



Mushroom Catsup, Buttons, and Flaps: *Agaricus campestris* in the History of Mycophagy

by David W. Rose

*Ketchup, Soy, Chili-vinegar, and Harvey,
Or by the Lord! a Lent will well nigh starve ye.*
— George Gordon Lord Byron, *Beppo*

Food writing is a genre of literature quite impossible to digest, and the horrid term “foodie” is by any measure an abomination of language. Yet, given that so many mycophiles place more value in the delights of mycophagy than in the subtleties of conidiogenesis, it may be instructive to consider the history of mushroom catsup, an anachronism of gastronomy that reveals quite a bit about fads of consumption and even of basic nomenclature. The qualifier “mushroom” is needed to present *mushroom catsup* here because American culture is so thoroughly given over to the tomato as the basis for this ubiquitous condiment. This was not always so. In fact, in the 18th and early 19th centuries, the basis of catsup (or *ketchup*, among several alternate spellings) was more often fungal than solanaceous, and pickled preparations of *Agaricus campestris* preceded *Lycopersicon esculentum* as cook’s choice in domestic and local manufacture before the advent of big business catsup brought

to us by Henry J. Heinz. First introduced in 1875, the commercial tomato catsup that catapulted the Heinz company from modest beginnings in Pittsburgh to today’s multi-billion-dollar global food conglomerate is about as distant from our humble fellow *Agaricus campestris* as one might suppose. And to suggest that this common agaric of fields and pastures was the single mushroom of choice for various local catsups is close to reality but not completely convincing. What other mushroom juices were poured into catsup bottles? It is difficult to say for certain. For today’s sophisticated mycophagists, the “species” is the aesthetic unit that has evolved into the measure of discrimination and taste, and there is little evidence in the cookbooks and other written accounts from earlier times of just what other mushrooms collected by market gardeners and thrifty housewives went into the enterprise of creating mushroom catsup in the first place. In any case, mushroom catsup was the most popular fraction of mycophagy on both sides of the Atlantic during this period: catsups, sauces, and gravies went down easier than the whole fungus, fried- or creamed.

The *Domestic Chemist* of 1831 proposed that the word *catsup*