

MUSHROOM NEWSLETTER

Another Silly Autumn Story

4 October 2014

As many of you will know, when not out mushroom hunting, I earn my crust as a writer/journalist. Now I hate to bad mouth my own profession, but along with the familiar rubbish about woods being 'stripped' of fungi by 'East Europeans' working commercially (see previous newsletter rants) the familiar threat of mushroom poisoning has appeared.

Both *The Times* and *The Guardian* have just run stories about a huge rash of mushroom poisonings, brought about by middle class idiots, inspired by celebrity chefs, rushing out into the countryside to gather ingredients for their latest frilly recipes. Apparently so far this year there have already been 84 mushroom poisoning incidents . . . and the main season has yet to begin!



At this point I breathe a familiar sigh of exasperation. Yes, a handful of mushrooms can kill (see past newsletters), but it is no exaggeration to say that 99.9% of the world's fungi don't. I don't blame the journalists who leapt on this press release for taking things out of all proportion.

Every year there are over a million food poisoning cases diagnoses in England and Wales alone and, tragically, around 500 people die as a result. (Fortunately incidents are much rarer in Scotland and Northern Ireland because, as we all know, they deep fry everything.) Firstly we are talking about 84 non-fatal incidents spread among a population of 60 million. That's an incidence of 0.0000014% or roughly one in 700,000.



Death caps and destroying angels can certainly kill

This rather puts the 'mushroom poisonings' into perspective. Even more so when one learns that adult fatalities in Britain are almost unheard of (unfortunately a couple of toddlers die each year while going through the phase of 'exploring' the world by putting things in their mouths – but this is not the fault of celebrity chefs).

True, a hippy, experimenting with fly agaric for tripping purposes, over-did it in the 1980s. And about five years ago a Vietnamese woman died on the Isle of Wight after eating a death cap stir fry while a Somerset lady died last year from the same species. But over the course of the last century that's it in Britain. Meanwhile 20 – 30 people die from allergic reactions to bananas and peanuts every year in the UK alone.

What it also not mentioned is that most of this year's non-fatal mushroom poisonings are attributable to one species – the yellow stainer (*Agaricus xanthoderma*). This is gathered by mistake by cautious forayers who think they are minimizing risks by picking familiar-looking field mushrooms. Yellow stainers are closely-related and many people

can eat them with no ill-effects. Unfortunately about one in two of us gets a violent allergic reaction and then spends several hours in the loo, the victim's distress only heightened by the conviction they are dying from mushroom poisoning. The good news is they always recover, but unfortunately this and the symptoms of a few hours of diarrhea and vomiting aren't going to get the story into print. No, let's go for the sensationalist angle . . .



Yellow stainers (left) can be easily mistaken for field mushrooms (right)

Now speaking as the son of an eminent statistician, 84 poisonings means nothing unless put into context. How do this year's 84 poisonings compare with those from the first nine months of last year? Or more importantly, how many poisonings were there 20 years ago (i.e. before the days of celebrity chefs and wall-to-wall cookery programmes)?

I don't know the answers – and the information is certainly not provided by either publication – but I would bet a great deal of money that no statistically-significant figures exist. By this I mean that when one is talking about such ridiculously small figures, even if these were to double from one year to another, it wouldn't be particularly important. Yes, if it doubles every year for a decade, then even if the numbers are very low it might mark a worrying trend . . . But it hasn't.

So to summarise *The Times* and *The Guardian*:

Almost no one has had stomach upsets from wild mushrooms this year. None of them has died. This might be more than last year . . . but it might be fewer. We

suspect they are middle-class people who want to pick their own ingredients from the wild inspired by celebrity chefs, but these are just hunches.

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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.