

Mad About Mushrooms

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Ленин – гриб: Lenin is a mushroom

☒What's the best thing about a week of pretty much nonstop rain in September? Well, if you've held out at the dacha, when the rain lets up, you can go mushroom hunting (ходить по грибы) and score a huge, perfect cepе (белый гриб) right in your own backyard.

It goes like this: Your neighbor comes over and demands: Дай нож! (Give me a knife!), which in other months and circumstances might sound alarming, but on a damp fall day means that he wants to scavenge in your garden for edible fungi. Carrying supermarket bags instead of the traditional кузов (birch bark basket), eyes to the ground and knife at the ready, you and your грибники (mushroom hunters) begin to circle slowly around the yard, delicately nudging grass and shrubs to the side while scolding the excited dogs, who are racing around and potentially trampling dinner.

Lest you think too highly of my mushroom-hunting abilities, I must confess that I'm like a truffle pig with a stuffed-up nose. That is, I can spot mushrooms, but since I can't identify

them with any certainty, I just stand stock-still and shout Гриб! (Mushroom!) and wait for an experienced hunter-gatherer to make the call.

Sometimes it's a good call, and I can savor the thought of soup and enjoy the expressive names: опёнок (honey mushroom, named for the пенёк — stump — it grows by); груздь (milk mushroom); чёрный груздь or чернушка (ugly milk cap); сыроежка (Russula; literally, "eaten raw"); лисичка (chanterelle); маслёнок (slippery jack or butter mushroom); подберёзовик (birch bolete; literally, "under the birch"); подосиновик (boletus, literally "under the aspen"); and белый (porcini or cepе).

The poisonous ones that I point out with the same enthusiasm are usually just dismissed as плохой гриб (bad mushroom), although sometimes my friends will clarify them as мухомор (fly agaric) or поганка (toadstool). At one point, we paused nostalgically by a patch of gray-brown mushrooms on long, delicate stems — псилоциба (psilocybin). Sighing that we no longer had any interest in hallucinogenic mushrooms, we moved on.

Part of the ritual as we fill up our sacks is entertaining me with Russian mushroom expressions. Грибов объесться (literally, "to eat your fill of mushrooms") means to go crazy — an expression recalled by those hallucinogenic mushrooms. Of course, we quoted дети растут как грибы после дождя (children are sprouting up like mushrooms after a rain), and без счастья и гриба не найдешь (without luck you can't find a mushroom — that is, skills aren't enough). And my all-time favorite: назвался груздём, полезай в кузов (if you call yourself a milk mushroom, jump in the basket) — that is, if you say you can do something, keep your promise and do it.

Then someone recalled that masterpiece of absurdist television: Ленин — гриб (Lenin is a mushroom). On a show aired in 1991, the musician Sergei Kuryokhin spun out pseudo-scientific and fake scholarly evidence proving that after decades of eating mushrooms, Lenin had turned into one. The next day, a delegation of apparently humorless old Bolsheviks went to the Party headquarters and asked: Правда, что Ленин — гриб? (Is it true that Lenin was a mushroom?) The flustered Party worker replied: Нет! Потому что млекопитающее не может быть растением! (No! Because a mammal can't be a plant!)

Chuckling, muddy, and happily hefting our bags, we finished our hunt. We had gathered more than a kilogram of mushrooms in an hour, without even leaving our yards.

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