

Mushrooms for the Holiday Season

By Greg Marley

*Ein Männlein steht in Walde
Ganz still und stumm
Er hat von lauter Purpur
Ein Mäntelein um.
Sag' ver mag das Männlein sein
Das da steht auf einem Bein?
Glückspilz!
Fliegenpilz!*

*Little man stands in the forest
very still and mute.
He has around him
a little coat of red.
Say, who may the little man be,
that stands there on one leg?
Happiness-mushroom!
Fly-mushroom!*

....Traditional German Riddle

Holiday Mushroom Foraging? Here in the Northeast, we generally do not associate the holiday season as a time for foraging wild mushrooms, but even in Maine, the end of November is still a time for collecting the last few of the season's wild mushrooms, especially over recent, mild years. Further south, and below the Mason-Dixon line, the season is still in full swing in regions where most mushrooms hold off fruiting until the Dog Days of summer are just a memory. The cool wet weather of late fall makes for the perfect mushroom conditions in the Southeast as long as the rainfall holds. In New England I call the late fall mushrooms "season extenders" and they give me another reason to get out into the forest in the short days after the leaves have fallen and before snow blankets the ground. One of the few silver linings in the consequences attributed to global warming is the extended mild autumn weather in the north country. This year, though we have already had 2 significant snow storms over much of Maine, the periods between storms have been mild and many areas have not yet experienced the depth of cold that stops all mushrooms from fruiting. Over the past week, I have collected and dined upon fresh Blewits (*Lepista nuda*), and abundant Oyster mushrooms. But by the time Christmas comes to the coast of Maine, we are resigned to settle in with our preserved bounty and warm memories of the season past. Thankfully I am well-provisioned with frozen and dried mushrooms to last until the first mushrooms of 2012 make their appearance.



The Classic red Fly Agaric of Western US and Europe

***Amanita muscaria*, The Fly Agaric: The Mushroom of Christmas and the New Year**

Beyond the opportunity for use of wild mushrooms in your holiday meals, there is another mushroom that graces our Christmas season, though it is not growing fresh. In many European cultures it is intertwined with Christmas and the New Year as a symbol of blessing at the turning of the year. The Fly Agaric, *Amanita muscaria* is the mushroom of the Yuletide season. With its cherry red cap and artful arrangement of white scales, it is likely the most illustrated mushroom in the world. You undoubtedly grew up seeing it as illustrations of fairy tales, children's stories and anywhere else a distinctive archetypal mushroom image was desired. In the traditional cultures of Central and Eastern Europe, the Fly Agaric has long been a symbol of good luck and there continues a tradition of giving them to friends and family around the turn of the year. The German names for the mushroom are Gluckspilz (luck mushroom) or Fliegenpilz (fly mushroom). It is called the Fly mushroom from its historic use for attracting and killing household flies. Break one up into a shallow dish of milk and see for yourself.

In Germany, Austria and other countries, Christmas decorations over the past century often feature the bright red mushrooms as an element of advent arrangements, garnish on a festive platter or even in the motif of the pottery glaze. European Christmas tree ornaments today show

the bright red mushrooms alone, or as part of the overall tableau. The common Fly Agaric found growing with trees in the Northeast differs from those found in Europe or Western North America. As seen at the top of this post, our *Amanita muscaria* have a yellow-orange cap rather than bright red.



Typical German Gluckspilz tree ornaments

In the early 1900s, America and much of Europe went through what many have described as a postcard craze. Brightly colored postcards were sent and received as greeting cards and to mark many seasonal events including Christmas and the New Year. Across Central and Eastern Europe and to a smaller extent, in the US, the postcards exchanged at Christmas and around the New Year sometimes resembled a good fortune charm-bracelet of playful images of gnomes & fairies, four leaf clovers, chimney sweeps, Leprechauns, horseshoes, pigs and quaint renditions of bright red mushrooms covered in white spots, the Fly Agaric. I have included a few of these postcards below to give the flavor of the time. Many are touchingly cute, a reflection of a period of time when life was more nostalgic, or... sweet. They might also lead the unenlightened to believe that the Fly Mushroom fruits in the snow.



