the post-Cold War environment with its increased contact with Chukotka, as well as the growing interest in wild mushrooms in the United States, will arouse some curiosity and provoke change. In any case, by placing mushrooms in the center of cross-cultural encounter, ethnomycology is able to illuminate broader social, political, and historical processes, and is therefore likely to remain a “prodigiously fertile field” (Levi-Strauss 1976:224).

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