A MEANS OF SURVIVAL, A MARKER OF FEASTS: MUSHROOMS IN THE RUSSIAN FAR EAST

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While the price of wild mushrooms in North American restaurants and stores ranges from high to unaffordable for people with limited financial means, wild mushrooms for rural low-income households in places as diverse as Eastern Europe, parts of Africa, and the Russian Arctic are an important part of the diet, especially during food shortages. In Chukotka, in the far northeast of the Russian Federation, wild mushrooms are a source of nourishment in everyday consumption, and were important for survival in times of food scarcity. Depending on social context, mushrooms there have multiple meanings, ranging from emergency food for the hungry to the mark of a festive table. (Mushrooms, Chukchi, Slavs, Yupik, Chukotka)

Wild mushrooms are an important source of food for the rural poor in regions as geographically distant from one another as Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Russian Arctic. Not only is there a heavy reliance on them, but also some notable similarities in the ways wild mushrooms are utilized in the cuisines and consumption patterns among the peoples inhabiting these diverse environments. For example, the Bemba in Zambia, Africa, have a porridge (*ubwali*) served with a mushroom relish made of varieties of *Lactarius*, *Termitomyces*, or *Amanita*, and the dish will likely be the main fare from late November through February or March (Chilieshe 2005; Richards 1939). In Belarus, a favorite dinner entrée is a savory stew of potatoes and golden chanterelle mushrooms. Traveling 14 time zones east of Belarus, we find a similar dish of potatoes and mushrooms that is just as popular along the Pacific and Arctic shores of the Russian Federation. Prepared usually with the *Leccinum* varieties in place of the chanterelles, the recipe is just as widespread nowadays among the indigenous Chukchi and Yupik people of Chukotka as it continues to be among the Slavs on the western end of the former Soviet empire. Although well appreciated by members of the more privileged social strata living in these far-apart places, it is the rural, cash poor households that consume great quantities of wild mushrooms, especially during times of food scarcity.

If during a prolonged stay in any of the aforementioned places a Westerner tires of eating these crunchy, slimy, poor people's food, all that is needed for a fillip is a visit to a specialty produce section of a modern supermarket. Assessing the price range for wild mushrooms, if they happen to be in stock, is bound to make the transcontinental connoisseur feel like a millionaire, returning from a deluxe tourney among the world's wealthiest, whose commonplace dinner entrée averages hundreds of dollars. Mushrooms hold center stage in many cultural paradoxes. Their unique biological character is received with a measure of ambiguity around the world, often

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ascribing the mushroom's perplexing origins, some of which are connected with devil and thunder, others with madness and decay.

Mushrooms were outlawed by the Dharma-sûtras (Simoons 1998:188), presented uncertainties for Jewish kashrut laws (Blech 2002), and continue to trigger strong, and often polarized, reactions in contemporary societies, being relished with fervor by some and abhorred by others (e.g., Anderson 2005; Arora 1986; Berezkin 1997; Fine 1998; Levi-Strauss 1969; March and March 1982; Schaechter 1997; Toporov 1985; Wasson 1973; Wasson and Wasson 1957).

In market value terms, mushrooms appear to be no less provocative than those in other dimensions of human perception. A symbol of affluence and poverty at once, mushrooms have admirers at virtually any point of the socio-economic spectrum. A Chech folklorist, Bozhena Nemtsova, relates a story in which Jesus and Peter attend a wedding in a poor village. Upon leaving, Peter furtively packed with him a few pastries offered at the wedding feast. As they walked, Peter attempted to eat them discretely, but had to spit out each bite every time Jesus looked at him. When Jesus urged Peter to return and pick up what he had spat out, Peter found mushrooms growing in place of the cake pieces. "Because the mushrooms had sprung from poor people," according to the tale's ending, "Jesus bestowed them on the poor, and because the poor need help, mushrooms multiply and abound" (cited in Wasson and Wasson 1957:16–17). While in some Western societies mushrooms appeal to those who consider themselves gourmets and have the means to satisfy an expensive appetite, in others mushrooms are a default emergency crop that alleviates the hunger of the poor. Moreover, the poor who depend on a mushroom harvest usually utilize mushrooms in far greater quantities, number of recipes, and occasions than do those capable of paying a fair sum for an exotic sauce or an hors d'oeuvre incorporating mushrooms at a white tablecloth establishment. With a focus predominantly on the role of mushrooms in the culinary practices among the peoples of Chukotka, Russian Federation, this article shows that in some societies mushrooms can be as important for the times of scarcity as for feasts in times of plenty.[1]

