
Take Me Down to Sarcodon City

By WFG

I parted the branches of an Engelmann spruce to let Mom pass through a tight spot after dragging her deep into the forest and up a steep hillside to look for porcini (*Boletus edulis*). I'm proud of my mom, for she was a trooper that day—fashioning herself a hiking stick to make up for sore legs on the trek over uneven ground, and forging onward despite the reduced availability of oxygen up high. Our take of wild porcini was decent, but in the end what got her really excited was a steep, wet and dark hillside dotted with giant hawk's wings (*Sarcodon imbricatus*).

It had been truly an amazing season for hawk's wings, and most other mushrooms besides, and the fairy ring of hawk's wings we happened upon in the woods that day was no exception—enormous, firm specimens arching gracefully around an area just a tad smaller than the size of my living room.



Hawk's wings are such beautiful mushrooms on the surface. Then you peek under the cap to see the teeth, which are neither sponge nor gills, but rather stalactite-like mushroomy protrusions.

I grabbed an air guitar and started rocking out to Guns N' Roses: "Take me down to Sarcodon City, where the grass is green and the shrooms are pretty!"

Mom was equally enthused. "I can't believe the size of these mushrooms!" she exclaimed. "And there are so many of them! Are we



Take me down to Sarcodon City, where the huckleberries are green and life is pretty.

going to take some?"

I'll admit I'd grown a bit tired of grilled Worcestershire-and-soy-sauce-marinated hawk's wings caps—though I did relish them earlier this season—and I wasn't sure I was going to feed my parents hawk's wings anyway due to the "some people get indigestion" warnings and a bit of uncertainty that seems to swirl around the brown-scaly, toothed mushrooms. But I was not inclined to disappoint.

"You're going to help me process these, right?" I asked, gathering up maybe seven specimens, each larger than two of my

hands put together. Later we sat side by side in the kitchen while I sliced and she arranged the slices on paper-covered cookie sheets to dry by the heat of the pilot light on my fake fireplace.



We gathered hawk's wings because I did not want to disappoint my mom, and now I'm very glad I did. Besides, it was easy with a helper in the kitchen.

We never did eat the hawk's wings on my parents' visit. Instead, I sent some home with Dad to hang onto until I give him the go-ahead to try them, and I came away with nearly a half-gallon of dried hawk's wings myself.

It took a few more finds and some more kitchen play after that to truly begin to appreciate *Sarcodon imbricatus*' merits, but I am now more excited than ever to experiment with my stored bounty come winter, when

the mushrooms are only a dream I think happened and I struggle to imagine them chilling down there, in mycelial form, deep under so many feet of fallen snow.

Dad's Creamy Mushroom Soup

Instead of hawk's wings, we ate a lot of porcini and puffballs on my parents' visit. One night I twisted Dad's arm to show me how to

This is a photo from a prior year, clockwise from top left: hawk's wings, porcini, one funny pink-peach Albatrellus confluens, and a pile of puffballs, all edibles collected in the Colorado high country.



make his cream of mushroom soup. I intended to watch, but then I didn't want to be underfoot while Dad was in the kitchen, so I handed off the sliced porcini and a small container of sautéed *Suillus brevipes* (short-stemmed slippery Jacks) that needed to be used. Dad said the soup is better with more than one kind of mushroom, and we had already determined that my parents are not allergic to slipperies on a previous visit when *Suillus* was the only thing fruiting.

After that, instead of watching him cook, I collapsed on the couch in front of the television. What can I say? I like playing teenager sometimes when my parents are visiting. And luckily, Dad was willing to send me the recipe.

Forty-five minutes later, he called across the long 70s bar/table that separates my living room from the kitchen and invited us to dish up the soup, which he decided to call "creamy mushroom soup" instead of "cream



With creamy Sarcodon soup on the brain, I'm keeping my eye out for the next big batch of hawk's wings. One won't cut it.

of mushroom soup," as his recipe for the latter has more cream and is "less healthy, but so good," as he put it.

