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A Vegetarian Behind Enemy Lines

By Todd Mauer

I'm often asked by my modestly bewildered French friends and neighbours why exactly I don't eat meat. To this natural question I invariably respond that I manage to eat very well – a bit too well, ha ha, if you know what I mean (I always pat my slightly protruding belly for dramatic effect) – without contributing to the suffering of animals. At which point my friends invariably ask me why I don't lose sleep at night for contributing to the suffering of carrots and green beans…

I've suffered from vegetarianism – and this rather tiresome line of questioning – for more than fifteen years. But, though I sometimes grumble at my lack of choice when it comes to restaurants, I can hardly blame my adopted countrymen for sticking with a good thing. When the food is as fine as it can sometimes be in France, why on earth change things just to accommodate the odd herbivore? Vegetarians in France are as rare as truffles, only less profitable – so it's little wonder we're left to our own devices.

But all hope is not lost. Even in France there are places where a vegetarian can momentarily forget that he is, in effect, living behind enemy lines. The region of Saumur, in the Loire Valley, is one such place. Here, watching fungi grow in a cave is an actual leisure activity. The tufa caves surrounding Saumur provide France with 70% of its mushrooms, which means that this is one area of France where a hapless and neglected – and, in my case, cycle-touring and therefore ravenously hungry – vegetarian need not be glum.

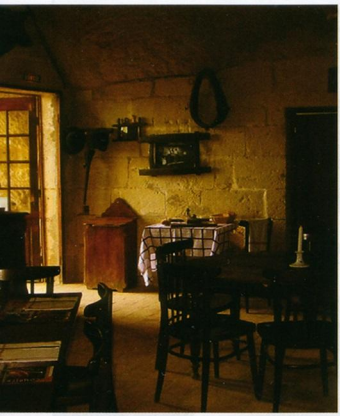
After its castle, the second most-visited tourist attraction in Saumur – or, rather, just outside of it in St. Hilaire St. Florent – is Le Musée du Champignon (The Mushroom Museum). Unique in the world, the museum is underground in what was once a working champignonnière, or mushroom farm. Although the original farmers have long since left, the museum continues the cultivation so that its many visitors can come, and pay, to, well… watch mushrooms grow.

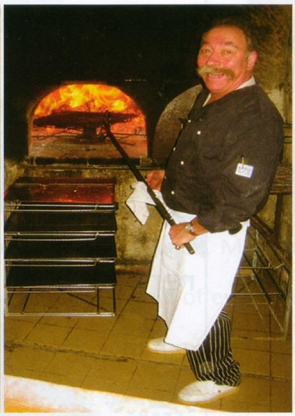
Inside the caves – which even during a heat-wave remain a refreshing 14 degrees Celsius – are examples of the most common types of mushrooms cultivated in the Loire Valley: oyster, shiitake, chanterelle, blewit, and, most importantly, white-button mushrooms. Cultivation of the white-button mushroom began in Paris during the reign of Louis the XIV. In the 1870s most of the production moved to Saumur, thanks to its 1,800 kilometres of caves and underground galleries, and – source of local pride – its 'widely available horse manure'.

The mushroom's earthy origins probably inhibited their early popularity. The philosopher Diderot wrote: *'Whatever dressing one gives to them, to whatever sauce our Apiciuses put them, they are not really good but to be sent back to the dung heap where they are born.'* Unswayed by the carnivorous ravings of Diderot, I found the museum fascinating.

'The Golden Chanterelle plainly deserves its good reputation,' I read, *'which is largely due to the firm, tasty flesh with its typical fruity-apricot flavour, and is rarely attacked by maggots.'* I'd already learned something useful; I resolved to consider the maggot factor in all subsequent mushroom purchases.

I had come to Le Musée du Champignon on a quest for serious fungi knowledge. To be precise, I wanted to show my neighbour, Michel, who was top mushroom dog on our street. Like many French people, every autumn Michel disappears into a forest near our village, and emerges several hours later clutching enormous baskets overflowing with wild mushrooms. As he is uncommonly kind – or maybe because I water his plants when he's away – he always shares some of his bounty with my family. Although I am, of course, grateful for his generosity, I must also confess to feeling slightly nervous every





time we sit down to eat whatever mushroom-delight my wife has conjured up with his pickings. I know I should be enjoying the unusual flavour of wild mushrooms, but part of me can't help but wonder: is there anything we've done to really annoy Michel this year? Is this the last thing we'll ever eat?