Mushrooms hold a prominent status in many Slavic cuisines and it is with the incorporation of Russian or Russified patterns of eating into the local Chukotka foodways that the Yupik and Chukchi people began to harvest, prepare, and consume the wild mushrooms of the Arctic tundra. The harvested varieties include several species of *Leccinum*, *Lactarius*, *Russula*, and *Armillariella*, with the first two being the most widely used. Collecting mushrooms is a popular activity in Chukotka, enjoyed by members of both the indigenous and the settler populations. But processing the collected mushrooms can be tedious and time consuming. Hours can lapse in the course of taking care of the day's harvest, often with several family members involved in cleaning and sorting the specimens, stringing and hanging those selected for drying, and preparing the marinade for those to be sealed in jars.

EATING AND "CHASING"

At Ida and Sergei's summer cabin in Novoe Chaplin, a one-room dwelling with plank beds and a wood stove, the finest selections of a morning's harvest were floating in a steaming pot. Surrounded by condiments and armed with a ladle, Ida demonstrated how to marinate mushrooms and fill jars with them. To seven spoonfuls of vinegar she added peppercorn, sugar, cloves, garlic, and dill. After tightening the lid she said, "Now we will put them in the cellar and wait for 45 days." To ensure proper understanding, Ida and Sergei explained that preserved mushrooms could be eaten as part of a meal or enjoyed as a snack after ingesting a drink of hard liquor (usually a shot of vodka). In Russian this sounds like a word play between the verbs *kushat* (to eat) and *zakusyvat* (to nibble, or in a more colloquial interpretation, to "chase" a shot of hard alcohol). It is worth noting that both spouses pronounced zakusyvat with the same intonation, projecting the second syllable, kus, which is also the common stem that this verb shares with kushat. The intonation emphasized both the commonality and the distinction between the two verbs, pointing out that zakusyvat is sort of eating, but is specialized as a form associated with a particular context. The mushrooms that Ida marinated were intended to be served as hors d'oeuvres (*zakuska*) on drinking occasions, to be consumed immediately after swallowing a strong drink.

The mushroom recipes of Chukotka are classed into two categories, each associated with one of two broad contexts of consumption. Other than as an accompaniment to liquor, mushrooms also constitute *yedá* (meal food). Mushroom recipes for hors d'oeuvres and those prepared for meals are usually intended for different eating situations, or different parts of a consumption occasion. The dishes within each category are also ascribed particular sensual and nutritional qualities. For example, Ida's marinated hors d'oeuvre recipe can be contrasted with soup, pilaf, and dumpling (*pirozhki)* recipes; the former is a zakuska and the others are considered yedá. Guided by Mintz's (1996:17) framework of examining the meanings of consumption settings, particularly those arising in the context of dietary change, the remaining sections of this essay explore the social and nutritional qualities attributed to the various mushroom dishes prepared in Chukotka. In accordance with the vernacular distinction between the mushroom recipes intended as either yedá or zakuski, the sections describe the conditions of "where, when, how, with whom, with what, and why" (Mintz 1996:20) for the culinary categories.

