

AS MAD AS A MARCH.....MUSHROOM!

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Whenever I find myself in a different country I am naturally interested in the various species of fungi that can be found there.

During the late 1990's whilst in Barcelona, Spain I remember purchasing a magazine called *Setas y Plantas*, (Mushrooms and Plants). There I read about a particular fungus that could be found in spring among pine trees called *Hygrophorus marzuolus*, commonly known as Seta de Marzo (= March Fungus).

Unfortunately I had no opportunity to scour the pine woods of Catalunya and therefore didn't actually collect this interesting fungus during my stay there. But in Barcelona, just off Las Ramblas, there is a large food market called La Boqueria and tucked away at the back was a small stall called Frutos del Bosque ('fruits of the woods'). During spring they have *Hygrophorus marzuolus*, as it is a highly prized edible fungus. I asked the owner where they had come from and he replied "...somewhere in the Pyrenees, the local villagers collect them". So I did actually get to see it, but not as I would have liked to, growing in the wild.

H. marzuolus was first known to Micheli (1729); he simply called it Fungo Marzuolo. This was in the era of descriptive names, before Linnaeus had introduced the binomial system. Fries (1821) then went on to formally name it as *Agaricus marzuolus*, but only knew it from Micheli's illustration and description. Bresadola (1893) assigned it to *Hygrophorus* where it has remained ever since. In Italy it also has another common name "Fungo dormiente" according to Fenaroli (1984), or 'The Sleeping Mushroom', because it beds down so deep in the litter.

H. marzuolus is a fairly robust fungus almost exclusively found growing in association with various species of *Pinus*. It is described as having a pale grey to dark brown

cap which is often lobed and wavy, white to greyish gills, and a solid white stalk usually with a grey snake-like pattern at the apex. It can appear as early as February and as late as June, depending on when there is sufficient moisture. This is typically during March and April in the mountains when the snows melt. Hesler and Smith (1963) also comment upon an Idaho collection made by A. H. Smith in June close to snow. It can also be found in North Africa and other parts of southern Europe, but its distribution is insufficiently known. Courtecuisse (1999) states that it is "rare everywhere", but interestingly also mentions it as associated with deciduous as well as coniferous trees "on calcareous soils", remarks that do not apply to the situation in the Madrid area (see below).

As this fungus has so far not been recorded from Great Britain and Ireland, I thought I would try to seek it out when visiting Patricia and David Hawksworth during April 2004 in Mataelpino. This is in the Sierra de Guadarrama, about 50 km north of Madrid, where there are extensive areas of *Pinus sylvestris*, some of which are many centuries old, a prime habitat for the 'Seta de Marzo'.

Following one of the Madrid Mycological Society's weekly meetings, we all went along afterwards for a celebratory drink at a local cider house. During these festivities we got chatting with Amparo Amann, a key member of the Madrid Mycological Society, who told us she had collected *Hygrophorus marzuolus* the previous Friday. She then went on to tell us of her favourite way of cooking this fungus, complementing its aroma with prawns and cuttlefish. We also noted that Rodríguez & González (2003) had a recipe featuring almonds and fish.

The very next day we all headed off into the Sierra de Guadarrama and explored an area just north of the village of Navacerrada, called 'La Barranca', which is around 1500

m above sea level and known to be good for fungi in general. About seven minutes from the Hawksworths' home, the valley has some of the oldest pine trees in the area, while the village is listed as one of the key sites for *H. marzuolus* in Paco Calogne's *Setas de Madrid* (Calogne, 2003).

Once into the forest, which consisted mainly of *Pinus sylvestris*, we crossed a small river, and it wasn't long before I spotted our first specimens of *H. marzuolus*. Exploding up through the loose soil around the pines were four or five beautiful specimens. We had been told that they are hard to find as they tend to rise up beneath patches of moss, but these were just bursting through the soil and plant litter. As we walked on this warning began to make sense as the forest floor became carpeted with moss, but we still managed to spot the rising mounds being driven up by this incredible fungus, I was a happy man.

We collected enough specimens (2 kg) to include as a starter dish forming part of a three course meal we were preparing for the visit of the esteemed Spanish mycologists Gabriel Moreno and Michel Heykoop the following day. A few had entirely white gills and also an almost pure white cap (with a little greyish area at one side, if at all). A white variety of this species, var. *albus*, was once described from France (Pouchet, 1939), but our field observations suggest that white morphs are part of the natural within-population variation. The lower part of the stalk of one specimen turned yellow immediately after being brushed and cleaned of adhering soil. Gabriel Moreno suggested this was most likely due to a bacterium. This species has a fairly strong floral smell, although we didn't actually notice this in the field, only later after we had cleaned and cut

them up.

For the starter dish the mushrooms were simply kept whole, brushed with olive oil, coated with garlic and then sprinkled with salt and pepper and placed in the oven, gills up. When cooked they were garnished with the sautéed prawns (see fig. 2). To our surprise, we found our guests had never eaten this delicious species before. The verdict, "Muy Bueno!"

References

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Hygrophorus marzuolus bursting through the pine needle litter in the Sierra de Guadarrama, about 50 km north of Madrid. Photograph © Andy Overall.



A dish of entire *Hygrophorus marzuolus* oven baked with garlic and olive oil and with a garnish of prawns. Photograph © Andy Overall.