

Friedberg fellowship, Fall 2016

The Friedberg fellowship provided me with the means to study the mushrooming culture in the Rhône-Alpes region of France. Pursuing my French major, I spent the fall semester of 2016 living and studying in Grenoble, France. During this time I visited a number of popular mushrooming sites where I encountered mushroom enthusiasts as well as a few members of mycological clubs. These outings, and the people they introduced me to, taught me the ins and outs of mushrooming in France. I learned about when and where to pick mushrooms, how to spot and identify mushrooms, and how to pick, clean, and sort mushrooms. That being said, after many hours in the forest, I learned how to identify only a handful of edible mushrooms. This is because edible mushroom identification is no easy task. Not only are mushrooms hard to spot, but among the thousands of species of mushrooms in France, and only a few hundred are edible. The rest are either poisonous or too bitter.

My study of the artisanal mushroom culture in the Rhône-Alpes region also took me to a number of open-air markets where wild mushrooms are sold. At these culinary bazaars, I had the opportunity to interact with vendors as well as sample the best fungi the region has to offer. In October, under the guidance of my host-mother, I purchased a half-kilo of “les trompettes de la mort” (translates to “trumpets of death”) at the market nearest to my home. Despite its morbid name, this mushroom is edible and delicious! Having attended a cooking class in which I learned how to clean and prepare similar mushrooms, I then prepared a mushroom dish for my host family. As far as I know everyone loved it!

With the Friedberg fellowship I was able to study and participate in one of France's most popular pastimes, mushrooming. I learned a lot about what makes this "hobby" so special, and why people will go to great lengths, like trekking miles through mud and briars, to get their hands on something that might kill them. As I see it, mushrooming itself is far more than filling baskets with tasty fungus. Mushrooming is an experience with a peculiar allure, following, and culture. For instance, the French are CRAZY about mushrooms, but you would never know it. This is because everyone has their own secret spot which they share with no one. I once asked a man where he goes to pick his mushrooms, and he told me that he would tell me, but that he would then have to kill me.

Mushrooming is not for everyone. It is reserved only for those who are not afraid to get their hands dirty, to take risks (people really do die from eating poisonous mushrooms). Those who do venture out into the woods are as bizarre as the mushrooms they pick. To conclude, I am deeply appreciative of the generosity of Dr. Friedberg. Not only has his fellowship sated my intellectual hunger for mushrooms and the culture they engender, but it has led me to appreciate some cold, wet weather.



des trompettes de la mort