MEALTIMES AND EVERYDAY EATING

Meal patterns in Chukotka today closely resemble the schedule followed elsewhere in the former Soviet Union and in the homes of those who emigrated to live in North America and Europe. They follow "a common etiquette, formed largely on the basis of de-ethnicized urban culture, which is familiar to people living throughout Russia regardless of nationality, and is practiced nearly all the time" (Arutiunov

and Voronina 2001:11). Although pan-Soviet consumption patterns vary considerably in connection with individual preferences and socio-economic factors, they generally adhere to a cultural model of three daily meals: *zavtrak*, *obed*, and *uzhin*. *Zavtrack* and *uzhin* are somewhat analogous to breakfast and supper. They are lighter meals that include a main course and a hot beverage, usually tea. *Obed* (dinner) is the principal meal. Served slightly later than the traditional North American lunch, the everyday obed entails three courses known as *pervoe bliudo* (the first dish), *vtoroe bliudo* (the second dish), and *tret'ie* or *sladkoe* (the third dish or the sweet course). Although it appears as though the three courses are simply enumerations, in this context the terms are better interpreted as course titles, rather than consecutive numberings. Pervoe bliudo definitively requires soup. An obed without soup is usually described as "without the first [dish]." Similarly, if the soup is immediately followed by tea and sweets or a fruit cocktail, the meal is described as consisting of only the first and third courses. The composition of vtoroe bliudo can vary greatly; among examples are stews, meat or fish with a serving of potatoes or rice, buckwheat kasha, stuffed *blini* (crepes), *pelemeni* (meat dumplings), or pasta dishes.

Prazdnichnyi Stol (Holiday Table)

While a holiday meal can also be called obed, the table prepared for a special occasion differs considerably from its everyday counterpart. With an elaborate menu intended to surpass the ordinary, festive eating (*zastol'ie*) can extend over several hours. In addition to lavishness, the main difference of the holiday spread from a daily obed, is the replacement of pervoe with a *zakuski* table. Food historians attribute the Russian appropriation of zakuski to the Dutch, German, and Swedish influences entering during the reign of Peter the Great (Chamberlain 1983; Goldstein 2003).

Besides pickled mushrooms, a zakuski table can include several salads, herring and various types of smoked fish, pickled vegetables, salamis, cheeses, smoked meats, stuffed eggs, and liver pâté.[2] Saucers of caviar, often a symbol of culinary extravagance, may adorn a more decadent spread. Although of foreign influences, zakuski is nevertheless considered an essential and defining component of the contemporary Russian-style feast. Regardless of the regional and household particularities, the plethora of dishes and flavors in place of the daily soup sets the holiday table apart from the ordinary. After a few bites of food, someone pronounces the first toast followed by the sound of clinking glass that will be heard at regular intervals throughout the course of the feast.

Russian and Indigenous Cuisines in Chukotka

Both everyday and holiday meals vary to accommodate differences in regional cuisines and the socio-economic conditions of households. Most Chukotka

specialties consist of the foods procured locally, either directly from the land or through social networks. As in older times, sea mammal and reindeer meat are staples of the indigenous people; such meat being regarded as principal food even when animal harvests are scarce and reindeer herding is in decline. Sea mammal meat is relished by both the tundra and the coastal people because it is fattier and because it was the chief food of their forefathers (Bogoras 1904–09:193). Talking about their food preferences, several individuals remarked that reindeer meat, although delicious, can get wearisome, whereas meat from sea animals, especially the walrus, remains pleasing even when consumed every day.

A few indigenous families distinguish between Russian and Chukotkan meals, designating particular days of the week for preparing one kind or the other. To emphasize the distinction, each type is consumed in accordance with the appropriate etiquette. Russian meals are served at a table, with individual dishware and utensils. The Chukotkan way prescribes a finger food approach, with everyone sitting on the floor around a communal platter, a factory-made vessel or a large oval tray carved out of driftwood; individuals may use a knife to remove bite size portions from a large piece of meat on the platter.

