

MushRumors

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Mushroom of the Month:
Boletus aguacatus (Ovorp)
nom. prov. By Buck McAdoo

Photo by Buch McAdoo



It is not very often that one finds a new bolete in Section Mirabiles. While the nodulose cap surface and the smooth stipe without reticulations indicate that this is where *Boletus aguacatus* belongs, we may never now for sure. In this case the story of the discovery of this hauntingly familiar Boletus may be stranger than the Boletus itself.

The whole episode started when I heard a sharp rap on the door of my study on the sixth floor of the Herald Building. It was late on a Wednesday afternoon in late November when not even a journalist would be wandering down the corridor.

The door opened before I could reach it, and a questioning face peered in.

“Buck McAdoo? Have I got the right place?” I was asked.

A most peculiar sort of fellow edged in. Large and a bit fleshy, he had short brown hair so sharply cropped at the temples that it looked sculpted in stone. The hair came to a point at the forehead with two lesser points above the ears. Sort of a Batman style only broken up by an absurd earring that looked at first like a mother-of-pearl paper clip dangling from the left lobe.

“Tangent Ovorp,” he announced, “I’m a taxonomist.”

We shook hands. The faint but pungent odor of tea tree oil wafted up from his lower extremities.

“How did you find me?” I asked.

Turned out that he had found a copy of an old NAMA membership list. For the Bellingham area, only Fred Rhoades and I were listed as people to consult in case of a mushroom poisoning. Figuring that we must be the local mushroom gurus, he had flipped a coin and come here. I was beginning to wonder what the result might have been if the coin toss had gone the other way when a yelp interrupted the reverie.

“Aha!” he seized, “You have the British Check List, I see.”

Indeed I did. I had it open on my desk to check out the latest synonym list for *Mycena galericulata*, a taxon that had fooled me in the field that very morning. Misery loves company. It always brought me up to see that others had missed it, too. The Check List was an important work listing all the species found in Britain with lists

of synonyms and misapplied names in italics below each accepted mushroom name. It was even helpful in the Pacific Northwest.

My new visitor now marched over to the volume, flipped a few pages, nodding appreciatively.

“I follow Ricken,” he said.

“Adalbert Ricken, the German priest?” I asked.

“Very prolific. Man of the cloth,” he verified. “He must have had the greatest herbarium of his time. Just look in these pages. You find him everywhere.”

Indeed one did, I surmised. More than any other mycologist, his name cropped up after the dreaded ‘mis.:’, an abbreviation for ‘misapplied’. It implied that Ricken had got the identification wrong. Of course, he might have been right for his time. Subsequent discoveries may have caused some of it. Still, it was disconcerting to see the ‘sensu Rickens’ all over the pages, and I had been subconsciously looking for explanations.

“Stature,” coughed Tangent, “Ricken had stature. Sure, in the beginning he got some of them wrong, but he never gave up. Towards the end of his career he was hitting on all cylinders!”

Well, that did it for me. I decided right there to ask him what he wanted.

“I’m up here to look for roof top *Galerinas* and late season *Pholiotas*,” he grinned.

He explained that moss covered roofs and leaf-clogged gutters were good places for *Galerinas*. Since most folks didn’t clean their gutters in November, it was a great substrate for potential new ones. As for *Pholiotas*, the places to look for those were nurseries that were shut down for the season. Both habitats would require some ingenuity. Yours truly, of course, was expected to lead him to both.

“Peck, Murrill, Singer, Smith.... all the great ones,” he was droning on, “They all collected in the Pacific Northwest but none remained in November when the weather turned bad. The result? Most of the late season stuff has never been named. Enter Tangent Ovorp.” And he gave a little bow.

I stared up at him with an eye half cocked.

“Have you checked in with Don?” I wondered.

Don, of course, was our world class mycologist down in Seattle. Whenever a taxonomist was visiting the area, the protocol was to inform Don first. Everyone gained. Don would learn that the visitor would not be sniffing around his genus, and the visitor would be taken care of. Maybe a lunch. Most likely a foray with a top amateur leading him on it. Tangent Ovorp had jumped the protocol.

“Oh, Don?” yawned Tangent, “Not this time. He wouldn’t go to my lecture on *Tephroclybe* of the North Central Tetons five years ago in Tacoma.”

“Well, maybe Don doesn’t believe in *Tephroclybe*. Some don’t, you know,” I shrugged. “Just think about it. Would you drive for 45 minutes through some of the worst traffic in the northwest to see a genus you didn’t acknowledge existed?”

I was expecting some sort of witty response. Instead, my visitor turned rigid. He stared icily into the distance, a vein beginning to throb at the sculpted hairline of his right temple. I realized I had to move on... quickly.

“Maybe he just got stuck in the traffic,” I suggested.