The verdict was Yum! I think the soup dressed the porcini in just the right amount of richness without going overboard, and with a little salt the *Boletus* flavor came through nicely. It was good hot and fresh on its own, and also reheated as leftovers with a dollop of kefir in place of sour cream and chopped

feral chives from the nearby historic site sprinkled on top.

Later, surveying the damage after my parents left, I found cream and chicken stock still in the fridge. It got me thinking about other creamy wild mushroom soups, until one day a *Sarcodon imbricatus* fruited up from the mycelial synapses in my brain.

Hawk's wings are to date the strongest-flavored wild mushroom I've tried, so I wondered what would happen with that strong flavor in a cream soup.

Sarcodon Warnings?

But first, here are the warnings I've read and heard about *S. imbricatus*. According to Vera Stucky Evenson's



Above: Hawk's wings newly rain-kissed.

Below: In honor of my Grandma's hot sauerkraut with dried mushrooms, this uses my closet-fermented kraut plus reconstituted dried hawk's wings and venison pepperoni.

Did the cultures die when I cooked the sauerkraut? Probably. Do I care? Nope.





Larry Evans discusses every single possible mushroom one might find in the Colorado high country at the 2013 Eagle Mushroom Festival. Colorado forager Katrina Blair of Turtle Lake Refuge is smiling in the sun hat at top.

book, *Mushrooms of Colorado and the Southern Rocky Mountains* (1997), it “makes some people slightly ill,” so “only mild, young fruiting bodies should be eaten.” Vera also told me over the phone that you have to

be careful to read the description and make sure you have the right species within the genus, and to steer clear of bitter *Sarcodons*. She writes that members of the related *Sarcodon scabrosus* group (described by David Arora in *Mushrooms Demystified*, 1986, to be “unequivocally and indisputably inedible due to the awful taste”)—have “chestnut brown, less scaly caps; distinctive olive-black to dark bluish green coloration in the stalk bases; and a bitter taste.”

It would seem to me to be difficult to tell the two apart, though to this day I do not think I have found *S. scabrosus*—which Michael Kuo describes as a pine-associated Northern European species that “may or may not actually occur in North America” (MushroomExpert.com).

But Arora (1986) sets my mind at ease a bit, explaining that *S. imbricatus* is a “widely distributed toothed mushroom, fairly easily recognized by its large size, its conspicuously scaly brown cap, and the absence of greenish

stains on the stem base.” He says it “is probably the most common *Hydnum* in North America” (*Hydnum imbricatum* being the old name for *S. imbricatus*). Still, he calls *S. imbricatus* “edible, but of poor quality,” noting too that it causes indigestion in some people, and that many collections have a bitter taste.

Then, at the 2013 Eagle Mushroom Fest, Larry Evans of Fungal Jungle (www.fungaljungle.org) hinted that one would be wise to be careful with *Sarcodon*s growing under lodgepole pines, and later clarified that these are not *S. imbricatus*, “but a related species with a greenish stain at the base when older.” He emailed: “If you are cautious I believe you can easily tell this from the *Sarcodon* that grows abundantly in the spruce.”

As far as I can tell, however, that’s not to say all *Sarcodon*s under pines are necessarily bad eating.

Michael Kuo
(MushroomExpert.com)
cites DNA analysis
finds in Europe by



Above: Mom also discovered her walking stick to be useful in parting the low huckleberries to look for mushrooms.

Right: Grilled, marinated hawk's wings are good, but I can't eat them every day.





Creamy Sarcodon soup does not need to be gussied up, but if a friend gifts you peppers and lamb's quarters (Chenopodium sp.), why not? Thanks B!

Johannesson and collaborators (1999) that “*Sarcodon imbricatus* is an obligate mycorrhizal partner with spruces, while the similar *Sarcodon squamosus* associates with pines,” a study he opines would be interesting replicated on this continent with current collections labeled “*Sarcodon imbricatus*” that were found under spruces, pines, and hardwoods.