Mushrooms in Everyday and Festive Eating

Mushrooms are low in fat and carbohydrates and therefore have almost no calories (Boa 2004; Chang and Miles 2004). While vitamin and mineral values are comparable to those of vegetables, mushrooms are not a substitute for meat or other high-protein foods (Arora 1986:30). Chukotka informants, however, assert that mushrooms are high in calories, nutritiously interchangeable with meat, stating that they are *tiazholaia pishcha* (heavy foods) and take a long time to digest. Offered a sample of marinated boletes, a friend in Provideniya ate only one mushroom, explaining that he is trying not to eat heavily during evening hours. Despite their integral role in the procurement cycle and local diets, mushrooms continue to be prepared almost exclusively in Russian-style recipes and have not found a special niche among Yupik or Chukchi dishes. Rather than attempt a cultural interpretation, most cooks explained the segregation in nutritional and economic terms. Since much of the indigenous foods are already high in animal protein, adding mushrooms would be redundant and seems counter-intuitive. The two contexts that surpass this rule are situations of extreme food shortages and regional cooking competitions, when seal oil becomes part of the recipe. When village stores run out of supplies, mushrooms are fried or preserved in seal oil to make up for the absence of butter. At regional food contests, on the other hand, which are carried out at various native culture festivals, the seal oil is intended to endow the mushrooms with a distinctive Chukotkan taste.

In everyday eating, mushrooms are conceptualized as the meat of the meal. Perhaps this ascribed quality and the recognizably dominant flavor are the primary reasons for their defining role in Russian culinary nomenclature— mushrooms are

key ingredients that determine the identity of the dish. For example, a soup made of barley, potatoes, and mushrooms is called mushroom soup, and stuffed rolls of fried bread are always called mushroom pirozhki as long as mushrooms are part of the filler. The types of mushroom dishes most commonly prepared throughout the year are soups and stews. In addition to barley or wheat based varieties, mushroom stock is also employed in *solyanka*, a sour soup cooked with pickled vegetables and infused with tomato purée. The potato and mushroom stew, seasoned with bay leaf and salt, constitutes a hearty self-sufficient dish, as does that of mushrooms and buckwheat. Throughout the year, most recipes are derived from the preserves of dried mushrooms or the ones that have been boiled and then frozen.

During the harvest season fresh mushrooms are consumed on their own, usually fried or sautéed with onions. The summer's first mushrooms, anxiously awaited and welcomed with enthusiasm, are almost always consumed freshly fried. As the season progresses, pickling and drying for the winter may become a priority. People like Lara in Nunligran, who in the early morning hours collects small quantities to be cooked for dinner that day, said that procuring mushrooms in the morning assures that the next meal has been secured. Once again, mushrooms are the meat; the dish is regarded as filling and nourishing. Stews and sautés can also be consumed for supper, though usually served in smaller quantities.

For festive occasions, albeit the hot course may feature dishes that include mushroom ingredients (pirozhki, stews, pilafs for example), it is the zakuski spread where mushrooms have a special role. Used to accompany a drink, the zesty pickled hors d'oeuvre is a recognized component of social drinking and a marker of the holiday table. The preparation of pickled or marinated mushrooms is very much connected to the revelry cycle in Chukotka. While selecting for marinating the finer specimens of their harvest, people contemplate upcoming birthdays, family celebrations, and various holidays that involve festive eating or call for a gift of *banochka gribov* (a jar of pickled or marinated mushrooms).

Banochka gribov is a distinctive commodity. To receive one as a gift is to be shown great appreciation by the giver, who wants to acknowledge a special relationship or occasion, or perhaps to express gratitude for an important favor. Whenever one brings banochka gribov for a friend's birthday party, the jar does not constitute a present, but merely a contribution to the holiday spread. (Potluck style parties are generally not practiced in Russia; the hosts expect and are expected to be completely responsible for the full spread.) A jar of pickled mushrooms is one of the few items (like a box of chocolates or a bottle of wine) that a guest can contribute to the table without offending the hosts. When brought for a special occasion, the jar is usually opened right away and the contents are consumed over the course of the celebration, often to the sound of jovial praise for their texture and aroma.

Sealed in jars, pickled and marinated mushrooms constitute a snack, rather than part of the meal. As mushrooms, they are considered heavy foods, but as a companion to vodka, one mushroom typically goes with a shot. Another dish usually associated with festive eating is mushroom "caviar." In Chukotka it is prepared from

boletes that are boiled, ground, and fried with onions. Like salads and other hors d'oeuvres, mushroom caviar is a zakuska, and at a holiday table it is served during the first course.

