

Welcome to Our Ethnomycology Issue

Mycologists often look down their noses on folklore about mushrooms as a childish and irrelevant diversion from the grave questions of taxonomy and scientific nomenclature that preoccupy them; and most anthropologists, strangely, seldom study botany and never mycology . . . strange, because plants fill a large part of the universe of the peoples we commonly call primitive.

—R. Gordon Wasson
Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality (1971)

Science has been late to fully evaluate and appreciate folklore and ethnological knowledge that societies have developed, over millennia, about the living world around them. In a quest for new sources of medicines, primarily, plants have been most heavily investigated in earnest, beginning with modern scientific techniques only a couple decades ago. Ethnomycology as a field of study is only now starting to catch hold. Fungi hold unquestionable promise for the development of new sources of medicine, surely, as well as for foods, fiber, and enzymes useful in countless processes for creating new materials (naturally produced plastics or fuels) and for degrading still others like manufacturing wastes (from paper-making, agricultural wastes, and toxins, to name only a few).

We have devoted this, our second Annual Special Issue, to the theme of Ethnomycology in recognition of the importance of fungi to civilization, past and present. Some of us first had the idea for a collection of ethnomycological papers several years ago, and it was the first themed issue we envisioned for *FUNGI*; but it took until now to bring it all together. Inside, you'll find some of our regular contributors: Else surveys ethnomycological literature, David Rose has a special Notes from Underground, and Ken Litchfield describes how you can cultivate an ancient Mesoamerican fungus, Huitlacoche, which is delicious. And note the beautiful blue color throughout Ken's paper—it's "Maya Blue," the shade of the unique pigments developed by Mesoamericans centuries ago.

Research and review papers in this issue range from Sveta's ethnomycological odyssey through Siberia to mushroom usage by indigenous peoples in other corners of the world like Nepal (by Sanjib Shrestha and Bradley Kropp) and Alaska (by Diane Pleninger).

We have all benefited from shamen and legends and folklore passed down through the millennia: Knowledge about

what to eat and when, and what not to. What to seek out for this malady or that. When our species, *Homo sapiens*, evolved the capacity for communication of complicated ideas and information, it was then that our evolution sped up dramatically. No longer did we need to taste everything for ourselves, as do other animals; we could *learn* about it beforehand. We became more efficient at finding food and shelter, and in meeting those requirements with time and food left over at the end of the day, *Homo sapiens*, the "wise man," now could pursue other interests, such as the development of art, music, and religion. No doubt a curiosity about mushrooms soon followed.




Come to the 2009 Telluride Mushroom Festival: participate in ethnomycological ceremonies, learn mushroom identification, and try your hand at mushroom cultivation. It's great fun for the whole family in a gorgeous natural setting. See ad on page 28 for details.