A Wikipedia write-up that also cites the Johannesson study (the full article text is available for \$31 and I did not download it) states that “For many years, *Sarcodon imbricatus* was described associated with both spruce and pine, although the latter forms were smaller and noted to be

more palatable by mushroom hunters in Norway.”

So are we dealing with more than one pine-associated *Sarcodon*? One that is palatable (in Norway, at least) and a bitter one with green stains at the base that is not? While noting the wide variation between different descriptions of *S. scabrosus* in the American literature, Kuo points out that “extensive molecular and ecological study of many well documented North American collections is obviously needed.”

And Evans wrote to me about “one further twist in the pudding,” as he called it—that “there are rather pronounced ‘flavor’ differences

between collections from the Rockies and collections from the Sierras or Cascades.

For the record, all of the *Sarcodons* I've eaten to date have had light brown teeth, no green stain at the stem base, and were found under Engelmann spruce and firs from 9,000-12,000 feet in the Colorado high country. I've eaten both young and slightly older specimens, approximately 10-15 times to date, with no ill effects.

Also, an informal poll of WFG Facebook readers revealed several who have eaten *Sarcodons* growing in lodgepole habitats, also to no ill effect, but I am not inclined to judge a mushroom on a few examples. If you have something to share on this, please by all means do so at www.facebook.com/wildfoodgirl.

In the meantime, if I find myself in the presence of nice-looking hawk's wings in a piney forest, I plan to look for the telltale green stains at the bases of mature specimens, nibble for bitterness, and not take the question of "To eat or not to eat?" lightly. But that's just me. You'll have to decide for your own self on that.

Behind the Fruitbody Ball

So I was feeling pretty good about my cream of hawk's wings soup idea, and then I met a gentleman at the Eagle festival who said he loves

cream of hawk's wings soup. (Ok, that's a good sign, even though I'd thought I'd thought it up first.) Later, when I relayed my brilliant idea to Butter, she told me she used to make cream of hawk's wings soup herself. (Of course she did.) But I decided to give it a try anyway.

The opportunity presented itself

A Cautionary Note

Just so we're on the same page, this is not an ID guide. The *Wild Edible Notebook* contains stories of my experiences with particular mushrooms and plants in a particular region. Please always cross reference my accounts with guidebooks, specifically those applicable to your region, and consult an expert if possible prior to consuming something you read about here. I'm not trying to scare you too much, but some wild mushrooms and plants are deadly poisonous, and especially in the case of plants and mushrooms with toxic lookalikes, you don't want to make a mistake. Fortunately, many do not have deadly lookalikes, so they can be learned with less risk. But you must put in the time learning them before eating something. Take responsibility for what you eat. Thanks so much! — WFG

recently when I went to check on my old mushroom spot. It's at around 11,500 feet, and though there were still no porcini to be found the day I went, I did come upon an abundant fruiting of my old friends the hawk's wings. I collected a container full of the best ones and later made dad's recipe using hawk's wings for flavor and the plentiful bright-yellow *Suillus tomentosus* to stretch the batch. I subbed white wine for the sherry because that's what I had on hand, and a fancy powdered beef broth Gregg had bought, in addition to chicken broth (which I ran out of), and a lot less of all the ingredients overall with not too much heed paid to proportions. But you get the idea.

The beef broth turned out to be a stroke of accidental genius, as hawk's wings are reportedly used in place of beef in some recipes—for example in a hawk's wing stroganoff where hawk's wings replace the meat, as described to me by the same gentleman at the Eagle Mushroom Festival.

After I finished cooking but before I blended the soup smooth, I tasted the broth and couldn't believe my own buds! It was not just good; it was fantastic. I could hardly stop myself from sampling spoonful after spoonful, and even eating a few decent-sized *Sarcodon* chunks. Did I

mention that it was very good?

The soup was still good, though very different, after I blended it and added cream. Gregg called it one of the best cream soups he's ever had, though at this point I'm not sure how good a barometer he is, what with all the "best this" and "best that" he's always leveling upon my cooking. That's another thing you're just going to have to judge for yourself.



My bowl gussied up even prettier than Gregg's.