



SACRED JOURNEYS: BURIED TREASURE

By Catherine Ann Lombard

During the first week of autumn while living in Italy, I realized how much my life had changed.

Signora Maria was partly to thank for this revelation, for it was she who invited me to venture into the *bosco* (forest) with her to search for *funghi* (mushrooms).

That morning, Signora Maria arrived at my gate promptly at 8 a.m., equipped with basket, knife, and rain parka despite the wide azure sky and early morning sunshine. In her early 60s, Signora Maria is elf-like with a quick step and a thin mouth drawn in a perpetual frown. She is known for her long walks alone into the forest and for her huge field

outside the village, where she grows vegetables and raises 40 chickens, geese, and a battalion of ducks.

I, too, was prepared with basket, knife, and parka, having earlier asked Signora Maria what I needed for our expedition. Being a bit nearsighted, I also had my glasses tucked in my basket. We started down the gravel road and headed into the valley floor when suddenly Signora Maria rushed up the embankment.

“This is where we can find *galletti*,” she said, staggering around as if suddenly drunk. “Look for the color yellow.” Soon Signora Maria was scraping the overcoat of leaves



A mushroom-hunting excursion in the Italian countryside culminates in so much more than a gourmet meal.

on the ground with her knife and plucking toadstools of creamy yellow from the earth. "Galletti," she said, handing me two for my basket. "They are called *galletti* (little chickens) because of their color."

I uncovered a yellow mushroom and hesitated. Every week the local newspapers ran a story of how someone had died instantly from eating a poisonous mushroom collected on such an outing. "Signora," I called. "Is this one good?"

"Yes, yes," she replied, only glancing at it. She was excited now, running from spot to spot uncovering the *galletti*. "You don't have to worry. I collect only mushrooms I know,"

she assured me. "I've been collecting for 40 years. If I don't know it, I don't touch it." She kept plucking more from what seemed like thin air.

Farther down the road, we rounded a bend and quickly slipped into the forest. Under the tall pine, cedar, chestnut, and oak trees, the crisp air suddenly turned warm. We headed up a worn path covered in fallen leaves. Tiny anemones decorated the forest floor in patches of purple, giving the dark woods an enchanting quality.

Signora Maria forged ahead, talking the entire time. Every so often, she would turn and say, "Hai capito, Caterì?



“Do you understand?” and I’d have to ask her to repeat herself. Patiently, she’d boil down her dialect into a meager sentence. “Some people are afraid of the woods, but not me,” she shared. “I saw wild boar once, but really they are more frightened of people than we are of them.”

Into the Woods

We veered from the path and started climbing. “This is the porcini zone,” she announced, waving a hand in the air. She seemed to know the forest like most of us know our neighborhood supermarket. “But we are too late for porcini. Besides, there’s been too much rain this summer. Still, we might find some. Look for the color brown.”

Even with my glasses, I knew brown mushrooms would only elude me in the blanket of rotten leaves covering the ground. What I could clearly discern poking out of the darkness were delicate round mushrooms of velvety lilac, squat fat ones of bright rust, and tall willowy ones of fire orange. I didn’t dare touch any unless instructed. Signora Maria picked out one of the rust-colored ones and said, “The people from the next town eat these. But I don’t know it, so *ba* ...” and flung it over her shoulder.

Suddenly we were enveloped in the loud music from the fish truck that came to the village at 9 a.m. every Friday. The fishman always announced his arrival with music from old Sophia Loren movies; a Salerno polka now wailed across the valley. *What am I doing stomping around this forest when I could just go buy a nice piece of fish for supper?* I wondered. But Signora Maria was now urging me higher up the steep hillside. “Be careful,” she warned. “This can be slippery. Start looking for white, fat mushrooms.”

A flash of white suddenly caught my eye and I called Signora Maria over. “*Si, si! Brava!*” she said, cutting it from

the earth. “They’re *grasselli* (little fat ones). You see the fat stem? There are more up here.” By now I had no idea where in the forest I was, having followed Signora Maria, for the most part, with my head bowed in search for the brown, yellow, and white buried treasures. Left with no choice but to follow her as she flew up the hill, I trudged behind.