I'd entered Le Musée du Champignon hoping to learn enough about wild mushrooms so that I could pick them myself. But what I learned was far from reassuring.

First there was 'The Fly Agaric': *'Although this amanita is not deadly poisonous, it remains a dangerous fungus that causes serious digestive troubles, generally accompanied by hallucinations.'* Then there was 'The Clouded Agaric': *'Very controversial as to its edibility, the consumption of this fungus poses problems to certain individuals, and is therefore strongly discouraged, even more so as its taste and perfume are strong and peculiar, even disagreeable.'* Then the innocuous-sounding 'The Death Cap', which – as luck would have it – closely resembles other commonly eaten mushrooms: *'The number one among the mushrooms responsible for deadly poisonings in Europe. The lethal dose is very low and one mushroom is enough to kill an entire family!'* But my favourite description was of 'The Stinkhorn', an edible but very phallic mushroom, *'Easily located by its strong cadaverous smell...'*

As I left the museum I no longer nursed any ambition to find and cook the lethal little toadstools myself. Oh no, I didn't want to die. Pope Clement VII met his death after accidentally eating a Death Cap mushroom, and if it could happen to him... I'd leave the harvesting to the pros.

A short trip by bike back to the Saumur tourist office, and I soon had the name and address of one such pro. Then a fifteen kilometre bike ride through the hills and vineyards of Saumur-Champigny, and it wasn't long before I was in the beautiful, river-hugging village of Montsoreau. I arrived with a cyclist's appetite and a vegetarian's urge to order a meatless meal in a French restaurant without having to hang my head in shame. Le Saut Aux Loups – or 'The Wolves' Jump' – was just the place to satisfy my twin urges. The place is both a charmingly decorated troglodyte restaurant, and a functioning champignonnière offering paid tours of its caves. Although meat is very much on the menu, this is a place where one can proudly order a meatless mushroom dish without the slightest fear of being looked upon as a pariah.

The dish I ordered – mushrooms with local goat cheese and herbs, cooked in a traditional bread-oven – was a version of what Jean-François Biette, the gregarious owner of Le Saut Aux Loups, called the 'Galipette'. Monsieur Biette – whose passion for mushrooms is as prodigious as his moustache – explained to me that his 'Galipettes' are white-button mushrooms allowed to mature an extra week to attain roughly the size of a portabella. Although I must confess feeling disappointed upon learning that the exotic-sounding *'Galipettes garnies d'un fromage de chèvre local cuites aux ceps de vigne dans un four à pain'* that I'd ordered were in fact just geriatric and obese white-button mushrooms, the taste quickly brought me to my senses. Délicieux! Magnifique!

But after the first rush of flavours began to subside, I glanced again at the menu and spotted something suspicious. 'Ceps de vigne'? What was that? Meat? What had I eaten? I attracted the attention of the waitress by turning green.

'Des ceps de vigne?' she said. 'Bah, ce sont des ceps... de vigne. Vous voyez?' I made it clear that I didn't see, by turning a darker shade of green. In my experience, equivocation is usually the last refuge of someone with bad news to impart. A young waitress who'd spent some time in Britain came to my aid. 'It means the feet of old vines,' she explained. 'We use the wood from the feet – or, how do you say? – the trunk of local vines in the bread oven.'

Since my return from Saumur, I've been thinking more than any healthy person should about mushrooms. Now that I've visited Le Musée du Champignon, I'm so knowledgeable about wild mushrooms that whenever I find them in my garden I massacre them on sight with a golf club. Some people might consider this behaviour excessive, indiscriminate, even paranoid. Frankly, I don't care. Much better to just kill them all, and let the God of Mushrooms sort them out – or, to paraphrase Diderot, to just send them back to the dung heap from whence they came.