

## Mushroom Eating: Cultural and Culinary Traditions

*Patricia Taylor-Hawksworth*

MycoNova, 114 Finchley Lane, Hendon, London NW4 1DG, UK

Nations have been classified as “mycophilic” or “mycophobic” based on their attitudes to the use of mushrooms as food, but patterns of use can change through time. Mushrooms may be used as entheogens, in medicine, or food, but these different categories of uses may vary in extent even in countries regarded as mycophilic. Past use by peoples with no or few contemporary written records can be uncovered only by often painstaking research using evidence from travelogs, diaries, artefacts, and oral traditions. In addition, there may have been suppression of records relating to the use of fungi as entheogens, either because religious leaders wished to keep the knowledge to themselves, or later because they did not approve of such use. In Europe, however, the church may have had a role in encouraging the use of mushrooms for food; here it is the predominantly Catholic countries that are the main mycophiles, perhaps because they were not allowed to eat meat on Fridays and found mushrooms a satisfactory alternative—especially if fish were not easily available.

In perhaps the world’s most mycophobic region, the United Kingdom, in the 19th century the eating of wild mushrooms appears to have been something of a speciality of the middle and upper classes. However, when food was scarce in World War II, the government actively promoted the collection of distinctive wild species for food, and also small-scale mushroom cultivation. Similarly, in the United States the government encouraged mushroom growing during the shortages of the Depression. As people have travelled more and settled in different countries, traditions have been

introduced. In the United Kingdom it is people from Mediterranean and eastern European countries who most regularly collect mushrooms for food, and restaurants featuring wild mushrooms tend to have Italian chefs. The increased availability of Asian mushrooms in supermarkets in Europe and North America, a result of demand from people who have resettled, encourages others to experiment. Species at first appear only in ethnic food stores, but as they catch on spread to supermarket chains. Mycophobes may be reluctant to collect and eat from the wild, but happy to foray in their comfort zone among the supermarket shelves. Traditions also lead to some species being eaten from the wild, cultivated, or used in medicine in some countries but not in others where the same or closely allied mushrooms occur.

The numbers of mushrooms on sale, eaten from the wild, cookbooks, artefacts, and hits on the Internet can provide indications of differing traditions—yet these resources are only now starting to be tapped to analyze different traditions. These datasets show, for example, that the United States generates more mushroom artefacts and cookbooks than any other country, something perhaps more linked to a desire to be close to nature and use what is “natural” in the better-off rather than innate mycophilia. However, more low-cost well-illustrated identification guides, recipe books, and poster guides will be found in small bookstores and newsagents in openly mycophilic countries such as Italy than in similar stores in the United States.