

## ***Starting From Mushrooms***

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**W**hen I stepped into the COOP market for the first time, the mushrooms immediately caught my eye. Freshly harvested mushrooms laid in craft boxes in their original posture, some with their bottoms still stuck together, with dirt attached. The store had a rather large selection of mushrooms, from the common white button mushrooms, baby bellas, and portobellos, to some rare species such as the hen of the wood, the lion's mane, chestnut mushrooms, and Pioppino Mushrooms. I also saw *eryngii* placed in small black boxes and *bunashimeji* wrapped in plastic packages exactly like the packaging that I saw while in Japan.

What surprised me was the price tag. I had never thought of mushrooms as an expensive food. I knew there were some luxurious mushrooms such as truffle and matsutake, but mushrooms are commonly thought to be a cheap and flavorful substitute for meat in many cuisines. Here in the store, they stood proudly on the shelf side by side with the noble fresh aromatics. With a price of over twenty dollars a pound, I could get ribeye steaks for the same amount! How could these little things that grew from rotted wood and muddy ground cost so much?

Mushrooms are now in-trend as a plant-based protein in vegan cookbooks, but they are not exactly plant-based: they are neither plant nor animal, but fungi—a whole separate kingdom of life. Although fungi might seem to be plant-like, typologically the

fungi are considered more closely related to animals. Both animals and fungi use organic compounds for energy. While animals eat “fresh”, fungi eat the rotten—they clean up what we usually considered trash by breaking their food down into inorganic molecules which go back into the ecosystem. Mushrooms are pretty much grounded, physically and metaphysically. Thinking of this, it is hard to grant the mushroom any noble title.

Historically mushrooms have been unpopular. Scholars argue that the English culture is “mycophobic”, while the eastern cultures are inclined to be “mycophilic.” This might be true. Even today, there are only limited kinds of mushrooms that will be seen on the table in a common American household, most of which have a similar structure with a cap and a stalk. The household mushrooms probably stem from the most common button mushrooms. It’s kind of funny to me that they are sold in three different names: white mushrooms, cremini, and portobello. The form of this mushroom is iconic, it is drawn in picture books and animation movies like Alice In Wonderland. For an Asian girl, it also represents the snack “kinoko no yama” (mushroom mountain) made with chocolate caps and biscuit stalks. I begged my mom for the snack every time we went to the supermarket. The shape of the mushroom was also the very reason why I was given the nickname “Little Mushroom” in middle school. With a bob-cut hairstyle, I looked very much like the cap of a mushroom. Willingly or not, my world had already been filled with mushrooms.

There are far more weird-looking fungi sold in Chinese markets than what I found in the COOP market. In China, there is a cult believing mushrooms are the ultimate key to a healthy diet. It is the nutritious food that your mom will force you to eat. One of the mushrooms is the black wood ear. It does not look like a normal mushroom, but just as the name suggests, they look like the shape of an ear. I’ve never thought of it as rare since it is so commonly used in Chinese cuisines. I am not in any favor of it. I prefer their close cousin, which is called snow fungus, or “silver ear” if I translate from Chinese. The snow fungus grows in clusters which makes it look like a flower made of white lace rather than ears. Snow fungus is usually used in sweet soups. I don’t know if my preference comes from the convention that snow fungus means a sweet treat, while the black wood ear is just part of the mundane everyday meal, or the aesthetic appeal, or if I just simply enjoy a soft and light texture dissolving into my mouth more than chewing something that is crispy yet jelly-like. That being said,

my love for fungi could never be cultivated with a single summer shower—I was born mycophobic amongst probably the most mycophilic culture.

Amidst all the species on the market, the shiitake mushrooms must be the emperor of the dinner table. I do not mean it is the most common or the most popular, but it rules most of the land. It appears in all cuisines—if it is mentioned in the name of cuisine, it is there; if there is no indication that the cuisine contains mushrooms, it still might be there.

This drove me crazy because I HATE shiitake mushrooms. Many people have food that they dislike, but my fear of shiitake feels like my ancestor had been killed by it painfully and wrote in my genes that this is the enemy of my whole life. The name shiitake originated from Japanese, in China its name xiang gu can be interpreted as “aroma mushrooms” indicating that it has a strong scent. Maybe this is the reason why it’s everywhere—it is not used as a center material for the cuisine, but as aromatics. Would you specify if your very fancy sauce contains a tiny amount of garlic in your home? I suppose not. But I can’t stand the slightest smell of shiitake. When I was a young kid, I couldn’t help throwing up in tears when I smelled shiitake mushrooms in other people’s dishes. I still remember when I was in kindergarten there was one time I did not eat anything for the whole day just because there was shiitake mushroom in the provided lunch. My mother was shocked by this diamond determination of a three-year-old child, since then she never forced me to have shiitake just for its nutritional value, like many mothers will do with broccoli and carrots.

Shiitake became the forbidden food in our home. Every Chinese New Year my mother brought home gifted dried shiitake mushrooms, yet they never had the chance to make a debut in the banquet for the new year’s celebration. When I left home for university, I released my family from my shiitake prohibition, wishing my mother for a whole new life to enjoy mushrooms freely. My mother laughed, “It’s not that hard.” I was definitely the most mycophobic person I have ever known.

