

MAGIC MUSHROOMS

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Living in a relatively mycophobic culture, coupled with the fact that the Horse Whisperer author Nicholas Evans has been in the news recently for almost killing himself after mistakenly eating Deadly Webcaps *Cortinarius rubellus*, as well as the 12 year old girl who in September ate two Death Caps *Amanita phalloides* and, unexpectedly but fortunately, survived, some of you may consider the following article to be, at best, challenging, at worst, highly irresponsible.

Therefore, in the interest of responsibility, let me just say this: Do not consume any fungi mentioned without first reading the entire article. Prepare them as described here. Never collect and eat any fungi unless you can identify with 100% accuracy and know that it is safe to eat in the condition that you have found it and in the way you have prepared it!

For full botanical details of the fungi mentioned here, refer to a good identification guide or guides (details below). Also, remember that all new foods can lead to gastric and other problems if consumed in large quantities for the first time – go easy; try just one mushroom first (cooked) to test your own sensitivity.

To begin with then, let me make a statement and ask you a question. Deadly nightshade or Belladonna (*Atropa belladonna*) is a poisonous (often fatally so) plant in the Solanaceae or nightshade family. This botanical family includes some of our most popular vegetables: potatoes, tomatoes, aubergine, and peppers of all kinds. Would you stop eating potatoes because deadly nightshade is in the same family? “Of course not,” is surely the only sensible answer. In the fungal realm a similar situation arises. The Death Cap (*Amanita phalloides*) and Destroying Angel (*A. virosa*) are deadly



Blushers (note the very distinctively blushing fungus with smooth cap/ remains of universal veil absent in this picture). To grow it had had to press up through some obstructions in the soil. This removed the veil remains and damaged the cap leading to blushing.

consumed (as food) in Europe but its edibility is well documented. Let's eat it more frequently and shock even those know-it-all fungi-loving Europeans!

In fact, having consumed the latter fungus as food for years, it was somewhat disingenuous, indeed hypocritical of me, writing in a previous article for this magazine, to trot out the usual stereotypical nonsense about the outright toxic and inedible nature of Fly Agaric. Here I seek to readdress the situation with a more balanced account.

fungi in the *Amanita* family, and yet there are many tasty edible *Amanitas*, some even considered as gourmet fare.

I want to encourage you to eat certain mushrooms in this *Amanita* genus: fungi that I've eaten for years and that are frequently eaten in Europe and elsewhere but that are very rarely eaten here. These are: Tawny Grisette (*Amanita fulva*), The Busher (*A. rubescens*), Grey Spotted *Amanita* (*A. excelsa* var. *spissa*), and Fly Agaric (*A. muscaria*). OK, the latter isn't commonly

This is a very good general rule. Nevertheless, there may be situations where you can only identify a fungus down to genus level and not know the exact species name. However, if you are familiar with all the poisonous or suspect fungi in that genus and know the one you've found isn't one of them, then perhaps you could try it. That in large part is my approach to the *Russula*, *Hygrocybe*, *Boletus*, and *Agaricus* genera. However, do bear in mind that a book like Roger Phillip's *Mushrooms*, although appearing fairly comprehensive, 'only' includes 1250 species of the 4000 odd found in Britain. Learning all the members of a genus from such a book, then, will not imply you have familiarised yourself with all members of that genus. Multiple reference guides are essential in this regard.

Although I've mentioned some key distinguishing features for fungi generally below, using an id guide familiarize yourself with, amongst other features, caps: colour, size, shape, striations, fibres, scales, peels/doesn't peel, sticky when wet? Stem: colour, size, width, patterning, ring present or absent, basal sac, hollow or solid, colour change when handled or cut? Gills/Tubes: colour, free or attached to stem, crowded, changing colour with maturity? Flesh: colour, texture, smell, colour change when cut or handled? Spores: colour, shape (if have a compound microscope) etc. Above all else, make no assumptions. For instance, you may find 9 Blushers at different sizes and stages of growth near to each other; don't assume the small similar looking one nearby is a blusher unless you can discern key identifying features. The small button sized one without spots in the picture looks very much like a death cap (although it did blush when handled; a Death Cap would not have done so) (See Image).

Fly Agaric *Amanita muscaria*

One of the reasonable fears of anybody collecting fungi is that one has consumed a fungus after making a mistaken identification and thereby is about to suffer the consequences of serious poisoning, even death. Fly Agaric cuts out that problem immediately.