“Cater! *Vieni qua!* Come here!” My basket was beginning to feel heavy now as I shifted it from arm to arm. I caught a glimpse of the signora through the woods and found my way to where she was standing, holding a beige-colored mushroom resembling coral. “*Manine*,” she said, and I repeated the word that means “little hands.”

Up, up, up she climbed, zigzagging along the way, making certain to examine the entire forest floor. *Don’t we have enough mushrooms for a tomato sauce by now?* I wondered, tired of foraging so aggressively. *Can’t we just go home?*

More *Funghi* Finds

At the summit, the forest floor flattened. Exhausted, I sat down. Signora Maria pulled two sandwiches from her jacket pocket and handed me one. I was touched by how she had thought of me and gratefully bit into the salty pecorino cheese and hard bread. Above us, a half-moon grinned in the crystal sky and church bells filtered down to us. It was 10 a.m. and our baskets were easily half-full. Somewhat revived by the sandwich, I struggled to my feet.

Signora Maria didn’t stop moving or talking as she ate, twittering around like a robin in search of a worm. Whenever she found a mushroom, she’d hand it to me. In her basket sat a brown mushroom the size of a dessert plate. “It’s good roasted. Take it,” she urged, but I refused. She insisted, and I refused again. After all, she had already given me most of what filled my basket.





We then returned to the depths of the forest. On the way down, one of the coral mushrooms caught my eye. "Signora, is this one good?" I asked dutifully before picking it.

"*Si! Brava!*" she responded. "See how anyone can learn to find mushrooms?"

I then strolled as best I could on the steep hillside, simply enjoying being in such a special place and observing the many varieties of mushrooms. I thought about my great-grandparents from the south of Italy and wondered if my grandmothers had wandered in their nearby oak forest, basket in hand, hoping to find mushrooms for their *sugo*.

Finally, we reemerged onto the road and into the sunlight. Nearly dizzy, I had to reorient myself. We had come out of the forest much farther down the road than I had imagined. Eventually, we arrived back at my house and Signora Maria took my basket. Gently, she removed each mushroom, carefully examining it. In the end, she tossed aside one tiny white one that she was uncertain about.

"You can eat these with tranquility," she said, handing the basket back. "Take a knife and scrape the flecks of dirt away, wash them, let them dry, and put them in the refrigerator." She used the knife in the basket to demonstrate. I copied her and, as I scraped the stem of a *grassello*, the earthy smell of the forest filled my nose.

Musing on the Metaphors

Later, upon reflecting, I was struck by how much our mushroom-hunting journey had mirrored my own search for myself. All the dark forest paths I had taken—some full of natural beauty, others frightening, all clearly

necessary—had inevitably turned me back to my own story, my own truth.

While searching for myself, I had also experienced resistance, fatigue, nearsightedness, and bouts of laziness. Resistance to accepting events I could not change and the parts of myself (especially my suffering!) that had accompanied me for so long that I feared who might emerge without them. Fatigue as I climbed my own spiritual mountain, panting and sweating, to glimpse the love that holds us all. Nearsightedness in not recognizing the light and beauty within myself and all around me, including in those who had inflicted harm. And my eternal battle with laziness—ready at all times to flop onto the couch and watch reruns or spend the day reading glossy magazines—any distraction from the spiritual work of becoming truly me!

But thankfully, a "Signora Maria" always seemed to come to my aid, pointing me in the right direction, filling my basket, and providing some kind of nourishment along the way: Kikuchi-sensei, my Japanese tea ceremony teacher, who taught me that even the most insignificant object must be esteemed as having immense value; St. Francis of Assisi, who has called us to establish peace in every aspect of our lives; and the few precious friends, like my husband, who have provided comfort and emotional support during the darkest of nights.

With gratitude to all my teachers—friend and enemy alike—my soul seemed to reflect those *funghi* once buried in the darkness of the forest floor only to emerge miraculously into the autumn light. For I, too, had managed to survive, even somehow thrive, under all the muck and dead leaves of my own life story to finally reappear as whole. ☺

