

The Chanterelle Wars

BY KATHRYN KRAMER

Sometime every July, depending on weather, the chanterelle returns to the North Woods. A wet couple of weeks, not too cold, and then a little drying are the conditions she favors. She likes best to grow beneath the spreading branches of hemlock and spruce, not deep in the woods but at the border – at the edge of a clearing, along a tree-shaded road, in a sparse stand – as if plying the limits of her need for shelter, wanting to see what goes on in the wider world. One may be simply strolling heedlessly and then – a flash of brightness arrests the eye and there's a loose gathering, like people waiting aimlessly for a performance to begin: tawny orange, the color of caramelized sugar, of butterscotch, of well-oiled boot leather – fluted stem, lacy edges on the larger ones, the little ones round bright buttons magically sprung from the ground.

LOUISE SMITH

The chanterelle, as anyone knows who has tasted it, is the disguised royalty among mushrooms. The morel, the *tout* of gastronomes, may stand resplendent and wear the crown, but the chanterelle smiles to herself in the shadows, recognizing her royal cousin for the impostor she is. The chanterelle, like Cinderella (whose etymological similarity we may well wonder about) knows her claim to the throne will one day be validated, but, like Zeus disguised, is content for now to be recognized only by select mortals.

The morel is unpredictable, showing up once and never reappearing, fancying the earth around decaying elms, for instance, though only at a particular moment, like overbred nobility too fastidious in its tastes to survive into future generations. The morel is the fickle Calvinist deity among mushrooms: you can do all the right things, but there is no guarantee your ardor will be rewarded. Though this may be initially true with the chanterelle, once you have found a growing spot, you can rely upon finding the mushroom year after year, though some say that, when you collect, you should leave enough so that she can resurrect herself the next season.

There is something miraculous about wild mushrooms – like the secretive truffle they cannot be cultivated; no one can perfectly duplicate all the conditions they need to thrive, even were it possible to assess these. They grow where they do according to some inner directive in the earth that, it is comforting to think, so far escapes human measuring. One may know the terrain a mushroom frequents, the conditions it prefers, the season in which it flourishes – and yet never find it. Why in this grove and not that? Why two-thirds of the way up the hill and not lower? Why on their land and not ours?

You begin to be a trifle fanatical, a trifle over-zealous, so that when you do finally, after much tramping through bogs, threading through blackberry bushes, creeping under low branches – at last glimpse the quarry – you feel deserving – blessed by the dryads and hamadryads and other sylvan deities that concern themselves with mushrooms. Virtue is rewarded, the only real affirmation anyone has ever really needed... Which is why, when a

summer passes and I have not found any chanterelles, I take it personally.

Take it personally... Let us not mince words. It's not only that I like to eat them, but I need to eat them. Chanterelles are my communion wafer, my fountain of youth, my philosopher's stone – my sign of absolution from the land. Which brings me to the confession that must precede: I have been guilty of envy, pride, and (it must be said) tremendous resentment – in short, guilty of nearly ceasing to speak to, of coming to blows with, hiring detectives to follow an enterprising mushroom-collecting neighbor of mine who, like the third little pig outwitting the wolf, always gets up earlier, travels faster, covers more territory, and finds more chanterelles than I! Not only that, but tells me about it. Not tells – brags, boasts, chortles, gloats, teases – and generally and sadistically rubs it in in the most heartless and depraved way. There are few spectator sports where we live, and I suppose that watching one village inhabitant attempting to feign indifference in the face of the taunting of another could figure as one of them.

To begin with, my family's time-honored chanterelle hunting grounds were rudely wrested from us by a lawn-broadening neighbor. For many years we used to collect our chanterelles, could *depend* upon collecting our chanterelles, in a spruce grove down below "the cabin," a log one in the little valley below our house. Our house and land, though blessed with splendid prospects, bounteous hay and blackberry fields, and noble pine and hardwood forests is, alas, sadly lacking in ground hospitable to this holy grail of mushrooms. Whoever has owned the cabin over the years has used it only occasionally – a few weekends every summer – so we have been free to wander through their vacant yard to the brook below, through a densely woven spruce thicket, where crawling was usually more to the purpose than walking, and to appropriate what were, legally speaking, their chanterelles – although privately, along the lines popularized by Robin Hood, I *am* of the opinion that chanterelles are, like the King's deer, the property of whoever needs them the most.

The cabin's current owner, however, had landscaping plans, and before we

Chanterelle I.D.

Despite fairly distinctive shapes and colors, the edible chanterelles can be confused with some poisonous look-alikes, so extreme caution is advised when hunting these – or any – mushrooms for food. Novices should seek out the help and advice of experienced mushroom hunters, and even seasoned foragers should consult a field guide to confirm any finds.

