

## Book review

PAUL STAMETS:

### Psilocybin mushrooms of the world – an identification guide.

1996. Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, California, USA. Distributed in the UK and Europe by Airlift books. ISBN 0-89815-839-7, 243 pages. Illustrated with colour prints. Price \$ 24,95

Towards the end of the 70ies, when interest in the possible occurrence of psilocybin mushrooms in Europe was just awakening, there was hardly any literature on the subject except for Roger Heim's now classic treatise on "Les champignons toxiques et hallucinogènes". In this book Heim presented *Psilocybe semilanceata* and *Panaeolus subbalteatus* as psilocybin-containing mushrooms which could be found in Europe, but analytical data were still lacking then.

On the other hand, in the USA a whole subculture surrounding the recreational use of at least half a dozen of these mushroom species existed already. A stream of pamphlets and field guides, often of poor quality, provided information on the identification and location of the hallucinogenic fungi growing in North America.

A book that really distinguished itself favourably from all those amateurish publications was Paul Stamets' "Psilocybe mushrooms and their allies", edited by the Homestead Book Company in Seattle (Wa.). This guide did not only give user-friendly keys for the genera *Stropharia*, *Psilocybe* and *Panaeolus*, but also excellent descriptions of the individual species, illustrated with very good colour prints. This book has been most helpful to those European mycologists who wanted to find out whether these mushrooms could also be found in their respective countries. Now, some twenty years later, not only the number of known hallucinogenic *Psilocybes* and *Panaeoli* has increased dramatically, but on both sides of the Atlantic ocean it was discovered that psilocin and psilocybin also occur in representatives of unrelated genera, such as *Conocybe*, *Gymnopilus*, *Pluteus*, *Inocybe*, and even in *Galerina*.

It was therefore time to bring out a new, updated book on the subject, and it was again Paul Stamets who has taken the initiative in editing a worldwide guide. After short introductory chapters on e.g. history, ecological aspects, world-wide distribution of psilocybin mushrooms, the various types of their habitats, the greater part of the book – characterised by yellow pages – is devoted to major – and minor psilocybin genera. The part on *Psilocybe* and *Panaeolus* in which most psilocybin-containing species are found is undoubtedly the most interesting. Not only are there good descriptions of macroscopic and microscopic characteristics, but also high-quality colour prints which are not to be found elsewhere. The illustrations are definitely better than those of Guzmán's well-known guide to the genus *Psilocybe*. As far current knowledge permits, the contents of the active principles psilocybin, psilocin and baeocystin are listed for each species. There are also some descriptions of inactive species which are often erroneously considered hallucinogenic, e. g. *Panaeolina foeniculii* and *Psilocybe coprophila*.

Of course, many of the 63 *Psilocybes* described by Stamets are tropical or subtropical species, and there are even a few which have only been discovered quite recently, for example, *P. samuiensis* Guzmán, Allen et Merlin discovered on the Thai island Koh Samui, and a strongly blueing species, *P. natalensis*, which was reported from South Africa by Gartz et al.

The chapter on "minor psilocybin genera" is, as far as the hallucinogenic *Inocybe* species are concerned, mostly based on the papers by Drewitz, Gartz, and Stijve and Kuypers. For somebody familiar with the literature there are no surprises. The lack of photos of the said *Inocybes* is somewhat disappointing. The occurrence of psilocin/psilocybin in some *Gymnopilus* species is still a matter of conflicting reports. According to the reviewers' experience, a positive or negative result could well depend on the time interval between collecting the mushrooms and their chemical analysis. For example, fresh, strongly blueing *G. purpuratus* contains much psilocin, which can disappear completely in about two weeks, even from dried material.

In contrast to his earlier book, Stamets is now making propaganda for the recreational use of psilocybin mushrooms, although there is the usual disclaimer from the editor who "does not advocate violating the law." It is, however, significant that Stamets' first book was prefaced by

the mycologist Gastón Guzmán, whereas it has now a foreword by medical doctor Andrew Weil, who has gained some notoriety by his mystic and pseudoscientific writings. We should therefore not be surprised that this book subscribes to certain far-fetched theories, e.g. the faculty to biosynthesize psilocybin is seen as a competitive evolutionary advantage, because the consumers help in disseminating the spores, thus propagating the species. Moreover, the author states that psilocybin mushrooms are carriers of messages from Nature about the health of the Planet: their widespread consumption in the 70ies prompted the ecological movement! Furthermore, it is repeatedly emphasized that, during the last 20 years in the USA, *Psilocybe* mushrooms are increasingly found in places wherever people congregate: in parks, lawns by housing developments, schools, churches, etc. Admittedly, Stamets also mentions the role that the growing use of wood-chips plays in creating a suitable habitat for lignicolous species as *P. stuntzii* and *P. cyanescens* in parks and gardens.

The author rightly points out the need to properly identify the psilocybin mushrooms one wants to collect. Indeed, severe cases of poisoning have occurred in people who were foolhardy enough to randomly ingest little brown mushrooms. Amateur collectors should be able to distinguish the highly poisonous amatoxin-containing *Galerina* species from *Psilocybes*. For this purpose, the chapter on the dangers of mistaken identification shows a very good photograph, depicting *Galerina autumnalis* and *Psilocybe stuntzii* growing side by side.

In the chapter "Good tips for great trips" the reader finds – as usual in this kind of literature – much talk about the great experiences offered by psilocybin mushrooms. The dangers of actually ingesting these conscious-altering fungi, especially to nervous persons, are played down. Stamets even cites a psychiatrist who in 20 years of medical practice never had a patient complaining of a bad mushroom session. We should, however, give the author credit for suggesting a number of valid precautions to minimize bad experiences and maximize the positive. For example, he emphasizes the importance of time and setting for the actual trip. Much attention is also paid to the right dosage by supplying tables and histograms based on comparative potency of the principal hallucinogenic *Psilocybes*.

The book has a literature list that is updated to 1996. It largely covers the relevant publications on the subject. This 12 page list is wrongly called "Works cited", because many a paper is not mentioned in the text.

Summarising it can be said that Stamets' book is by far the best and most complete guide to psilocybin mushrooms. Even if one is only mycologically interested in the genus *Psilocybe*, the purchase is still warmly recommended. Considering the quality and quantity of the information provided, the price of the book is really low.

Tjakko Stijve

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Czech Mycology, published by the Czech Scientific Society for Mycology. Graphic design by B. Bednář, PISCES. Typeset by T<sub>E</sub>X. Printed by Čihák Press, Praha 10. Distributed by the Czech Scientific Society for Mycology, P.O.Box 106, 111 21 Praha 1, and Kubon & Sagner, P.O.Box 340108, 80328 München, Germany. Annual subscription: Vol. 50, 1997 (4 issues), US \$ 86,-, DM 136,-

Podávání novinových zásilek povoleno Ředitelstvím pošt Praha čj. NP 105/1994 ze dne 4. 2. 1994.