“I got the point,” Tangent recovered, “No further excursions in that direction.”

We agreed to meet at nine the next day, at the Koye Café on the corner. Tangent made an about face and trudged down the corridor. Tangent Ovorp. The name was somehow familiar, but I just couldn’t pull it up.

On the ride out the next day to the first of several deserted nurseries I learned a little more about Tangent. He had grown up in Brigham City, Utah. This was not exactly a world heritage site for the fungi. He had first encountered mushrooms on a family picnic to Antelope Island when he was just 14. It’s an island about nine miles offshore in the Great Salt Lake. It’s a place where the antelope still play and the buffalo still roam, and if you go to a place called Mushroom Springs, you can still find the giant *Agaricus osecanus* fruiting near the buffalo dung. Later, he told me, he found more fungi in a park in Brigham City when the lawns were sprinkled there.

“I was only 22 when they took my eldership away,” he grimaced, “It was the beginning of a downward spiral for me.”

It turned out that he had been spotted by a temple leader dashing between the sprinklers to pick the mushrooms. ‘Prancing Among the Fairy Rings’ had been the headline in the local paper. Followers of the Latter Day

Saints do not indulge in that kind of behavior, and Tangent had been made an example of.

His wife left him shortly after.

“She just couldn’t take it anymore. I just couldn’t stop looking for mushrooms and folks were crossing the street to avoid her. But before she left, she gave me this parting gift.”

Tangent then pointed to his earring, a subject I had been trying to avoid all along. A closer glance revealed a whitish rectangular shape with a concave interior. On the top was a little golden knob, roughly fusoid-ventricose, if you know what I mean. The rest was white porcelain with a mother-of-pearl glaze.

“It’s a urinal,” muttered Tangent, “The classical kind, like they have in Grand Central Station.”

“Are there two of them?” I inquired. I had no idea what to say.

“Nope. Just the one,” he nodded, “My ex said that whoever guessed what it was on the first guess would get to be my next wife.”

“Any luck with that?” I offered.

“Been twelve years and no girl has ever come close.”

“But many have tried,” I suggested.

“That is correct. Mormon women don’t want to stay single for long. Been very frustrating for some of them.”

He had been told that the only way he could get his eldership back would be to volunteer for a number of missionary expeditions. He had volunteered for many such missions and had picked up the language each time. It turned out that he was a natural linguist. Even if he was not on a mission, he could pick up jobs as an interpreter wherever he forayed.

“I’ve authored new species in eleven languages,” he smiled at me.

He figured it was the greatest advantage he had over other mycologists.

By now we had pulled into the parking lot of the second nursery on our list. The first had been locked solid. Ovorp spotted a pair of *Pholiota spumosa* even before the car had braked. He was on hands and knees in front of them, poking at the earth around them with a pocket knife, even before I arrived.

“*Pholiota spumosa*”, I announced, “Probably our most common November *Pholiota*.”

“Not so,” disagreed Ovorp, “That species fruits on wood according to Smith and Hesler, or if on soil, it has to be coniferous soil.”

The specimens were about ten feet out on a lawn, no wood or conifers nearby.

“Could be buried wood,” I suggested, “Could be coming off a dead tree root a foot down or more.”

“Do you see wood? Do you see a neighboring conifer?” he chided, “This is a new variety, and if the micro characters don’t match *Pholiota spumosa*, it’s likely a new species.”

He carefully prodded up a stem base. There was no wood chip at the end of it.

“See,” he grinned in triumph, “Meet the *var. graminicola*, if all goes well in the lab.”

I was too taken aback for speech. Here was a fungus I thought I had known like the back of my hand.

We edged beyond an unlocked fence gate and were soon near the center of the nursery. Here stood a large wooden box overflowing with compost. Tangent was not more than five feet away from it when he let loose a startled cry.

“Oh, my God!” he shouted, “Take a look at this here bolete!”

There at our feet sat a pair of glistening maroon caps emerging through the spruce duff.

“Forget the *Galerinas*! Forget the *Pholiotas*!” bellowed Tangent, “A new member of Section *Mirabiles* may arrive once in a century.”

And suddenly I remembered who this was. Tangent Ovorp. There had been mutterings at Key Council meetings. I remembered one professional saying that he couldn’t be trusted. ‘If the fungus blushes, it’s a new one.’ Another mycologist at the table had called him a ‘Shotgun Mycologist’.

“If he names everything he sees, he’s bound to get a few new ones,” he had sighed.

By now Tangent was digging up the specimens and easing them onto tin foil. All he could say was “Oh, man. Oh, man” as he lurched to the car with his prize. I could see that collecting was done for the day.

