

ISSUES

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Tokyo

Amanita muscaria
The Gorgeous Mushroom

紅粉茸は皿にうつせる料理哉

Benikodake wa sara ni utsuseru ryōri kana.

(Scarlet Amanitas mirrored in the food plate.)

TOKUGEN (1559–1647) (1936, 179)

THE *Amanita muscaria* is one of the most gorgeous mushrooms of the fungal world, and a delight for the eye if not for the palate of most. It has a broad scarlet cap—speckled with tiny soft conical white patches arranged concentrically—attached to an alabaster-colored stalk. Just below the gilled underside of the fully opened cap a membranous skirt with a crimped rim hangs delicately to midstalk. The adult mushroom reaches a height of 5–18 centimeters, has elliptical spores, and leaves a white spore print. The mushroom develops from an egglike enclosure called the “universal veil”; its rupture of this tissue causes the white patches that dot its scarlet cap. Throughout the mushroom’s life its base remains bulbous, a feature it shares with other members in this mushroom family.

The scarlet Amanita is a member of the family *Amanitaceae*, a group that includes some of the deadliest mushrooms (the Destroying Angel and the Death Cap), and within which 90% of all fatal mushroom poisonings occur. Although the *Amanita muscaria* is not itself deadly, it is nevertheless consistently listed as dangerous and poisonous in mushroom field guides worldwide. In Japan, IMAZEKI, ŌTANI, and HONGŌ’s mushroom guide (1988) assigns to this Amanita two red dots out of a possible three for toxicity.

In Europe, the *Amanita muscaria* (Latin, *musca* means “fly”), placed in a bowl of milk and kept indoors, was long used to stupefy houseflies. In Japan as well, it has long been known as an insecticide in the mountainous areas where the mushroom is commonly found. In such places it is known as *aka haetori* or “red fly-catcher.” However, the mushroom has been known to stupefy bigger animals than houseflies, and consumption of it by humans causes delirium, raving, and profuse sweat-

ing. Japanese descriptions of *Amanita* poisoning emphasize its potency as a soporific.

The active ingredients of the *Amanita muscaria* are ibotenic acid, muscimol, and muscarine. The first two ingredients act on the nervous system within thirty minutes to two hours after ingestion, causing dizziness, lack of coordination, delirium, spasms, and muscular cramps. Luckily, these symptoms are temporary and subside within four to twenty-four hours.

Found in forests from July to October, this *Amanita* has a symbiotic relationship with various trees, and is most often found under pines, spruces, and birches. The problem with the identification of the *Amanita* (and this is a general mushroom rule) is that rain may alter its appearance considerably by washing away its patches or draining its vibrant red to a paler shade. With these more superficial characteristics erased, it can easily be mistaken for an innocuous or edible look-alike. Beware of look-alikes!

Gordon Wasson, the pioneer and founder of the esoteric discipline known as "ethnomycology," wrote a great deal about the relationship between people and mushrooms. He went as far as to divide the world's people into two distinct groups based on their attitude toward mushrooms: "mycophiles" (mushroom lovers), and "mycophobes" (mushroom haters). In their major opus *Mushrooms, Russia, and History*, a two-volume work published as a pricey limited edition in 1957, WASSON and GORDON explain the various cultural uses of mushrooms and in particular the role of *Amanita muscaria* in primitive religions of Siberia. Both the natives of Kamchatka and the Maritime Provinces made ample use of the *Amanita muscaria* for mushroomic inebriation. The method they used was often to drink the urine of reindeer who had been fed the mushrooms. This "straining" was said to reduce unpleasant side effects.

The easily enthused Wasson traveled widely and had a knack for finding a mushroom lurking in the shadows of every human mystery, and at the core of all religious ritual and symbolism: all that was necessary was to learn how to decode the highly codified world in which our cultures came to be bound. He and his wife carried out extensive studies on the great Mexican shamaness, Maria Sabina, and her use of mushrooms in healing (she did not however, use the *Amanita*).

A more skeptical and tempered approach to the *Amanita* can be found in the works of the renowned historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, who also traced the uses and abuses of psychogenic mushrooms in the divine oracles of primitive religions. In his work, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1974), ELIADE is critical of the pervasive use of

the *Amanita* throughout Siberia, calling it a "vulgarization of mystical technique," and a sign of religious decadence because it imitates a model that belongs to another plane of reference.

Whatever the case may be, the stunning and seductive beauty of the *Amanita muscaria* has inspired various people in different ways. It is a favorite among illustrators, and its image is repeatedly found in fairy-tale books as an archetype for all mushrooms. In Germany and Austria it came to be considered a good luck omen and from there was adopted as the mascot of chimneysweeps throughout Europe.

According to Wasson's classification of mycophiles and mycophobes, Japan is a mycophilic civilization par excellence. Japanese paint mushrooms, write poems about them, hunt them in a festive spirit, admire them, and, of course, eat them. In sharp contrast to the Japanese stands the quintessentially mycophobic Anglo-world. Wasson notes that from Beowulf to Hemingway mushrooms have been considered morbid or sinister. It is certainly true that wild mushrooms most often receive the convenient blanket term "toadstools," thereby blurring all significant distinctions.

In Japan the *Amanita muscaria* is referred to by several names. The most common of these is *benitengudake*: *beni*, "red," *tengu* "Japanese long-nosed and red-faced goblin," and *take*, an abbreviation of *takeri*, "penis." The mushroom is also called *benikodake*, "rouge mushroom," and *benitake*, "red mushroom."

When Wasson came to Japan he made sure to visit certain mountain villages in Nagano Prefecture known for their long tradition of consuming the scarlet *Amanita*. Writing in 1973, WASSON reports of his visit to Ueda, where he watched the villagers enthusiastically gathering *Amanitas*. He noted that the people of the region knew that in its raw state this mushroom is toxic and inebriating and therefore did not ingest it as such. They consumed it only after certain preparations: "Dried, soaked in brine for 12-13 weeks, rinsed in successive washings until the water became clear. They came out alabaster white and indeed are translucent like alabaster. Prepared thus for savouring during the long winter evenings, they are delicious, excellent as hors d'oeuvres" (24).

When I visited Nagano in October 1991, recent rains had left the forest floors spongy and rife with *Amanita*. Together with a group of mycologists—foreign and Japanese—we made our way to the well-known Kinoko Pension. But the proprietor had stopped serving *Amanitas*, a dish for which he was famous. He explained why. After consumption of an *Amanita*, he had fallen into a deep sleep which lasted fourteen hours. It had frightened him, and his doctor suggested that

the poison might accumulate in the body. Hearing his story, we lost our enthusiasm. He did, however, tell us how the people in his region are accustomed to preparing the mushroom for "safe consumption." Boil the Amanitas, then salt and leave them for 3-4 months. They are ready to eat by *Oshōgatsu* or New Year's. At this time they should be washed thoroughly and are delicious when eaten with mayonnaise. Although this recipe sounds simple enough to duplicate, I have never tried it and do not suppose I will. But perhaps instead I will stupefy a few houseflies this season.

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A woodcut by M. C. Escher (1967) depicting *Amanita muscaria*. The Latin motto reads: "Dissolutionis ex humore speciose praeefloresco."