The most widespread and sought after chanterelle is *Cantharellus cibarius*. Found in forested areas throughout the United States and Canada, this chanterelle is recognized by its egg-yolk coloration throughout the whole fruiting body and overall trumpet-like shape. It has a smooth, thick, slightly convex to flat cap (1 1/4-4 inches wide), with a wavy to lobed irregular margin that may be incurved. The gills are blunt, thick, and widely spaced, and they extend down the tapered stalk. The spore print is pale buff to pale yellow, and the fruity odor is reminiscent of dried apricots.

C. cibarius can be confused with the poisonous Jack-O-Lantern mushroom (*Omphalotus illudens*). The Jack-O-Lantern mushroom, however, has thin yellowish-orange flesh, an unpleasantly sweet odor, and sharp-edged gills that glow in the dark. It grows in clusters at the base of stumps or from buried roots.

could so much as lie down in front of the bulldozers he had cut down the dense trees, leaving a few for atmosphere, and planted – of all things – grass. It is lovely around the cabin now, I am constrained to admit, but did he really need all that space and sunshine? What are these things, compared to chanterelles? An orphan of a kind, I wander the field edges, keeping faith with the land in this idiosyncratic fashion, hoping for belated revelation. Alas. Meantime my rival takes to horseback to cover more ground, trains his young daughter to crawl beneath low-lying branches to reach where he can't, even enlists his girlfriend in his foraging – not to mention in the sport of baiting hapless mushroom excommunicants.

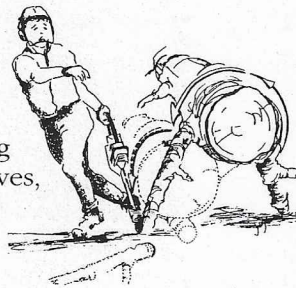
"This is such an incredible year!" they'll say (to give a sample of their brand of sadism). "We were just driving to town the other day and found several pounds along the road – we couldn't even pick them. . ." "We've found so many we're sick of eating

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them..." Or, alternatively, "Have you tried the ink-spots?" Or the chicken-of-the-woods or the Boletus... The implication being that perhaps I'm too obsessed by one species, too monotheistic for my own good.

But I know this is all a distraction, meant like the apples thrown for Atalanta to make me veer from my goal. People name their *daughters* "Chanterelle"; who has ever run across a human Boletus, or Ink-Spot, or Chicken-in-the-Woods? (D. H. Lawrence called his main character in *Sons and Lovers* Paul "Morel" – perhaps to suggest his earthiness if not his phallic preoccupations – but he's fictional, after all, and Morel is only a last name.) Another long-time friend of mine shares my passion for chanterelles (there are worse things to cement a friendship), if she's not driven to quite the lengths I am to satisfy it. Though she may come close.

We were walking along an old road one day, mushrooms far from our thoughts, when we spotted the tell-tale burnt sienna, growing among ferns that earlier, if noticed in time, would have been fiddleheads and ended up on someone's plate. We had nothing whatsoever to carry the chanterelles in and didn't want to risk leaving them (spies are everywhere) to go all the way back to the house to get something. We both wore short-sleeved shirts, but my friend was wearing hers under overalls, and so she took this off and we wrapped the mushrooms in it. The overall bib covered her, but not to the point of great modesty. This was a little-traveled road, but no sooner had we tied up the shirt with our spoils and set off homeward than a truck came along – two men, clearly mushroom under-cover agents, but masquerading as loggers. They idled that truck and kept us in conversation for the longest time. My friend kept her arms folded across her chest and I held onto the laden shirt. The two men looked back and forth between the two of us, clearly suspicious – but they didn't dare ask anything outright (What have you got in that shirt there? Why aren't you wearing your clothes?) and finally gave us up and drove on. At dinnertime we pulled the black-out curtains and devoured the chanterelles with dispatch.

I have, on occasion, I feel bound to admit, stooped to *buying* chanterelles, but I have never felt good about it. It is, as I see it, tantamount to a Catholic's asking a

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friend to take communion for her because she's too busy to go to Mass.

And as for my tormentor – well, he redeemed himself one evening last July when we were invited to his house for dinner. He took me aside and, *sotto voce*, said, "There's a pan of chanterelles on the stove – I am telling only a few people – take as much as you like." I have to admit that at first I thought it was a joke – it was right in keeping with the kind of torture he liked to inflict – but then there it was: a whole deep cast-iron skillet full of ambrosia – and in fact hardly anyone did seem to know they were there, or to think anything much about it if they did notice. (I don't dare open up for contemplation the possibility that I might live among infidels.)

That evening, for the first and only time in my life I had as many chanterelles to eat as I wanted, and I felt scarcely guilty at all that I didn't spread the word; after all, you have to suffer before you really merit grace. And I forgave my neighbor – at least until next summer.

KATHRYN KRAMER IS A WRITER FROM CORINTH, VERMONT. HER MOST RECENT BOOK IS *Sweet Water*, A NOVEL.



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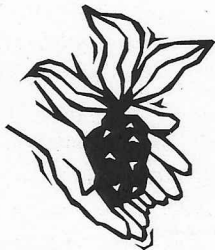
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