Another context that does not quite fit everyday or festive eating, but often entails the consumption of food and drink, is the bathhouse (*bania)* gathering. A few households in each of the Chukotka villages had built small private bathhouses, but the majority of the population continues to use public facilities. In Provideniya, even during the weeks when hot running water was available in the apartments, bania was equally popular among men as it was among women, with different bathing days set aside for each. Drinking alcohol and eating in the bania in all the settlements was more prevalent among the men, and took place during the rest between rounds of steaming and washing off sweat. To cool off and replenish energy and fluids, bathers spent much of their time taking refreshments while sitting on the dressing room benches or in the large corridor entrance. In Chukotka, the women talk about preparing the food, mostly freshly baked mushroom pirozhki that the men in their households take to the bania to share with friends and enjoy with a healthy dose of libations.

GOOD TO THINK, HARVEST, AND EAT

When comparing perception and uses of wild mushrooms in Chukotka with those of the Bemba and others, it may be useful to employ the approaches of both cultural materialists (e.g., Ferguson 1995; Harris 1985; Ross 1987) and interpretive symbolic anthropologists (e.g., Douglas 1966; Heston 1971; Levi-Strauss 1969; Sahlins 1976), as the two orientations are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. First, mushrooms are perceived as nutritiously valuable. They are regarded as heavy foods and a caloric equivalent of meat. Discussing their nutritional qualities, Chukotka residents often exclaim, "Mushrooms are very nutritious, they are rich in calories and vitamins; they are heavy foods; they are the total equivalent of meat, don't you know that?" or "Mushrooms are like meat, the same in calories; when we make mushroom soup, or pirozhki, or rice pilaf, we don't even put meat in. Why do that? Mushrooms are the meat."

Second, even from an outsider's point of view, nutritional values of any food can only be meaningful if measured within its culinary context. Fried mushrooms are prepared in liberal amounts of oil or butter and, regarded as the meat component of the meal, are usually consumed with a serving of carbohydrates. In addition to their perceived caloric contribution, mushrooms are valued for their strong distinctive flavor that tends to saturate the taste of the entire dish. For these reasons, it is useful to think of mushrooms' nutritive roles as those of condiments, which make starches ingestively more interesting, thereby increasing the consumption of core foods (Mintz 1986:11). Therefore, within the emic ethno-nutrition schema of Slavic cuisine that the Russified newcomers have brought to Chukotka, mushrooms are good to think in social, sensual, and economic terms. The caloric significance of mushrooms

is physically achieved and socially acquired through the consumption preferences and preparation that in today's Chukotka are good to think as well as to eat.

Chukotka had several years of severe food shortages in the 1990s following the Soviet collapse. This economic crisis was due in part to the crumbling infrastructure coupled with the regional government's astonishing mismanagement, which people vividly remember and refer to as the hunger years. Salaries and pensions were not paid for months, giving private entrepreneurs little incentive to make deliveries, especially to villages. This was a time when the state failed to supply even bare necessities, but people managed to get by through creative use of local resources, a reliance on subsistence and social networks. In interviews, people shared their recollections of hardship, losses, and survival strategies.

If famine often brings its own cuisine (Goody 1982:59), Chukotkans coped with the extreme shortages of the post-Soviet crises with ingenuity in procuring and preparing food. Describing their survival strategies, informants repeatedly stated that not a single berry on the tundra was wasted, enunciating every word with a slogan-like precision. Even those who previously went out on the tundra largely for recreation, during the hunger years had to turn to foraging activities for sustenance (Gray 2003). Not surprisingly, most households collected a wider variety and far greater quantities of berries, mushrooms, roots, and greens over the course of this trying period. Chukotka culinary innovations resulting from creative experiments of that time included recipes that subjected locally gathered foods to new methods of preparation, such as grinding meat into cutlets and spicing and smoking the meat of whale, walrus, or seal. This was primarily done by the settler residents who, after years of living in Chukotka, still did not take a liking to the taste of marine mammal meat unless its flavor and texture had been significantly altered. Under the dire circumstances of the hunger years, mushrooms became a critical food source and were reportedly gathered in copious amounts. "We often subsisted on mushrooms alone," said one Provideniya resident, describing how almost every day she tried to figure out a different way of preparing them.

