

Shelton-Mason County Journal - Dedicated to the citizens of Mason County, Washington since 1886

By any other name

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: “Shaggy Parasol” is among the types of mushrooms growing on the forest floors as the weather turns rainy and cool. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

It’s mushroom season, and even if you don’t find them, they’ve found you. Their mycelia spread through forest litter and compost, manure and woodchips to surround our impermeable spaces.

I was tending the compost by the nursery when I noticed beautiful mushrooms fruiting beneath a maple twinned with a fir. In years of mushroom hunting I’d never seen them, perhaps because I’d rarely searched beneath dense maple canopies.

There were about 20 of them, large and savory-looking, some already having sporulated. Slugs and flies had gotten to most, but I’m used to the involuntary sharing inbuilt to foraging.

Almost an hour later, webpages and books splayed, I’d identified the mushrooms within a margin of error in which I’d be comfortable nibbling on one. I was certain enough that they were *Lepiota rachodes*, the edible “Shaggy Parasol,” and not the poisonous *Chlorophyllum molybdites*.

A spore print had been key in drawing this distinction. Having left a mushroom cap on a piece of paper (a Strictly Medicinal Seeds catalog that happened to be green) overnight, I found the spores that dropped to be a creamy white.

According to what I’d found, this excluded *molybdites*, which is distinguished by its green spore print and greenish gills. The specimens I’d collected also bruised red, usually meaning a species other than *molybdites*, so I figured I was safe to collect any that were less than half eaten.

David Arora’s compendium “Mushrooms Demystified” advises dry-frying these mushrooms because of their high water content. I had seen this before with Matsutake, which are ruined by cooking in butter or oil. After cooking them down in an iron skillet, I sauteed them with a little butter and a sprinkle of freshly ground pepper.

They were intensely earthy and meaty with a long mineral-duff finish. Arora had described them as “exceptionally nutty,” so I supposed there was some hazelnut flavor. They were already starting to wither so I dehydrated the rest for later mushroom soup.

Lying in bed wondering whether I’d get sick, it occurred to me that the paper I’d used for the spore print had been green. What if it had concealed a green tinge to the spores? Was I going to projectile

vomit for hours like the Australian who had eaten a plateful of similar mushrooms warm and partially raw?

Prior to a night of multiple incontinences, his stomach had felt a little funny. It's a familiar sensation. I never eat more than a couple bites of a new mushroom to see whether it agrees with me. All the same, I haven't been sickened by one (knock on myceliated wood). The quare feeling I had was well within normal parameters.

The next morning, glad to have retained my contents, I read a bit more about the *Lepiota* genus. It had been renamed "macrolepiota" at some point. Sometimes around 2005-2007, it had been collapsed into the *Chlorophyllum* genus. This kind of shuffling is typical in mycology. Just a few decades ago, it was discovered that evolutionarily, fungi and animals have more in common with each other than either does with plants.

It turned out that my macro/lepiota was more *chlorophyllum*, and my rachodes probably *olivieri*, or maybe *brunneum* — and that the molybdites I feared is more common outside of the Pacific Northwest. People have eaten so many similar mushrooms across this genus that it's hard to tell whether they've been poisoned, have an intolerance, ate the wrong species or didn't cook them enough. Molybdites are responsible for most mushroom poisonings annually in the United States.

If only a Shaggy Parasol by any other name were just as safe.

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