The favorite activity of enormous numbers of people—

Picking Mushrooms in Russia

By Alexander (Sasha) Viazmensky

Editor's Note: Viazmensky, an artist from Leningrad, recently spent several months in Minnesota. A part of that time was spent with Lee Muggili in upper Minnesota at Lee's summer cabin, reveling in the quantities of mushrooms he could render in watercolors or pen and ink. The watercolors are delicately rich; the species characteristics are clear, even though, as he modestly says, he does not have the knowledge of either Latin or English names for the mushrooms.

If five years ago I had been told that I would pick mushrooms in the United States I would just have laughed. Yet I am now living in an unbelievably spacious apartment in Minneapolis and I am cleaning American mushrooms I picked in American woods. Because of changes in Russia, it became possible for me to visit my friend Michael Kulmsen whom I have not seen for 12 years, since he emigrated from Russia.

True luck led me to meeting Lee Muggili, vice-president of the North American Mycological Association. With him I found myself for the first time in the mushroom woods of the United States.

In Russia, mushroom hunting is the favorite activity of enormous numbers of people. Many more people are mushroom picking than, for example, fishing. Children and men and women of all ages are indulging in mushroom hunting. American mushroomers! What happy people you are because you are few.

Until the middle of July, in Russia you may seldom meet a hiker in the woods. Soon, though, the rumor spreads that somebody has found the first mushrooms. The most impatient mushroom hunters immediately rush to the woods, though there are not yet too many mushrooms.

Eventually mushrooms show up at a farmers market. This is the signal for the move: Crowds of people with mushroom baskets fill the morning trains out of the city. In the evening when they come back, the people who are passing by jealously peek into their baskets. However, baskets have usually been covered on the top with small branches or with grass to protect the mushrooms from indelicate, inquisitive glances.

When the major mushroom fruiting arrives, it is impossible to get on morning trains. Many mushroom hunters stay waiting at a railroad station for the next train. The ones who managed to get on the train will be standing in a jam-packed car for two or more hours, and yet they will consider themselves lucky. The most devoted mushroom hunters go to the woods in the evening and stay there for a night, camping at the fire. As a reward for that they have avoided crowded morning trains and are the first to reach mushroom spots.

As for me, I usually do the other way: I go to the woods in the afternoon in order to run into the least number of people.

The feeling I experience toward woods and toward mushrooms in nothing else but love. And if there is love there will be jealousy around, directed to everyone who also loves the object of your love. When mushroom hunters run into each other in the woods they silently curse at each other, although exchanging pleasantries out loud. It becomes particularly upsetting if you meet someone at your favorite spots. I will never turn from the road to my spots if somebody is behind me. I will pass by my spots and will return back by a roundabout way, so that I hide my mushroom spots from everyone else.

All our woods are invisibly divided among "professional" mushroom hunters. The one who wants to feel in charge of his mushroom spots must painstakingly review them at least once every other day. He picks all mushrooms and covers the smallest ones with leaves to pick them next time. If he does it regularly the other mushroom hunters who may wander there by chance will think that there are no mushrooms in this place, and they will not return there again.

If you do not review your spot for several days someone else may find mushrooms there and he will make this spot his own. Then you get into competition and the pleasure would...
be ruined for both of you. Often in such cases the real war begins. Competitors spend nights in the woods sitting at fires not far away from each other. They start to look for mushrooms before sunrise. The winner will be the one who has more time and patience.

A good mushroom hunter knows every tree on his spots as well as every mushroom family (the meaning of this word has to be as human family rather than the botanical meaning) and its peculiarities.

As everywhere else in Russia nowadays the demand for mushrooms exceeds the supply. In other words, the demand exceeds the woods' capacity. You can't find a good mushroom in the resort areas around Leningrad. Remote woods also noticeably suffer because of increased numbers of cars in recent years. Cars drive through in the most beautiful pine tree forests where the trees grow wide enough apart to drive between. The forests soon turn into networks of roads. Almost not a single mushroom has a chance to live to its mature age on such places. Mushrooms do not have a chance to multiply and their population decreases continuously.