During the hunger years, tundra mushrooms became one of the remaining and most abundant local food sources that was fairly easy and inexpensive to harvest. Compared with hunting and fishing, mushroom collecting requires very little in the way of equipment and supplies. Stripped of most desired foods and ending up with an unusually high volume of mushrooms, people were looking to diversify the ways of preparing the fungi, as well as to expand the overall scope of flavors available to them during shortages. A transition took place in the late 1990s, when marinating mushrooms became more widespread and popular. Those who canned and preserved all along began to stockpile in greater quantities while others learned to marinate for the first time. Those who were previously relying solely on the gifts of others for occasional feasting began to supply their own. Aside from holiday gatherings, people tapped into their pantries more regularly, just to eat a few mushrooms with pasta or bread for an ordinary meal, thereby turning a delicacy into emergency food.

It is possible that the escalated mycophagy that took place in Chukotka over the years of the post-Soviet crisis (which was likely the case in other parts of the Russian North) was the first large-scale occurrence of mushroom use for basic sustenance during famine in the circumpolar area. While increased consumption of berries, perennial greens, roots, and lichens is well documented (e.g., Jones 1984; Kuhnlein and Turner 1991), we do not know of mushrooms being used during food shortages to any great extent. Eidlitz (1969), whose circumpolar food survey revealed that in the past mushrooms were hardly ever eaten in the North, lists some evidence of mycophagy taking place during severe famines in northern Sweden in the 1860s.

The fact that during the recent sustenance hardships Chukotka residents used mushrooms as emergency food extends the ethnographic perimeter of mycophagy, surfacing additional ground where the materialist and the symbolic attributes of eating can be further explored. On the one hand, the striking upsurge in the harvest of wild plants that occurred in the late 1990s, which many local people perceived as the maximum utilization of tundra resources, is clearly a practical coping strategy, a tactic of mere survival. At the same time, even during the hunger years in Chukotka, mushrooms were good to eat only after they came to be culturally regarded as such, which did not occur among the Yupik and Chukchi people until the end of the Soviet era. For example, in the early 1900s it was wheat flour (at the time important in the trade between the indigenous people and whalers) that was the chief means of avoiding starvation. The annual quantity of flour that whalers sold along the Chukotkan coast in the early 1900s averaged 2500 sacks (at 44 pounds per sack). During the spring of 1901, people in the village of Ekven, on Plover Bay, and also at Indian Point, lived chiefly on flour cakes baked with a little oil, according to Bogoras (1904–09:62).

On the Alaskan side of the Bering Strait, native peoples also regularly searched for ways to obtain flour when hunting resources were scarce (Eide 1952; Lopp et al. 2001). While mushrooms probably fruited just as abundantly at the start of the twentieth century as they did in the late 1990s, during the earlier period they were not used as emergency food, very likely because they then were simply not regarded as food. While on the Alaskan side this view is still largely intact, in contemporary Chukotka the idea is all but unthinkable. Mushrooms are now endowed with positive qualities both in nutritive and in symbolic senses, but the case at hand reaffirms that it is ultimately what is good to think that determines what should and should not be eaten.

CONCLUSION

Mushroom preferences vary among culture regions, and those of Russian and Eastern European cuisines grade all edible mushrooms into four categories, depending on the desirability of their flavor, aroma, and texture (Klepinina and Klepinina 2004:20–21). The members of the genus *Morchella*, marketed to specialty retail and high-end restaurants in Switzerland, France, and to a lesser extent North America,

in the Russian taxonomy qualify only for the lowest grade, placed in a category together with other less desirable edibles. At the same time, the birch bolete, albeit ranked just below the choice *Boletus edulis,* is one of the most commonly used mushrooms in Slavic cooking.

