



Brian Viner: Country Life

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At the Ludlow Food Festival the Sunday before last I was introduced to Alexander Schwab, a Swiss mushroom expert who was sitting at a table behind a giant puffball, publicising his new book *Mushrooming Without Fear*. The giant puffball - cousin of the common puffball, or *Lycoperdon perlatum* to those of us who have now read *Mushrooming Without Fear* - has a smooth surface like suede and is, says Alex, "as good a reason as you'll get for a dinner party". When I turned up at his stall, a woman was examining the puffball with great interest. "Look," said Alex, pointing to the sky. "Up zere is a flying puffball." In fact it was a white balloon, but for a fleeting moment the woman believed him, to much general merriment.

Alex makes mushrooming fun, as I discovered for myself two days later when he came over to Docklow to take me on a private forage through our own small wood and into the neighbouring fields. I took with me a large wicker basket, which turned out to be absurdly optimistic; it had been far too dry for mushrooms to prosper, and all we found was something alarmingly poisonous called *Lepiota josserandii*. The point of Alex's book is to remove all doubt from a mushroom hunt, so he advises that any mushroom with gills underneath the cap must be left alone. As I understood it, not all mushrooms with gills are deadly but all deadly mushrooms have gills. So the first rule for a mushroom forager is to be able to identify gills, those radiating blades always attached either to the stem or the cap in a uniform way.

Where Alex lives, a village called Biglen in the Emmenthal region of Switzerland, there is an official mushroom inspector called Monika Lehmann. People gather all sorts of mushrooms and take them to Monika, who decrees whether or not they are safe to eat. I love the idea of a mushroom inspector, although I'm not sure whether I approve of the way the Romans tested a mushroom, by letting a slave try it first.

Anyway, here in Herefordshire the nearest thing that I have to Monika is Alex's book, which conveniently comes with a pocket-sized field identification card that I now intend to take with me every time I take the dogs for a walk. I have a long way to go, however, before I become an entirely safe pair of hands. "Here's an interesting mushroom," I called to Alex as we skirted the wood. He came over to take a look. "Zat," he said, "is a dried-out cowpat."

The prize find for mushroom-hunters is the cep, and Alex looked with approval at the beech and oak trees round the pond at the bottom of the field next to our house: ceps thrive underneath beech and oak and he advised me to get out there after some steady rain. The cep, he added, is known as the king of mushrooms. And the fly agaric, what most of us would call a toadstool, is known as the queen of mushrooms. Fly agaric is a hallucinogen and best avoided unless you want to have a particularly wild evening, but mushroomers have a saying, that wherever you find the queen, nearby you will find the king. According to Alex's book, the phrase "to go berserk" derives from a particular band of Viking warriors called the

Berserkers who were known for fighting like mad dogs, apparently because they'd dosed up beforehand on fly agaric. You can't say this column doesn't teach you stuff.

At the end of our somewhat unsuccessful mushroom hunt, we returned to my kitchen where Alex, happily, had a large cep that he had found the day before in Mortimer Forest. He cooked it in about half a pound of unsalted butter, explaining that I should freeze what was left of the cep-flavoured butter and use it to fry meat in, or to pour over rice or pasta. The cep itself we ate on toast and extraordinarily delicious it was too, even at 10am, which is not generally a mushrooms-on-toast time of day for me. "It has to be cooked in unsalted butter," said Alex, sternly. "To cook a cep in olive oil is a crime." I didn't argue.

'Mushrooming Without Fear', by Alexander Schwab, is published by Merlin Unwin Books, priced £14.99