In this regard the problem arises which has not yet hit the United States — how to help mushrooms to live and to multiply. I have established for myself a set of rules in my attitude to mushrooms. When weather cooperates I always wear in the woods shoes with thin leather soles, but not boots, so that if I step on a mushroom I will feel it and not crush it.

When I find a mushroom eaten by worms I do not throw it away, but I hang it on a tree branch so that it can scatter spores. Sometimes I break it into several pieces and hang them in different places. If I find a good ripe mushroom I overcome my laziness, remove all mushrooms from my basket and put the ripe mushroom on the bottom. Now as I walk in the forest the mushroom will drop spores through the basket twigs anywhere I go.

*Boletus edulis* is considered the truly best mushroom in European Russia. It is call in Russia *Bely Grib* (white mushroom) because when you cut it, it does not turn dark but stays white. When there are enough of them, people do not pick other mushrooms. One feels very fortunate if he picked his whole basket of whites.

Before returning home, many mushroom hunters take out all mushrooms from a basket and put them back again so that the most beautiful mushrooms are on the top. The majority cover their baskets with pretty branches, leaving the best mushrooms partially visible.

All this reminds me of a woman dressing herself; she wants to show the beauty of her body, however modesty makes her cover it. A totally open basket with beautiful mushrooms draws everybody's jealous glances, but it looks shockingly immodest. Everyone selects their own compromise in relation to how shy they are.

I was always reluctant to cut beautiful mushrooms. I wanted to save, somehow, if not their beauty then at least the memory of them. So I started to draw mushrooms. Gradually it became my habit. I walk in the woods with two baskets — a big one and a small one. I carefully put in a small basket the mushrooms I intend to draw. I put moss in between them. These mushrooms have to stay absolutely fresh so that they look good on the portrait.

Here is my favorite mushroom recipe:

**Sasha's Ceps**

*Clean and cut mushrooms. Put them in the pan and add very little water. Bring it to a boil. When spume appears on the top, remove it. Pour accumulated extra water off so that mushrooms lay but do not float.*

*Put butter, cut potatoes, onions and salt in with the mushrooms. You*
have to add just a little more salt than you would usually put in. Cook the dish until potatoes are ready. 5 minutes before the end of cooking, put in sour cream.

Boletus edulis prepared like that is the best dish I know.

Editor's note: For those who have not traveled in Russia, the idea of driving in the woods must be almost as repugnant as the feelings of disgust our coastal residents have for those who drive four-wheelers on the beach. But there are fewer roads in Russia than we have here in the U.S., and driving off-road is more commonly done.

For those who question the effects of overpicking mushrooms, Sasha offers us evidence that there is cause to worry. Because Russians are such enthusiasts about mushrooms, there is little hope of lessening the harvests around the cities, particularly as the food problems increase in the USSR.

When food is plain and scarce, using mushrooms both as food and as condiment becomes a necessity, and “conservation” will take a back seat to necessity. This happened during the war years in Moscow with the trees. When I visited there recently I saw almost no old trees. They had had to be used for cooking and for heating homes.

Russians are modest people. The idea of putting oneself forward, or bragging, is not customary. Sasha’s description of a woman dressing herself as a parallel to showing off mushrooms is evidence of this social pressure. Some of the problems of perestroika may be connected with this same characteristic, if you consider that entrepreneurship calls for the will to push oneself forward, to compete, punishable behavior for many years under Stalin and his followers.

Though Sasha has now returned to Leningrad, a Russian friend in Minnesota, Michael Petsman, has some of his paintings for sale. These are his sole way of earning money enough for return trips to the U.S.

Sasha may be able to return to the United States. If you are interested in his paintings, you may contact him through Michael Petsman, 1646 Hampshire Avenue South, Minneapolis, Minn. 55426. POB 27484

never got a paw on him. The fellow was so badly lacerated and bruised because he kept running into trees and brush!

A few adjustments had to be made for forays planned for the long weekend (it was Thanksgiving in Canada) because several drenching rains had dislodged a lot of rocks and soil in this rather unstable geological area, and landslides plus mud-slugs blocked roads. Some forayers took to the gondolas, finding snowfall in the upper regions which they claimed obliterated all but the magnificent specimens. (Listeners weren’t sure whether the dimensions were exaggerated ....)

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