The cross-cultural subjectivity of human tastes for mushrooms is well reflected in a reputed predilection of Julius Caesar, mentioned by numerous authors, for the mushroom *Amanita caesarea* named in his honor. "It was only served to the Emperor, and only on the most precious dishes (*boletaria*); the rest of the guests had to content themselves with *fungi suilli* (swine mushrooms [of what is now known as genus *Suillus*])" (Persson 1998:88), which includes several varieties of the Russian venerated boletes. Wasson and Wasson (1957) interpret the disdain for mushrooms found among Anglo-Saxon cultures and the contrasting mycophilia of the Slavs in connection with the history of endemic poverty and food shortages among the peasant populations of the latter. Investigating the subject in the regions of the former Soviet Union today, it is not uncommon to find a similar view. When I mention to Chukotka people that in the United States mushroom hunting is all but absent, with the exception of certain hobbyists such as amateur mycological societies, they respond by suggesting that it is probably because of the affluence of Americans who can afford to buy all the mushrooms they need at the supermarket. Of course, Chukotkans are unfamiliar with the astronomical retail prices for wild mushrooms in North America. Where there is a reliance on wild mushrooms as a food source among the poor, it exists only in those societies where mushrooms are accepted as food. For instance, despite periodic famines in the Bering Strait area, wild mushrooms were never utilized even as emergency food in Alaska and have come to be widely used in Chukotka only with the incorporation of Slavic cooking and a transition to a Russified pattern of eating. Whereas in Britain, where the taste and other qualities of fungi have little appeal to the majority of citizens, the consumption of mushroom dishes is a marker of high social status. According to M. J. Berkeley, an eminent British mycologist of the 1800s, dishes of chanterelles were occasionally served at public dinners at the principal hotels in London and on state occasions, "where every effort was made to secure the rarest and most costly dainties" (cited in Cooke 1891:104). When recent policies banned the sale of foie gras in parts of the United States, a Chicago restaurant employed a creative dodge by offering what was forbidden as "foie gratis" when served with the wild mushroom confit salad at a premium price, a tactic satirized as a "weapon of the chic" (Heath and Meneley 2007:595).

Biologically, mushrooms can be understood as the fruiting bodies of interlacing subterranean organisms called mycelia, which are composed of thin winding threads that extend through the soils of practically all the life-supporting landmasses of the Earth. The health of every ecosystem is dependant on these mycelia webs to nourish its plant life and perform other essential ecosystem functions. Yet, the universal importance of mushrooms in the natural environment does not mirror their standing

in the human world, as the latter varies widely between social, cultural, and temporal contexts.

The circumstances of mushroom use in Chukotka that this article discusses in detail, along with other cases, speak soundly to this point. They also illuminate further cultural and regional idiosyncrasies, demonstrating that even among the societies where mushrooms generally occupy a respected place, a person from one culture might regard as trash that which to another might literally be a treasure. In certain regions of Africa and the former Soviet Union it is poor people who rely on mushrooms most heavily, while in Britain and the United States wild mushrooms, for the most part, appeal to a select few and are chiefly marketed to the affluent. Finally, depending on the circumstances of a given time, even among the economically disadvantaged, as seen in Chukotka, the same kind of mushrooms can be used as emergency food or a marker of a holiday table. Thus in the end, it is neither the ecological settings nor the broad cultural dispositions that determine the status of a particular food, but rather a particular constellation of the ecological and culinary spheres of knowledge, history of cross-cultural and intercommunity contacts, dietary preferences, consumption patterns, and a people's ingenuity and adaptive techniques.

NOTES

1. The primary ethnographic data stem from fieldwork conducted in 2001, 2004, and 2008 in seven Chukotkan settlements near the Bering Strait, and a life experience with Russian cooking, many aspects of which have spread throughout the post-Soviet area, including Chukotka, over the second half of the twentieth century. The focus here is restricted to practices since the 1970s, emerging with the influx of Russians during rapidly expanding Soviet developments in the North. The use of mushrooms among the Yupik and Chukchi people prior to Russian influence and an historical overview of mushroom use in Chukotka appear in Yamin-Pasternak (2007, 2008).
2. Having attended countless special occasions, I speak authoritatively on the subject and describe Russian festive eating from first-hand experience. Factors such as geographical location, socio-economic status, individual preferences, as well as cultural and family traditions always bring variation to meal contents. For meal descriptions and recipes see Chamberlain (1983), Goldstein (2003), and Voronina (2001).

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