A troop of Fly Agarics (photo taken 22nd Oct)

As the fairy tale fungi par excellence, the red one with the white spots, it really is both very common and, crucially, unmistakable. This fungus and the other edible ones described below do not contain the seriously toxic amino acid based (and subsequently unbreakable) amatoxins and phallotoxins of the Death Cap; however that its shamanic and otherwise ritual use is well attested to should give serious pause for thought. When consumed raw or dried its ibotenic acid and muscimol components can lead to mystical experiences, inebriation, hallucinations and coma like sleep but, crucially, not death (see Rubel and Arora article). Hence in all UK mushroom guides it is, quite rightly, labelled as poisonous. These toxins are, however, readily soluble in water. Back in 1991, not being able to try the related and highly

esteemed European *Amanita*, Caesar's Mushroom, I did some research and decided to make a Fly Agaric omelette thinking it might taste similar to one made with *A. caesarea* (it does – only



The Fly Agaric risotto only serves 4-6 as a starter, as a main course serves 3 (with portion size as shown). It's delicious but filling - I'm eating it as I do this!

milder due to processing!). I peeled the caps, chopping up three medium-sized fungi before soaking in water overnight prior to frying: very tasty; no unwanted consequences. Nevertheless, subsequent research led me to consider my processing technique as not quite satisfactory. The best up to date research can be found in a fascinating and excellent article by William Rubel and David Arora (2008): A Study of Cultural Bias in Field Guide Determinations of Mushroom Edibility Using the Iconic Mushroom, *Amanita muscaria*, as an Example. It is their processing technique I describe in the recipe below.

Fly agarics can frequently be found in mixed and deciduous woodland – especially associated with birch from August until the first hard winter frosts – so sometimes even occurring as late as Christmas in the South of England.

Fly Agaric Risotto (serves 4-6)

INGREDIENTS

1.5 kg (3lb) fresh Fly Agaric mushrooms
500g (1 lb 2oz) Cap/Porcini (*Boletus edulis*)
1 litre vegetable or mushroom stock
300g (10 oz) carnaroli risotto rice
60g (2 oz) butter
200g (7oz) shallots, finely chopped
5 spring onion tops, finely chopped
125g full fat soft goats cheese
1 large garlic clove, finely chopped
Juice of 1 lemon or a little sumac extract
grated Parmesan to garnish
Salt and pepper

Method

First prepare the Fly Agaric exactly as described. Cut the cap and stalk into thin slices 3–4 mm or 1/8" thick. For each 110 g/4 oz



of mushroom, use 1 litre/1.8pt water with 1 teaspoon of added salt. Bring water to a rolling boil. Add the sliced mushrooms. Begin timing the cooking once the water returns to a boil. Boil for 15 minutes. Drain and rinse. Set aside. Slice the Ceps and gently shallow fry or boil in a little water until tender and set aside. Bring the stock to the boil and gently cook the shallots for three minutes in the melted butter. Stir in the rice and cook, stirring for 3-4 minutes. Add the boiling stock a ladleful (100ml) at a time, stirring continuously until each addition of liquid has been absorbed (approx 18 minutes). Two minutes before the end add the garlic, salt and pepper as desired, and stir in the chopped spring onions and all mushrooms. Finally, mix in the soft cheese. Serve with a dusting of grated Parmesan, sprinkling of lemon juice and garnish with 1 or 2 Fly Agaric replica radishes (because the mushrooms themselves are toxic raw and, alas, lose their beautiful colour during cooking).

After rinsing place in a lightly greased tray, cover with foil and bake at 200 degrees celsius for 10 minutes. Although I've never done this there may be small quantities of the psychoactive chemical muscazone present the crystalline structure of which breaks down above 190.

²Using unleached dried mushrooms that are then subsequently leached requires different treatment from that described here and is not recommended.

Tawny Grisette *Amanita fulva*

This is a common and attractive looking fungi of mixed woodland that can often be found in large quantities from June till the first frosts. Apart from knowing the relevant details of shape and size, a key identifying feature is its orange-brown cap without spots



Tawny Grisettes



(broken up remains of the volva sac), white stem and volva (basal sack) tinged with the cap colour. (Do not confuse with the similar Snakeskin Grisette *A. ceciliae*; key difference: greyish or grey brown stem with shaggy horizontal bands –edibility unknown; with *A. eliae*, key difference: pale flesh coloured cap and ring present on stem – edibility unknown). The very similar Orange Grisette *A. crocea* could cause some confusion too. Fortunately that one is edible.

