

MUSHROOM NEWSLETTER

June 3 2009

As I predicted in my last newsletter, the next really good late spring species has just emerged. So although the St Georges are now drying up (in every sense) thanks to the recent hot sunny weather, their centre stage place in the fungi fanatic's attention has been taken by chicken-of-the-woods.

Last year these emerged in the second week of May, a good month earlier than normal, but the burst of hot weather over the past week has mimicked mid-summer conditions and I had a hunch they would be early this year too. Sure enough, yesterday I found my first 'buds' when I whizzed through a local wood that is normally home to several healthy outcrops. At first I saw nothing, but a closer inspection showed what could have been a fresh scar where a branch had been ripped off by the wind.



This pale chicken of the woods was unusually hard to spot (photo: 3 June 2009)

It turned out to be two very young *Laetiporus sulphureus* buds – albeit abnormally pale for their age. Once my eyes were tuned in, however, I noticed two much better examples to the rear of a nearby tree.



The neighbouring outcrop was much more characteristic and visible from the right angle

Although most experienced readers will know just where to find these wonderfully meaty outcrops and their culinary value, it is worth pointing out to more timid or novice subscribers that they are probably the perfect beginner's mushroom, being common, delicious and – above all – utterly unmistakable.



The fungus turns from sulphur to orange to cream as it ages – only the first of these is in its prime

They grow on aging deciduous trees, particularly those that are storm-damaged. The mycelium lurks beneath the bark throughout the year, but bursts forth in late spring and summer in sulphurous yellow 'buboes' which gradually turn orange and flatten to resemble a stack of oddly-shaped dinner plates. Later the orange gradually fades to an off-cream – by which stage they are no longer really edible (the flesh will be tough, powdery and more of a chewing exercise than a gastronomic treat). You can easily tell the quality of a find, however, as you cut the flesh with a knife. A good specimen has the texture of butter straight from the fridge – you should be able to slice through with a sharp knife without having to saw.

The other thing to remember when hunting is to look up as well as down. Although the mushrooms can sometimes appear close to the

ground, annoyingly they are usually just beyond reach, high on the trunk or even half-hidden by the canopy.



More often than not it grows high in the canopy, but it can occur near the ground too

Around here the host is usually an oak, but probably only because it is the dominant species. Elsewhere they parasitise willow, cherry and sweet chestnut – even yew (I would avoid any growing on the latter because apart from the flesh of the berries, every part of this tree is toxic). Those of you who live in cities should also keep an eye open in your local parks and botanic gardens – you could well find it on a range of mature exotic broadleaved species.

These mushrooms have a good flavour, but are valued by in the kitchen as much for their firm texture as their taste. Unlike most mushrooms they retain this when cooked, making them great meat substitutes. I like them casseroled and in risottos, but to make a change this month's website recipe is for a satay version – perfect for summer barbeques, washed down with a richer white wine – maybe an off-dry Riesling, Gewürztraminer or even (dare I suggest) Chardonnay?



Nettles may be the bane of many outdoor activities, but they are delicious in mousses, quiches and soups

Also, don't forget the plethora of alternative wild foods out there – nettles are particularly good at this time of year. For those that have never tried them, they really are like a nutty spinach. I've had them as a delicious mousse in the past, but it's a bit fiddly and I think it hard to beat a creamy soup, served either hot or – in suitably blistering conditions – chilled in the same way one can serve Vichyssoise or watercress.



Painted ladies are particularly abundant this year – their spiky black caterpillars feed on nettles

When gathering them, however, watch out for the plentiful insect life lurking amid the protection of the stinging spines (which are instantly destroyed by heat when cooked, by the way). Several butterfly caterpillars, for example, feast on the nutrient-rich leaves, including peacocks and painted ladies. And while on the subject of these, we are currently experiencing one of our spasmodic 'painted summers' owing to a population explosion in the Atlas Mountains which has pushed millions of this migratory insect further west and north than normal. This is, of course, much to the benefit of our songbirds as they struggle to rear their broods in our hedges, woods and fields.

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P.S. I loathe junk e-mails and would be horrified to think I might be clogging up your systems unnecessarily, so if at any time you want your name taken off, just let me know with a brief - preferably polite - indication that you want to be removed.