

# Mushrooms, Truffles, Wild Boars, and Chestnuts

The Apennine mountains are the backbone of Italy, literally and figuratively. While summer in Italy means plunging into the sea, sunbathing on the sand, whale cruising, or fishing in the ocean, there is an older, harder way of life in the interior. The Partisans were able to hide away in the mountains, sometimes in caves, coming out to bushwhack their enemies, for example along the 40th parallel in Val di Serchio. Nowadays, pioneers young and old live in the same stone houses, many of which have survived earthquakes and other disasters. These people still know how to find their living on the land.

Modern society, in between its fixation on depressing news about viruses, politics, and wars, turns back to nature partly out of nostalgia. However, in Covid-time the Apennines have definitely re-gained their appeal. Avoiding other people and breathing fresh air take on new meaning this year! Yet in the past, every year, city dwellers travelled to the countryside to partake of its bounty. Usually we can enjoy sagras, those open-air festivals dedicated to the products of the land – but not this year. So those who have cars or friends with cars, and sometimes children who need to be liberated from their cell phones and video-games, head to the hills to experience just a bit of how our grandparents once lived.

When I first lived in Lucca (in the town center), I adopted a rescue dog. The elderly men in town often admired Teo, saying he was a truffle dog, a race known in Italy as *Lagotto Romagnolo*. He had curly fur and a good nose. So I took him to a truffle sagra south of Siena to test his capacities. But he didn't much like tasting truffles. With my children, we took Teo exploring in the woods nearby, but he showed no truffle hunting propensities. Teo physically resembled the dog made famous by Peter Mayle in his book *A Year in Provence*, but he seemed to prefer city life.

There are risks involved in foraging in the forest. If you wear the wrong shoes, you may slip into a ravine. If you forget your rain parka, you may end up soaked and miserable. If you keep your eyes to the ground, you may lose your way in the forest. If you don't wear gloves, you may poke yourself with the chestnuts' sharp outer husks. If



*Lepiota cristata*, false Mazza di tamburo (poisonous). Compare to the one on the Grapevine cover....

dropping a quarter, 25 cents, in the boiling water. If the quarter turned black, it meant the mushrooms were poisonous. At least they thought so until someone got sick and died....) And, to be a bit less dramatic, who hasn't burned their fingers on chestnuts roasted over an open fire! Yet all these activities were once necessary for survival, not only beautiful and inviting.

Recently in Rome, some wild boars invaded a city playground. The Roman mothers seemed glad to see the hunters who came to shoot the boars. Then the children could return to their fresh-air escape from Covid isolation!

By the way, did you notice the news reportage about raccoons on the White House lawn in Washington, D. C.? When mankind is driven back by virus, nature regains its ownership of the land.

– by Norma Jean Bishop



Seen at night: *Coprinus comatus*? – poisonous if consumed with alcoholic beverages!



Moreccio, a type of porcino

you go into the woods on hunting days (this year, from October through December on Mondays and Thursdays), you may get shot. On other days, you may run into a boar (*cinghiale*). Don't ever get between mother boar and her young or she'll get very angry....

Coming out of the woods, there are other perils. The authorities may stop you and ask for your mushroom or truffle gathering permit, and they will check that you don't exceed the legal limits. If you wander onto private land, you may meet an angry farmer or even a mad dog.... If you go equipped with plastic bags instead of a proper container, like the basket shown here (photo right), you may get fined. If you gather poison mushrooms along with edible ones, you can end up sick or even dead! (My mother used to talk about the Italian mushroom gatherers in New Jersey. They tested whether these were poisonous by



Apples in a basket

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

– by Robert Frost