Tawny Grisette Tempora (a good starter) Serves 1

INGREDIENTS

5-10 Tawny Grisettes – ideally 3 inches/7.5cm long with unopened, still rounded caps.
500ml (ish)/18fl oz(ish) ice-cold sparkling mineral water or beer
130g/8oz plain white flour
2 tbsp corn flour
½ tsp fine sea salt
2 tbsp garlic mayonnaise
Wood sorrel leaves – a few to garnish
Oil for deep frying

Method

Don't overmix the batter or let it stand but make just before cooking. Into a large bowl sieve together the plain flour, cornflour and salt. Gently whisk in ice-cold sparkling mineral water or beer. Place in clean (but not washed) mushrooms (remains of volva sack removed) to completely submerge. Lift out individually and transfer immediately to the hot oil until golden brown. No need to shake off excess batter. It should be thin enough for that not to be necessary. Don't overload the wok with too many at once though – max 5 at a time. Cook until golden brown, turning over a few times during cooking: takes 3-4 minutes. Transfer to absorbent paper for 30 seconds before sprinkling over a little salt and serving with wood sorrel and garlic mayonnaise

The Blusher *Amanita rubescens*

This common fungus can be found in deciduous and coniferous woodland from June to the first hard frosts, sometimes singly but also in small groups. The cap is rosy-brown to flesh coloured with distinct spots. The 'blushing' of the flesh occurs with damage and contact with air. Sometimes obstacles



The caps can often appear with a more brownish brown/orange all over cap colour compared to the somewhat greyish looking ones shown here.

in the ground or very firm soil as it grows forth can push off all the spots and leave it very rosy coloured compared to adjacent fungi (see picture). This mushroom is toxic raw due to a component protein Rubescenslycin that has a cytolytic action

upon internal body cells – especially of the liver. It is denatured and rendered harmless by thorough cooking. Some people (i.e. Roger Phillips) recommend boiling in water and discarding that water. If in doubt feel free to do this – this isn't mentioned at all in most Italian Mushroom guides. I just fry it as they recommend.

Grey Spotted *Amanita Amanita excels var. spissa/A.spissa*

Found in season and locations as for The Blusher. It can be clearly distinguished from its poisonous look-a-like The Panthera Cap *A.pantherina*, by the former's grey spots and striated (lined) ring and above ring stem; nor does it have the distinct fine striations at the cap margin or volva that separates into a distinct ring just above the swollen base as does the Panther Cap. Although the cap colour is variable and could thereby be confused with the Death Cap, the latter has no spots and a more distinct volva sac. Note: Panther Cap poisonings rarely result in death, most making a full recovery, but are unpleasant nonetheless!



Grey Spotted *Amanita*/cap detail. Edges with out obvious striations as in the Panter Cap or the Panther Cap's white 'spots'. These are grey.

Blushing Fagottinis makes 20 (2 per portion?)

INGREDIENTS

454g/1 lb fresh Blusher mushrooms, medium to finely chopped
454g/1 lb fresh Grey Spotted *Amanita* mushrooms, medium to finely chopped
150g/6oz seabee or spinach, steamed for 4 minutes and chopped
150g/6oz soft mild goats cheese
3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
1 egg, yolk and white separated
Olive oil for frying
salt and pepper to taste
For the dough:
750/1.7 lb flour
4 large eggs
2 tbsp olive oil
salt

Method

Mix the 4 eggs, oil and salt to form a firm dough – add water if necessary. Knead for 5 minutes. Wrap and chill for 30 minutes. Fry the mushrooms until well cooked, add the garlic and break in the cheese and add the cooked chopped spinach. Thoroughly combine and season and cook for a further minute or two. Roll out the dough to form a large square about 1mm thick. Cut into squares approx 10cm by 10cm. Place a heaped table spoon of the mixed filling in the centre of each. Brush the sides of each square with egg white. Fold opposite corners in and press together. Use fingers to seal all gaps. Place on an oiled baking tray and brush each parcel with egg yolk and drizzle over a little olive oil. Bake in a preheated oven at 150°C for about 30 mins or until golden brown. Serve as a starter with roasted vine tomatoes and basil or as a main course with salad and vegetables. The fagottinis can also be boiled (like pasta) for 12 (ish) minutes or deep fried.



Folding the dough over



Dusting with parmesan

Essential reading:

Mushrooms. Roger Phillips, Pan Macmillan, London 2006
Mushrooms: River Cottage Handbook No.1. John Wright. Bloomsbury, London (2007)
A Study of Cultural Bias in Field Guide Determinations of Mushroom Edibility Using the Iconic Mushroom, *Amanita muscaria*, as an Example. William Rubel and David Arora. Economic Botany (2008)
Amanita muscaria: chemistry, biology, toxicology and ethnomycology. Didier Michelot and Leda Maria Melendez-Howell. Mycol. Res 107 (2) (2003)
Both of the above articles can be found on my website at <http://www.wildmanwildfood.co.uk/pages/mushrooms.htm> Click on the Fly Agaric picture.