It was my trip to Yunnan when I was 18 that changed my fear of mushrooms. The Yunnanese love mushrooms. It’s said that “if you haven’t eaten mushrooms in Yunnan, you can’t say you have been there.” There are over 900 kinds of edible mushrooms that grow in the forest of Yunnan province. The most well-known mushroom in Yunnan is Jian Shou Qing, a close relative of the famous porcini

mushrooms, whose name is gained from the fact that it stains blue when bruised or cut—the name literally means “seeing your hand will make it blue”. But what makes it popular is not that it can change colors, but the fact that it can cause hallucination when eaten raw or not fully cooked. Numerous people are knocked down by lurid bolete every year. So, there’s also a saying for Yunnan tourists that goes, “If you haven’t been to the hospital because of being poisoned by mushrooms, you are not a real Yunnanese.” Being poisoned never prevents these people from eating more mushrooms—not only in quantity but also variety.

Is overcoming mycophobia about overcoming a trauma of the past or the fear of the unknown? Skeptical as I was, I was still bewitched by people’s confident smiles and convincing “sales pitches” and I summoned the courage to try the first mushroom that I hadn’t even heard of before. They looked so strange that before I saw them, I’d never imagined any mushroom that would look alike. Maybe that’s the reason I believed they could be different. Indeed, they smelled nothing like shiitake, but a chorus of the forest, earthy, flowery, leafy, and nutty scents. For the first time, I took off my green glasses which had colored all mushrooms in a seemingly poisonous hue and discovered the beauty of fungi. They were not shiitake, they were their own kind of species that should not be mixed with anything else. I was buried by my own nightmare, but then I saw the scenery. It was almost like a rite of passage, which often included a procedure of putting the participants in an unfamiliar and fearsome environment in hopes of them overcoming their fear and becoming true adults fit for the society.

I couldn’t agree to a truce with Shiitake, but my time in Yunnan did open a whole new world for me—the Yunnanese market. The market is a joining of the human world and nature. The various kinds of mushrooms sold in the market were still covered with dirt. They were picked by the hands of Yunnanese who go to the mountain in the morning mist and return to the market under the afternoon sunshine. For the first time, I smelled the mountain air, I saw the wrinkled hands, and I heard the melody of life. The people I saw in the market had probably never been to high school, yet they may have had more knowledge in hunting mushrooms than any mycologist in New England. The rhythm of seasons is in the different varieties of mushrooms placed on the counter, which can only be harvested at specific times and places. Some

mushrooms only grow in the beautiful tropical forest in Yunnan, but some species can even grow on the mophead in my home—yes, it really happened.

The market is a screenshot of time and space. Later when I went to Hiroshima, for the first time I had to worry about cooking by myself. Yet I felt great joy every time I walked into the market. Hiroshima was famous for oysters, which were sold cheaply all year around. The counter for seafood was over 20 meters long and changed every day. I liked to read the labels of different fishes which I had never learned about and imagined how they were caught and transported to this supermarket located in a town surrounded by mountains. I saw crabs from being the center of the advertisement to disappearing in the market. The sweet smell of baked sweet potatoes began to fill the air. Crown daisy piled up in front of the store.

And then spring rushed in with tender buds of trees unknown to me. I searched for the name of the tree in Chinese in the dictionary on my phone, no result. But that didn't matter. I googled recipes: scramble with eggs? Sounds easy. I took that box of new buds home and had them for dinner, thinking this must be how Hiroshima tastes like in Spring. I also thought of my hometown Wuhan, the new lotus root is a must have for the season in my family. It is only as thick as my index finger, crispy and juicy, best fried in a sour and spicy flavor. I never thought of it as something local since lotus roots can be found all over China. But in Shanghai, my other friend told me they have never seen or heard of the newborn finger-thick lotus root. I've always thought big cities are all the same. Not only then did I realize how the soil and water of my home had already become part of me.

When I stood in the only supermarket in Hanover, I was never so convinced that I was in a totally different place. It was the first time I saw so many kinds of apples lined up on a three-tiered shelf. Potatoes were divided by different sizes and colors and some aspects that I didn't know existed. However, green leaves took up the space of less than two lines—there were less than 10 species, but there had to be a different shelf for organics. It confuses me that people invest so much in cultivating different subgenres of lettuce rather than trying out leaves of new plants, like the tips of a newly sprouted sweet potato or the young buds of a red toon tree—the latter might sound a bit too adventurous, but are the greens of common vegetables that scary? Maybe yes. The greens of tomatoes are poisonous and for quite a long time tomatoes had served as ornamental plants in the court of the Qing emperors. People are scared,

just like my triple check of no-mushroom ingredients when I was dining out not so long ago.

But then I was standing in front of my biggest enemies in a foreign land. They had acquired different names. Lion's mane is called the monkey's head in China—a cool name, but why can it never get rid of animals? What were once called “flat mushrooms” in the far east are granted the name of oysters, which made them much more appealing, proven by the largely increased price tag. In between was something I had never seen—chestnut mushrooms. I don't know if they're named that because they grow on chestnut trees or that their caps are in a color similar to chestnut—it is a beautiful shade of golden brown. They look similar to what I called tea tree mushrooms back in China, all with slim stalks and nice little flat umbrellas. The only significant difference I could notice is that they came with scales—tiny dots on the caps, while tea tree mushrooms have a smooth surface. I stared at my phone, not a single Chinese website would provide a picture that matched the species in my hand.

I didn't know how other people prepare them, but I stir-fried them in the similar way people treat the mushroom's possible cousins—and I can't recall the difference. Maybe mushrooms are just like me, a spore that has traveled across the Pacific Ocean and changed its state of living. There's a Chinese saying that goes, “An orange grown in the south is an orange, an orange grown in the north becomes a citrange.” Welcome to The North, little mushroom.