

The Amazing Mushroom Museum of Croatia is in Jeopardy



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Imagine if the city or town that you lived in were home to a museum dedicated solely to mushrooms. Now imagine that the culture in which you were embedded was so enthusiastic about mushrooms that this museum was chosen to be located right in the main square of the region's largest city. Does this sound like a fantasy world? It is not. Located in a building overlooking Ban Josip Jelačić Square in Zagreb, Croatia, the Educational Center World of Mushrooms Prof. Dr. Romano Božac (aka: the Mushroom Museum) displays the largest collection of freeze-dried (lyophilized) mushroom specimens in the world and it is currently on the brink of being shut down and its delicate collection potentially getting destroyed in the process. However, you can help.

Zagreb is the capital and largest city in the country of Croatia and it is situated along the Sava River basin, a major tributary of the Danube, the second-longest river in Europe. According to Roko Levar, a master's student of experimental biology at the University of Zagreb, "The Sava River basin is a biodiversity hotspot, with approximately 64% of its river course designated as protected areas under various conservation frameworks. Fungi contribute to these ecosystems by fostering nutrient cycling and supporting plant communities essential for these wildlife habitats" (Levar, 2025).

The Sava region has a long history of mycophagy, especially during the autumn months when the forests are bursting forth with edible species of mushrooms. Levar remembers from an early age how he would "venture into nearby forests with his grandparents to collect mushrooms like porcini, chanterelles and parasol mushrooms." In addition to wild mushroom risottos and goulashes, people here enjoy a wild mushroom soup dish from the North of Croatia called *zagorska juha*. And when the wild black trumpets are out, they are

often added as a secret ingredient to the region's classic stewed meat dish known as *kotlovina*.

It was from this culture that a legend of mycology emerged: the late Prof. Dr. Romano Božac. According to Ivana Kovačić, a visitor's guide at the Mushroom Museum, Prof. Dr. Božac became interested in truffles at an early age. The hidden subterranean treasures were common in the peninsula of Istria where he grew up. Dedicating his entire life to the field of mycology, Prof. Dr. Božac published twenty-four books on fungi including his magnum opus the *Encyclopedia of Mushrooms*, a veritable tome totaling 1,566 pages and spanning two volumes. During the course of his work he described sixteen new truffle species to science. He was also passionate about preserving fungal specimens for educational purposes. To this end, Prof. Dr. Božac and the Kamilo Blagaić Mushroom Society—a mycology public education organization—diligently freeze-dried and labeled over a thousand wild mushrooms and established the Mushroom Museum in 2013 in order to display the specimens and educate the public about them (Kovačić, 2025).

Anyone who has ever been involved in fungarium mushroom preservation work will know that simply drying a soft-bodied species will cause it to shrivel up and—depending on the species—oftentimes not look anything like the living form. Freeze-drying, on the other hand, “showcases their original size, shape, and color in a way that cannot be experienced elsewhere. It provides a unique opportunity to observe real mushroom forms as they appear in nature, thanks to the innovative and unique lyophilization techniques developed by Prof. Dr. Božac” (Kovačić, 2025).

According to Levar, over the years Prof. Dr. Božac developed a particular method for successfully freeze-drying mushrooms that included proper long-term care of the specimens so that they could be put on public display for years to come. Fortunately, he passed down this “knowledge to his colleagues who have been maintaining and adding new mushroom species to the collection even after he passed away” in the year 2020. (Levar, 2025).

In addition to housing approximately 1,600 freeze-dried mushrooms, the



Mushroom Museum educates visitors about the ecological roles of fungi as well as their medicinal properties. Furthermore, the museum has played “a crucial role in raising public awareness about safe foraging practices, which has helped prevent accidental poisonings during mushroom-picking seasons” (Levar, 2025). Every mushroom season, foragers from in-and-around the city of Zagreb go to a nature park on Medvednica Mountain—which forms the natural northern border of the city—to seek out these wild delicacies. The Mushroom Museum curators are members of the aforementioned Kamilo Blagaić Mushroom Society who are dedicated to helping these foragers have their wild-picked mushrooms properly identified so that they can stay safe while eating these important foods. In fact, local, seasonal produce—including wild-harvested mushrooms—are sold in Dolac Market, which is located just a few steps away from the Mushroom Museum.

According to Kovačić, “this invaluable collection was created through decades of dedicated scientific research and work by the Kamilo Blagaić Mushroom Society ... and holds numerous protected and rare species” including all sixteen of truffle species described by Prof. Dr. Božac. Kovačić affirms, “this unique collection is an irreplaceable educational and scientific resource, offering the public, students, scientists and researchers a unique opportunity to

learn about fungi. Its location in Zagreb's city center makes it a prime educational and tourist attraction, and it also raises awareness about the hidden kingdom of fungi and popularization of mycology.” People from all walks of life have visited the Mushroom Museum over the years and have written mounds of positive reviews in the museum guest book as well as online. Visitors who come to see the unique collection include international tourists, mycologists, professors, mushroom enthusiasts, physicians, students, and locals. One evening, when the Mushroom Museum participated in Zagreb's annual Night of the Museums, it attracted over 1,800 visitors in a single night!

