

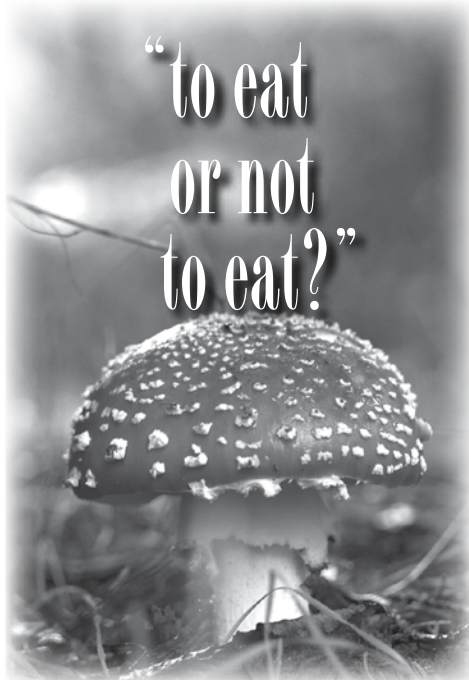
# *Amanita muscaria* - An entrepreneurial opportunity

(A modern satire) by Denis R. Benjamin

In recent months, the world of amateur mycology, especially the mycophagists, have become embroiled in an age old controversy - to eat or not to eat. The target of their particular ire is *Amanita muscaria var. any and all*. This topic periodically surfaces when scholarly articles appear - some promoting its consumption, others touting its toxicity and dangers. Such dichotomy in belief systems often creates a lot more heat than light. The parties retreat behind their own ramparts, lobbing insults, threats and occasional rotten wormy boletes at one another. There are other ways, not only to resolve the issue, but to make money and have a little fun in the process. But before we get to this modest proposal, let's look at some of the evidence - from both sides, albeit not too deeply.

First we have to answer the most fundamental question - can *Amanita muscaria* kill you? I hate to disappoint the enthusiasts, but I am aware of at least five deaths. One is in the ancient literature and may have been the result of sheer gluttony; the type of gluttony we rarely see nowadays, except at the twelve course meals in Napa Valley - which unfortunately none of us can afford. Since gluttony is a known deadly sin, this merely confirms the proposition. One was due to police restraining a particularly aggressive subject following a muscaria repast, succeeding in suffocating him with what is known in the trade as positional asphyxia. The medical examiner, bless his/her heart, signed the case out as mushroom poisoning. Third was even more violent, when police shot a belligerent subject seven times - some would consider this heavy metal poisoning rather than a mushroom death. Another character was repeatedly shocked with a taser, in an effort to subdue him. He finally complied by becoming pulseless. And the last poor soul combined alcohol and muscaria, vomited and successfully clogged his windpipe with his stomach contents

limiting airflow to the point that his vital functions were extinguished. Simply put, he expired by aspiration. Ah, you might claim, I am being unfair. The mushroom was not the proximate cause of death, merely an accessory to the crime. All these cases merely prove behavioral disturbances and an overly assertive police force. That is a pretty reasonable conclusion.



*Amanita muscaria* - Photo courtesy of Machel Spence.

On the edibility side there is evidence that prepared appropriately, many people, in scores of places, regularly eat this fungal fruit with little harm and sometimes with great relish. In every community in which I have raised the issue someone in the audience claims to be a regular consumer of this mushroom, or knows of others that do. To my well-trained medical eye these folks looked perfectly alive and well. In their defense, most of the foods we eat today have significant toxins - potato skins develop dangerous glycosides if improperly stored (beware green potatoes), beans contain potent lectins that bind to

cells (boil them to destroy the lectins), manioc (cassava) has to be specially processed to become edible, rhubarb leaves contain abundant oxalates, lima beans have to be genetically engineered - "bred" - to be low in certain cyanogenic glycosides. (Now you know why you always despised them.) So you get my drift. Most of our foods are inherently dangerous. The list of "natural" toxins in our everyday foods is prodigious, not to mention all the herbicides, pesticides, fungicides, insecticides, preservatives and other agents we intentionally challenge ourselves with. And how about all the bacteria, viruses, and other nasties that regularly contaminate our food, despite the oversight of Big Brother? We have just figured out ways to survive them, without upsetting our life insurance companies. The proponents of muscaria eating claim a similar model - prepare it right and gobble away.

