



Eating Red Mushrooms in Labrador

Robin McGrath – Goose Bay, NL, Canada

The first time I ever saw an Inuk eat mushrooms was in Labrador. During twenty-five years of fieldwork in the Canadian Arctic, I often traveled with Inuit, and whenever I asked if it was okay to eat a certain food, generally the answer was, “You can eat anything if you are hungry enough.” I was hungry enough on several occasions to eat many things, including a very flea-ridden ground squirrel, the cartilage from a caribou nose, and some rather maggoty dried seal meat from the bottom of a toolbox. But in all those years, I never ate a mushroom nor did I ever see an Inuk eat one. Yet, according to everyone I asked, Inuit traditionally ate mushrooms. So, I wasn’t surprised when I saw my Inuk friend, Alex Saunders, picking mushrooms one day on the North West Islands of Lake Melville. Alex grew up among Innu in Davis Inlet, and an Innu elder had already told me that, “the only mushrooms Innu eat come on a take-out pizza.” However, Inuit are opportunistic eaters, willing to tackle just about anything.

By the time I had moved to Labrador in 2006, I was an avid chantereller. Several summer visits to Battle Harbour had introduced me to boletes, and I also enjoyed the occasional puffball. However, I still wasn’t confident about any other edible mushrooms Labrador had to offer, so I willingly signed on for an Edible Mushroom Foray sponsored by the Birch Brook Nordic Ski Club in Goose Bay. We had a marvellous time stomping around in the woods, followed by a potluck supper on the last evening. And who should turn up at the potluck but my old friend Alex Saunders?

In the next room, sorted, labeled, and laid out for display, were nearly 100 species of mushrooms, so it took but a moment to ask him if he saw anything he recognized. Instantly he went straight to the *Russula paludosa*, and described with enthusiasm how he had loved to eat them as a boy. “We used to put a sheet of metal, tin or something, over a fire and toss



these mushrooms straight onto that,” he explained, “same as you’d cook mussels or capelin. At home we’d put ‘em on the pan whole, cap down.”

Labradoreans of European and Inuit origin have been eating mushrooms with far more enthusiasm than their neighbors in Newfoundland for well over a century. Emma Dicker Voisey, born in Rigolet in 1884, used to pick mushrooms at Voisey’s Bay, but was careful never to let her children harvest them unless she was with them. “She knew the kind that was poison and the ones that was good to eat, and showed them which ones to pick, which they would cut up like onions and fry in the frying pan,” said her daughter Rose in *Them Days* magazine. “Oh, I loves mushrooms,” she added.

According to Grenfell nurse Kate Austin Merrick, Sir Wilfred Grenfell once had the mushrooms on Indian Harbour Island examined to determine which were edible, and wrote that in 1929 the nurses used to gorge on them in season, although they could not get their Newfoundland staff to share their feasts. It seems that the most popular and possibly only mushroom eaten regularly in Labrador was the *Russula* Alex Saunders identified. Called variously “red tops,” “red caps,” or just plain “mushrooms,” Jemima Learning recalls that her niece once came across a big patch of them when she had nothing in which to carry them. She stripped off her petticoat and tied it to her waist to make a bag, because they were too good to leave



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behind. Learning used to gather mushrooms around Dumpling Island and Pack's Harbour, where they would fry them up in pork fat or butter, or stew them. Harold Hamel of Cartwright said the mushrooms were fried up and then mixed with bread and water to make a sauce. Some people believed that it is best to peel the red skin off them. Doris Saunders, wrote that her father used to "come home with mushrooms and peel the skin off of them and throw 'em in the pot when Mom had a soup on." Although Doris made it a point to get the mushrooms early to avoid worms, her father was not averse to a little extra protein. "You'd have to take your spoon and scoop the worms off the top. They'd always float up to the top," she said.

Inuit from Hopedale recall collecting mushrooms for the Moravian missionaries, but did not eat them themselves. Inuit or Settlers of the south coast were more likely to collect and eat mushrooms. If Inuit traditionally ate mushrooms, one would expect the custom to have persisted in the more northerly areas, rather than in the south where there was more exposure to Newfoundlanders who were wary of them. Perhaps the difference between north and south coast Inuit eating habits is related to their disparate origins. According to John C. Kennedy, the more northerly Labrador Inuit descended from Thule Eskimos while their southern counterparts descended from the remnants of the Dorset people. The Thule would not have been exposed to poisonous mushrooms until they moved south. Having lived and travelled below the tree line for far longer than their Thule relatives, the Dorsets had more time to adjust to the diverse mushrooms on the south Labrador coast. Greater contact with the Basque and French may also have contributed to their incorporation of edible mushrooms into their diet. It is perhaps this lineage and mingling that made most Settlers on the south coast mycophages of the red top, while their northern relatives, and Innu and Anglo-Saxon neighbors remained gustatory mycophobes. In any case, I had heard so much about the red top, and speculated about its identity, that it was a real pleasure to have Alex unravel

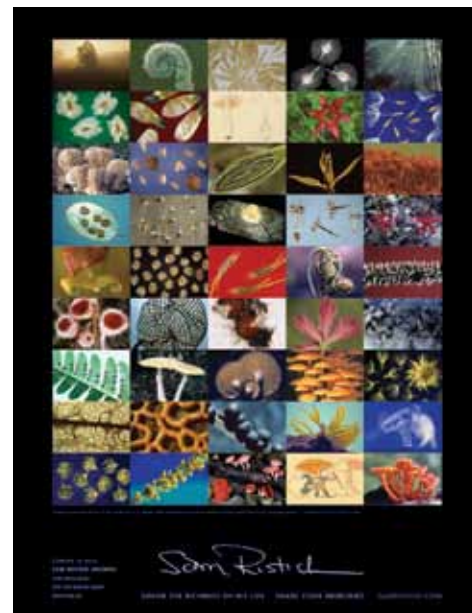
the mystery, restoring *Russula paludosa* to its rightful place of pride in the culinary heritage of Labrador.

[The author is a professional writer based in Goose Bay, Newfoundland. This article originally appeared in the November 2012 edition of *Omphalina*, the newsletter of the Foray Newfoundland and Labrador club.] ♪

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