Unfortunately, says Kovačić, “despite its uniqueness, this extraordinary and valuable collection faces an uncertain future due to unresolved legal and administrative issues between Zagreb city and state authorities. In December 2024, the Educational Center World of Mushrooms Prof. Dr. Romano Božac established by the City of Zagreb, the Zagreb Tourist Board, and the Kamilo Blagaić Mushroom Society was temporarily closed.” Even more worrisome is that since the specimens have been freeze-dried, each beautiful piece in the collection is extremely fragile and could easily be damaged when moved, should the museum have to be relocated. They also require being maintained within a highly specific



humidity and temperature range in order to remain in a properly preserved state. Therefore, a forced relocation poses an existential risk to this delicate mushroom collection that took decades to create. Troublingly, Kovačić reports that the local institution which oversees the Mushroom Museum known as

“Javna ustanova Priroda Grada Zagreba’ under the City of Zagreb, has failed to regulate its status with the Ministry or even to propose an adequate solution for the collection’s protection.”

Fortunately, Vesna Dujlović, president of the local Kamilo Blagaić Mushroom Society, exclaims that “members of the

Society are presently working on the protection of this collection as a cultural heritage” (Dujlović, 2025); and Kovačić mentions that the Society “has taken the initiative to keep the collection intact and ensure its long-term preservation” (Kovačić, 2025). In order to save the collection as well as the museum, the Society is making the following demands in a public petition:

- **No Relocation:** The fragile specimens must remain in their current location under proper conditions to protect the collection.
- **Restoration of Premises:** Both spaces previously used by the center must be returned to their original purpose.
- **Educational Purpose:** The collection must continue its mission of education and science popularization by reopening to the public as soon as possible.
- **Proper Management:** The Mushroom Society “Kamilo Blagaić” should take over the management of the collection, as other parties have not demonstrated the necessary expertise or interest. This will prevent its deterioration and ensure ongoing efforts to refresh the collection by adding new specimens from nature and preserving them through lyophilization.
- **Official Protection Status:** The collection should receive legal protection as cultural and scientific heritage.

However, as these goals are quite a large undertaking for such a small group, they are requesting the help of mushroom enthusiasts everywhere. This is where you, dear reader, can do your part by spreading the word and signing the petition to save the Mushroom Museum. Specifically, Ivana Kovačić requests:

“We ask for mushroom enthusiasts worldwide to voice their support to help preserve the specimens so the Mushroom Museum with its priceless collection can re-open to the public! By adding your name to the petition, you are standing with us to protect a unique scientific and cultural treasure for future generations. Your signatures and messages of support will show the authorities that this

preservation is crucial and holds significant global interest.

To those reading this, we kindly ask you to sign the petition and share it with others on social media. The link to the petition can be found here: <https://form.jotform.com/250917116515050>

You will also find the link to the petition on our Mushroom Museum Facebook and Instagram pages, so you can copy the URL from there, too. Let us all come together to ensure the survival of the largest collection of freeze-dried mushrooms in the world!”

Also, if you would like to start your own mushroom museum, you can reach out to the Kamilo Blagaić Mushroom Society to learn about their special preservation technique. Levar shares that:

“It is our dream that one day Zagreb could become a global referral center for this method of mushroom preservation and we would be thrilled to share our knowledge and help others set up similar institutions. It would be amazing to see mushroom museums springing up in cities around the world, showcasing local fungal biodiversity and promoting awareness of their ecological roles. These museums could become as standard as botanical gardens in every city. Local mushroom museums could highlight native species, their uses, importance to ecosystems and more while fostering community engagement through professional species determination, workshops, exhibitions, lectures, organized foraging and other similar events like those we practice in Zagreb. It takes a lot of time, patience, dedication and knowledge, but together we can create a global network of mushroom museums that inspire people everywhere! But first, we need to save our collection in Zagreb that is currently under threat.”

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their website <http://gdkb.hr/>.

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Kew Gardens Fungarium, London:

The Greatest Fungal Collection

The Kew Fungarium traces its origins back to the late 19th century, when Rev. M.J. Berkeley donated his collection of over 10,000 fungal specimens. Since then, Kew Gardens has maintained a dedicated mycological presence, growing the collection to over 1.3 million specimens from around the world, representing around 60% of known fungal genera. Among these, over 50,000 type specimens are part of a DEFRA-funded genome sequencing project to make their genetic data publicly available.

The Fungarium is invaluable for research, preserving fungal diversity across time and geography. Initially used for morphological studies, it now supports DNA analysis and may one day contribute to research on metabolites, enzymes, and pigments. It serves as a global fungal “library” for taxonomic and ecological studies, allowing scientists to borrow specimens and even conduct destructive sampling to extract genomic data.

New specimens—whether rare or common—are always welcome, and amateur mycologists play a significant role in expanding the collection. To donate, collectors should contact the Collection Manager at fungarium@kew.org, follow legal procedures, and submit a donation form. Other UK institutions, such as the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff and the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh, also accept fungal specimens. 🍄