On the other side of this divide are the toxicologists and the mushroom clubs. They have two different issues, one real and one contrived by a surfeit of attorneys. The real one is that muscaria does contain some pretty potent chemicals that scramble nerve signals in the brain producing some amazing visual and other sensory effects. Whether or not it inspired such magical thinking as *Alice in Wonderland* is open for debate, but there is little doubt that it can produce some extraordinary visions. It also has the nasty habit, before the onset of such experiences, of initiating nausea and vomiting, something not all people want to endure for a temporary chemical vacation. However the toxins vary considerably in concentration from location to location, and possibly from one season to the next. The chemicals are decidedly water soluble. So the best way to appreciate these neurological effects is to eat the mushroom raw, or in a tisane - tea, in common parlance - or if really desperate drink the urine of someone who has done one or both of the above.

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*Amanita muscaria* - Cont. from page 22.

The mushroom clubs are rightfully terrified of promoting the use of said mushroom in the event that someone will become ill and sue—and most know enough really dumb members who can't follow a simple recipe or even find their way out of a forest after a foray. Some can't even find their way to a foray. This is a legitimate concern. The problem is that when dragged into court to defend themselves, the club (or anyone else with deep pockets), the prosecuting attorney will haul out almost every mushroom field guide and, with great aplomb, show the jury the skull and crossbones next to a blazing red mushroom with white warts, and the bold lettering. POISONOUS. Do not eat. Case closed. Pay the attorney one third or more of the settlement.

So here is the deal. Let's certify a small number of regional chefs, skilled in the art of preparing muscaria. This would be equivalent of the fugu (blowfish) restaurants in Japan. Just imagine it. Food of the gods that could be dangerous. The excitement. The adrenaline rush that accompanies biting into that first cap, not knowing if you will be wheeled, feet first, out of the restaurant later in the meal. The delicious danger! Mushroom clubs could profit from the licenses they provide. National societies could set up expensive schools where chefs are taught the principles of the preparation, not available to the general public. They would learn the art of selecting the right mushrooms,

how to slice them, boil, decoct, decant, and so on. An oath of secrecy would add a further element of mystery. During the training phase they could experiment on the more recalcitrant members of the club—those who the general membership wouldn't miss. You know the ones. Those who always prolong the business meeting by challenging the budget, or the folks who never help at the yearly mushroom show. Or even better, the ones who poach on your chanterelle patch.

Visualize the advertisements promoting the danger, the links to ancient, shamanistic tribal rituals, various and sundry religious orders, and of course today, the current obsession with local products, lovingly prepared by gentle virgins. Words like "entheogenic" will enhance the effect. It will be the nexus to the hidden treasures of benign, nurturing Mother Nature. And of course it will be Certified Organic, Sustainable and Fair Trade.

The only caveat is for the societies to increase their liability insurance, although one hates to enrich either attorneys or the insurance companies. Maybe they could get by, by having potential victims and participants sign a twenty page release.

Nah! That never holds up in court. If anyone develops such a restaurant, please remember that I deserve a ten percent royalty, but zero liability.

Every time we eat something we play some version of "Food Russian Roulette." This one could have some real substance. Just a thought.

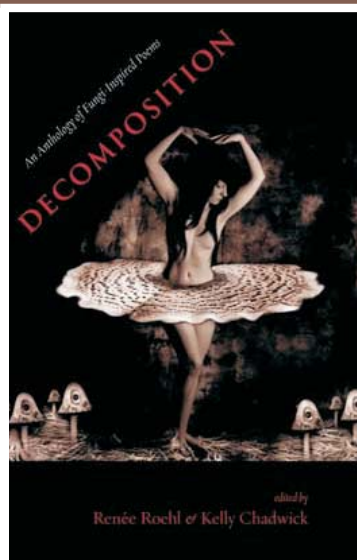
[Denis R. Benjamin is the author of *Mushrooms: Poisons and Panaceas*, published by Freeman.] ♣



*Amanita muscaria* - Photo courtesy of Machel Spence.

  
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