

There are so many mushrooms that I've never seen growing around here: Matsutaki, hedge hogs, giant chanterelles – the list goes on. No, they don't grow around here and I haven't been to where they do grow (yet). However, *Volvariella bombycina* does grow right around here, especially on the islands and floodplain of the Mississippi in ancient river–willows and maples, and it's always a joy to find!



*Volvariella bombycina*, commonly known as the silky sheath, silky rosegill or silver–silk straw mushroom, is one of this area's most beautiful mushrooms by any name. It can also be a really tasty mushroom to eat. I'll call it silky V.

I find silky V most years. This year I found it at two different times and places in the same woods, though the first time it was high in a river willow and much too old. Actually the second time my wife Sally found it emerging at eye level in its sheath like a big goose egg on a dead willow. I'd only seen pictures of it in that form but I knew right away what it was. As proof there was a beautiful mature cap with crimson gills high in the same tree. I knew that cap had spread billions of spores through the woods and far beyond so I planned to harvest the egg but not right away. I photoed the egg and returned three days later. The beautiful silky cap was just emerging so I photoed again and came back two days later.



In those two days the weather warmed, causing the mushroom to almost completely mature. It was visibly dropping spores. The gills were already pinker than I wanted because I've learned that the paler the gills are, the better tasting the mushroom. A young silky V is delicious, but its window of deliciousness passes quickly. Dark red gills like those on the mushroom up high in the tree taste gamey and bitter and silky V quickly dries in the summer or early fall warmth. It turned out that, after lightly rinsing the gills, this one was still plenty tasty sautéed with veggies and a few little oyster mushrooms that were fruiting from the same tree at the same time. It almost seemed like the oysters softened the tree up for the *Volvariella*. The one mushroom was enough for an entire entrée.



I've come to know this mushroom well, but it seems most of the experts really don't. So I started with everybody's favorite expert, Captain McIlvane. He said, "The writer has not been successful in finding it." What? Never found it?? The author of *One Thousand American Fungi*? Didn't he ever hunt on floodplains? Next I checked the mushroom bible, *Mushrooms Demystified*, but all David Arora said was, "It's easier to identify this striking mushroom than to find it ---- reportedly delicious." Arora has barely, if ever, seen these and he's never eaten them. I checked Michael Kuo's *100 Edible Fungi*, but Kuo didn't even have it listed - and he's from Illinois! Wow! I know this species better than all of those guys. Maybe being a river rat is more special than I thought. Silky V is certainly in my top twenty edible mushrooms and may well be in my top ten.

It turns out that others know a lot more about silky V than I do. I ran across a scholarly article from India titled *Proximate Analysis and Antibacterial Activity of an Edible Fungus Volvariella Bombycina*. Those folks from India know a LOT about silky V and it's all good! They found out that it has compounds that can be antibacterial. They also studied its nutritional content and found the fruiting caps contained 24.6% crude fiber and 28.3% crude protein plus only 2.7% lipids. It also had 10.9% ash, 38.9% carbohydrate and the rest moisture. They came to the conclusion that

being high in protein but low in lipids make silky V an ideal food.

Not only is it an ideal food, the authors also found that studied mushroom extracts possess compounds with antibacterial properties that can be used in new drugs, as antibacterial agents for the therapy of infectious diseases caused by pathogens. This study also recommended that the agricultural system in the India region be encouraged to domesticate this healthy food.

Considering domesticating silky V makes me also think about one little problem with this mushroom. There's too little of it! Yes I find it regularly, but I never find it abundantly. Yes one cap was all I needed for a meal, but if it had been the only cap I saw in that woods, I would have only photographed and not harvested it. Often a fruiting produces only one cap. It could very easily be harvested unsustainably if it were more sought after. Interestingly a Wikipedia post states that it's considered a protected species and picking is forbidden in Hungary. Hmmm, I sure don't want that to happen here. Okay, forget all that stuff I wrote about it being delicious. For the record, my statement is: "Probably edible but I would hesitate to try it."



Dave