Back at my office I was treated to a rare privilege... the witnessing of a type description composed right on my desk. ‘Caps 5-6 ½ cm. wide’, I was reading, ‘subnodulose to uniformly pitted. Obtusely campanulate, tough, coriaceous, dark maroon with mottled dark green tinges near the margins. Margins naked, not incurved. Context

thick, pale yellow becoming ore green at margins. Pores distant, about one mm. in width. Dissepiments casual. No immediate change of color upon bruising.’

Here, Ovorp paused in mid sentence.

“We’ll have to observe what happens over time,” he cautioned me.

‘Stipe smooth, napiform’, he continued writing, ‘Velar material represented by random pale yellow patches near apex. Stem dark tawny brown with pallid zone at base. One thick, grayish mycelial strand extending from base (magnifying glass). Odor none. Taste mild, even pleasant. Spore deposit.....’

“We’ll have to wait on that, too, “ he solemnly intoned.

Tangent duly jotted down the habitat and told me he had to get moving to get this under wraps. Who knows? Some other mycologist may be racing him to publication.

“But what about the microscopic details?” I asked.

“That’ll come later, my good man. I only work with dried material.”

He carefully shunted the specimens back onto the tin foil.

“Do you think it’s mycorrhizal with spruce”, I ventured.

“Could be,” he quipped, “You saw the rhizomorph as well as I did.”

Suddenly, he was almost out the door. I realized I might not see Ovorp again for awhile.

“So, what’s next?” I shouted at the departing figure.

“University of Uzbekistan. The herbarium there. They house everything I bring them.”

A year passed. I heard nothing more from Tangent Ovorp, and nothing about the proposed *Boletus aguacatus* in the literature. Just on a whim, I decided to e-mail Dr. John Horribull. He was the only expert who had ever dared publish with Ovorp. He was bound to know something, one way or another.

‘That odd bolete with the chartreuse pore surface?’ he e-mailed back. ‘I don’t really know what happened. Some awful accident in the dehydrator. Totally unforeseen. He says he’s going to try for another one, but not until he gets a better dehydrator.’

P.S. Poisson d’avril

Mystery Russula **Challenged**

By Buck McAdoo

Our December mushroom of the month, *Russula parazurea* var. *ochrospora*, has been challenged by Greg Hovander, a *Russula* expert in the Key Council with strong local roots (think Hovander Park).

He’s a good friend of mine, so I sort of asked for it by sending him a copy of the article. What we found instead, he contends, is *Russula olivacea* var. *igorii* Hovander nom.

prov. This ‘nom. prov.’ means that it is a provisional name and not yet published. It was named after Igor Malchevski of the Snohomish Club who once gave us a fine lecture on east coast fungi. It turns out that Igor didn’t

photo by Dan Digerness



find it. The *Russula* just showed up at the Snohomish Club's fall show last year.

But Greg analyzed it and came up with nine differences between his *var. igorii* and our rendition of *Russula parazurea var. ochrospora*. I have sent him an email rejecting six of those differences or at least questioning some of them, but three are legitimate differences. The first is that *Russula parazurea var. ochrospora* never has a pinkish tint on the stem, but *Russula olivacea var. igorii* does. The second is that stipes of *R. parazurea var. ochrospora* are always shorter in relation to cap width. They don't extend beyond 7½ cm. long where as the stems of *Russula olivacea var. igorii* reach 9 ½ to 10 cm. in length. But the most important difference is spore ornamentation. Neither Ben Woo nor Greg found reticulations between the spines on the spores. Ben thought it might be due to adjustments on his microscope, but Greg arrived at the same conclusion with a microscope that was working. The problem is, of course, is that *Russula parazurea var. ochrospora* has totally reticulate spores. And this is enough of a reason to separate them right there, in my opinion.

One of the trials we face in *Russula* is that so many of them look alike that we need to find as many characters as we can to identify them. Spore ornamentation is one of the main characters used. This is not helpful for forays when we want to name the species in the field. We want to be able to write down '*Russula emetica*' when what we really might have is *Russula silvicola* or *Russula americana*, two other red capped *Russulas* with white spores and acrid taste. To separate them you need to consult the microscope, and this might be how spore ornamentation rose to such importance. However, once you have dug out all the characters, the relative importance you give to each character is arbitrary. Other researchers might place more value on cap color and spore color than on spore ornamentation. Such a tendency might lead to lumping with *Russula silvicola* and *R. americana* becoming synonyms of *Russula emetica*. It all depends on how you look at it, thus introducing the human element into the identification process. So far, the best way to solve the human factors is by DNA sequencing, and I have no idea whether *Russula* has undergone this sort of scrutiny yet.

Meanwhile, all we can do is await more information from Greg and discover why the species is attached to *Russula olivacea* instead of some other taxon. We might even discover who found it and where.