

MUSHROOM NEWSLETTER

1 December 2016

TRIPPING SANTA



Santa is a 'shroomhead?

We're coming up to our annual bout of excess. Boozy evenings with workmates and friends will inevitably be followed by missed trains, excuses, rows and hangovers. To keep up with this last part of the holiday spirit, I shall start this newsletter with my familiar dashing of the ridiculous seasonal urban myths, followed by a recap of the genuine origins of our favourite holiday (which are obviously mushroom-based). We'll then have a quick recap of the 2016 season and finish with some appropriate presents for the forager(s) in your life. I will finish with a desperate attempt at getting you to stay in my Pembrokeshire palace – but by that stage you will have ceased reading, so it won't matter.

Christmas? Bah! Humbug!

Right, the bunkum obviously starts with the name. No, this is not another Dawkins-inspired attack on religion, but an observation that the early Christian proselytizers were undoubtedly adept at hi-jacking existing pagan festivals. Almost all ancient religions, particularly in temperate regions, celebrated the turn of year around the shortest day and, three or four months later, the explosion of new life in what we would call March/April. It took the new religion four or five centuries to realize the PR potential, but in the early Dark Ages someone made the connection and the seeds of what we now call Christmas and Easter were sown. And, at about the same time, the early missionaries trudging across Britain, began to commandeer the sites of pagan temples to build their hermitages, chapels and churches. For example many graveyard yew trees pre-date Christianity, while circular enclosures around the church often denote the area's pagan pre-history.

And pre-Christian, positively Neolithic, traditions also underpin many of the other familiar mid-winter stories and traditions. Our ancestors' lives were hard, particularly in the depths of winter. Even in the relatively mild regions of lowland England a large proportion of livestock were slaughtered as the grass ran out in early winter. There was a desperate rush to salt, smoke and pickle as much as possible, with the remainder consumed fresh for a fortnight or so until the bacteria and fungi rendered it positively dangerous (hence the 12 days of Christmas). The privations grew ever more extreme the further north one went. For thousands of years Scandinavia was definitely to be avoided for at least six months of the year and the only people prepared to remain north of the Arctic Circle needed serious fortification.



Many yews were planted by pagans and pre-date the neighbouring church

This is where the mushrooms come in. Fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*)'s psychedelic properties have been appreciated by primitive cultures for many centuries. Reindeer-herding shamens used it to communicate with the spirit world, helped by the discovery that its extremely unpalatable active ingredient, muscimol, is a resilient chemical unaffected by liver processes. In other words, it leaves the mammalian body almost as pokey as it entered, but most of the unpleasant chemicals responsible for its extreme bitterness are removed. As a result, the urine from someone – or something – which has consumed fly agaric is still highly hallucinogenic, but (believe it or not) more acceptable as a drink.



Reindeer love fly agaric

Now it seems reindeer are just as partial to getting intoxicated on fly agaric as humans and their livers and kidneys work in pretty much the same way as ours. Thus for much of the autumn, the Lap herdsmen would follow their charges around brandishing flasks and water bottles. At the appropriate moment they

would dive in and harvest the golden haul. Later, as the depths of winter drew in and the snow built up around their wigwam-like tents, they would sit swigging the amber nectar before sitting down to watch reindeer flying across the sky while waiting for their friends to come around with presents to celebrate the longest night. And of course by now the only way in and out of the tent would be through the smoke hole – and some say the red and the white of Father Christmas’s tunic also comes from this iconic mushroom.



Were some of Coke’s most famous advertisements inspired by hallucinogenic mushrooms?

The 2016 Harvest

To use Dickensian language, let’s turn to the season past. It was an odd year, dry and warm, but not particularly sunny. In spring those living in alkaline areas reported good finds of morels, the chanterelles were up early and in June I found my earliest ever porcini. I was all set for a bumper year of the last, but the normal explosion of late summer porcini failed to materialize. It was a very good year for hedgehogs, however, and millers were also up in force, with cauliflower, hen of the woods and saffron milk caps all putting in appearances – along with orange- and brown birch boletes of course. In general, however, things were a bit disappointing – a little of a lot would summarise my foraging experiences. That said, I did find my first horn of plenty – thus ticking off a huge gap on my bucket list.



Morels, porcini, hedgehogs and horn of plenty were all there . . .

We have also acquired a new truffle hound – Holly’s training starts in the New Year.



Back to Christmas

All right, I know I originally lured you into signing up for this newsletter by saying there would be no advertising, but for those of you struggling to find presents for loved ones with an interest in either good food or the great outdoors, here are a few suggestions:

- 1) A foraging voucher: -

- a) For a full day's foraging, with three course meal, preserving and tasting sessions, with a mushroom knife or field guide (£70 per person). I can send knife or guide in time for Christmas.
- b) A morning's foray either with or without homemade soup and bread in the woods (£20 - £30 per person)
- c) A foray on your home ground – price dependent on location, numbers and timing.

2) A mushroom knife (£12 incl. p&p)

3) A 'Tinned' Field Guide (£12 incl. p&p)

4) *Fungi Forays* by Daniel Butler (New Holland 2013; £12 incl p&p)

Now, finally, you may or may not know that I have a little place down in Pembrokeshire (www.glebeholidays.co.uk) Now lots of things went wrong with its construction and I spent a lot of money, but the end result is that it's really nice. Generally it's out of our price range, but Helen and I did manage to snatch a night there last month and it really was very cosy indeed.



It is about a mile south of Little Haven, the coastal path runs virtually along the garden wall, stunning beaches such as Marloes and Freshwater West are usually deserted and the Skomer ferry is just a five minute drive.



It's in high demand during the school holidays, but becomes remarkably affordable outside the peak season. Unfortunately routine costs such as cleaning and heating mean a minimum weekly charge of £600 applies, but it does sleep eight (10 at a push) and there are significant discounts for mushroom hunters (you don't actually have to go foraging, although there are some delicious seaweeds and shellfish to be had in the pure coastal waters. Less adventurous types can visit the three excellent pubs in Little Haven or venture slightly further afield to The Griffin and The Moorings in Dale while The Brook in nearby St Ishmaels is also excellent. Normally bookings run from Saturday to Saturday, but there is more flexibility in winter. It comes with two log burners and unlimited firewood – oh and dogs are welcome too. There is also secure storage for things such as bikes and body boards.



Daniel Butler

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P.S. As always, let me know if you want to be removed from the list and I will do it forthwith.