Examples of a Danish Christmas and American New Year Postcards with Fly Agaric as a good luck symbol



French New Year's Card from turn of the century



Turn of the century American postcard from the New York Public Library archives



A Danish New Year's postcard showing gnomes, 4-leaf clover, horseshoe and Amanita

One is led to consider why this one mushroom has come to be a symbol of good fortune and intertwined with the spirit of Christmas. There are plenty of equally beautiful mushrooms, many great edibles and equally common and colorful. Many Americans of Polish, Russian or other Slavic descent make a traditional Christmas soup of dried Honey mushrooms, or popinskis (or podpinkis, pidpenky or opienka...), as they are known. Yet the bright red and white Fly mushroom has been more deeply linked with the Yule celebration than any other. Is there a connection with the idea that Santa Claus wears red and white? Santa wanders across the planet in a sleigh pulled by flying reindeer; where did the idea for reindeer flying come from? Are they physically flying or are they high as kites?

The connection between reindeer and the Fly Agaric has been reported in numerous sources. Apparently reindeer love mushrooms and feed on many species whenever they can. In the far north country where they are raised as food and used as beasts of burden, reindeer

actively seek wild mushrooms as preferred bite-sized snacks during the short arctic season when mushrooms abound. They are drawn to *Amanita muscaria* perhaps more than other mushrooms. Reindeer herders have even been known to use a bag of Fly Agarics to lure stray reindeer back to the herd. Reindeer not only seek out the mushrooms to eat, but also seek out the urine of other reindeer or the urine of humans who relieve themselves following consumption of the Fly Agaric.



In summer Reindeer seek out mushrooms as food

Amanita muscaria and a few related species of mushrooms contain Ibotenic Acid and Muscimol, toxic and psychoactive compounds that have made this mushroom famous. The active chemical from the mushroom is excreted in urine, and it appears that the reindeer are attracted to it. Numerous accounts have described assertive tactics of the herd leaders seeking *Amanita muscaria* tainted urine. Under the influence of the Fly Mushroom, the normally docile reindeer become quite frisky and difficult to manage. Stories abound of their leaping and cavorting across the tundra under the influence of the mushrooms. Flying? So the leap (metaphorically) from reindeer flying due to mushroom intoxication, and flying reindeer harnessed to Santa's sleigh may not be too unrealistic.



Reindeer High on the Fly Mushroom

Our modern version of Santa is an amalgam of Northern European forest-dwelling pagan traditions of the Green Man coupled with early Christian beliefs and stories, and all leavened with way too much twentieth century commercial branding. Santa Claus, also known as Saint Nicholas, Father Christmas or Kris Kringle is seen as a kindly man who bestows gifts onto well-behaved children. Santa's current suit of red and white became the widely accepted norm only a century ago and was given a boost after a 1930's advertising campaign by Coca Cola. The campaign featured a jolly bewhiskered Santa in bright red vestments sucking down a bottle of Coke.



Santa as seen in a coke ad from 1930

Older depictions of the generous man present him garbed in forest greens and browns and even in the garb of a bishop. Now he is as bright as a newly emerging Fly Agaric cap. The red Amanita image has long been a symbol of good luck in the season of the longest night; a bright red light shining bright in the winter darkness, somewhat like the glowing nose on Rudolph...

The excitatory effect that the Fly Mushroom has on Reindeer is similar to the effect that it has on humans. The mushrooms have a history of ritual use as a vision-inducing substance by shamans and other healers across much of Eastern Europe and Eurasia. Some healing shaman continue to use the mushrooms to guide their work in parts of Siberia. Early reports of its use ritually and as a celebratory inebriant came out of Siberia and Russia almost 3 centuries ago. Some of those reports hit the European newspapers about the same time that Lewis Carroll was writing "Alice in Wonderland" and perhaps he wove the concept into his famous tale.



This comic of "Santa in Wonderland" by George Kerr from the 1940s mixes metaphors nicely

A person under the influence of the Fly Mushroom can become agitated and out of control, but often falls into a deep sleep and has profound dreams or visions. Before the Russians introduced vodka to the region, this was the most common form of inebriant used in Siberia. So, perhaps our modern image of the Saint Nick is a blend of tradition and mythology. Is it any surprise that Santa wears a red suit, is a jolly fellow and flies through the air on a sleigh drawn by reindeer? We even have one reindeer with a bright red nose!

For more information on *Amanita muscaria* and its connection to Christmas, religion, and history, get a copy of my book, *Chanterelle Dreams, Amanita Nightmares*, and read the chapter on this fascinating mushroom:

