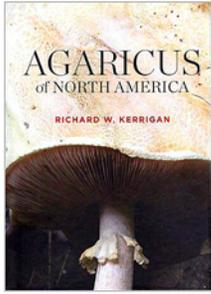


BOOK REVIEW

AGARICUS OF NORTH AMERICA

a book review by David Wasilewski



Agaricus of North America
(Memoirs of The New York Botanical Garden Volume 114)

by Richard W. Kerrigan

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For me, *Agaricus* has always been somewhat of an enigma. Identifying a given mushroom to this genus is generally not difficult, given the invariably free gill attachment, rich brown spore prints, and whitish caps. Naming those “pink bottoms” growing each year in different areas of my lawn may seem as easy as saying *Agaricus campestris*, but this actually amounts to little more than calling them all meadow mushrooms. The comments on Mushroom Expert’s online page for this “species” mention mysterious names such as *Agaricus porphyrocephalus*. But the account of *A. porphyrocephalus* reveals doubt that this species may be reliably differentiated from *A. campestris*. Then there’s the robust horse mushrooms with their variably almond odors. The confusing array of woodland *Agaricus* species, with their different odors and variably ornamented cap surfaces, represents yet another challenge. There’s also the squat firm-fleshed “torqs,” a group of species often found in urban settings and typically lumped under either *Agaricus bitorquis* or *A. rodmanii*.

The arrival of a definitive source of information regarding the genus *Agaricus* has been keenly anticipated by mushroom enthusiasts and mycologists; both professional and amateur. *Agaricus of North America*, by Richard W. Kerrigan, represents 40 years of mycological research. This 570-plus page volume includes a detailed overview of the genus from both the macroscopic and microscopic perspectives, as well as interpretations of molecular data.

Of particular note is the detailed description of the variable structures associated with universal and partial veils; essential to utilizing the many species descriptions. I read the section several times before beginning to feel comfortable with the ideas. The author is to be commended for undertaking this challenging aspect of *Agaricus* identification.

The section on microscopic traits includes suggestions for collecting spores to be examined, as well as reasons why spore size and shape may vary, even for an individual specimen. Descriptions and drawings representing variability of cystidia shape are excellent. I found comments regarding the frustrations associated with locating cystidia and differentiating them from basidia potentially helpful and refreshingly honest.

Perhaps honesty is the most admirable quality of the writing. The typical mushroom field guide inevitably creates the impression that mushroom species fit rather neatly into categories that strongly correlate with one-page descriptions. Early in the introductory material, Professor Kerrigan very clearly states that this is a false expectation, at least when it comes to genus *Agaricus*. “If ... your temperament is such that you prefer checklists, I suggest that you either give up mushrooms for the life-listing of birds, or else look into cryopreservation – you can instruct that you should be thawed when the *Agaricus* list is completed.”

Thus, the stage is set for descriptions that reflect the current scientifically verified understanding of the various species. This can be occasionally frustrating for the reader, especially when aspects such as geographic range and season reflect only those collections that have been vetted by experts. For instance, there are many examples in which the range includes “Midwestern North America extending into western Pennsylvania,” but areas east of that are rarely mentioned. Also, I suspect that some species for which the listed season includes only one or two months may commonly occur at other times of year. Photographs are mainly voucher specimens and perhaps not the most aesthetically pleasing examples.

This book is more a statement of the current scientific understanding of genus *Agaricus* than a field guide. This is not to say the species accounts are not useful. Much to the contrary, the descriptions are highly detailed, and each one begins with a short paragraph titled Notable Features. The casual mushroom hobbyist who hopes to learn to identify a handful of edible or toxic types of *Agaricus* is likely better served by a typical field guide in which groups of species are lumped into a single standard description. But for the discerning mushroom identifier, this book is a revelation. For example, the aforementioned *A. porphyrocephalus* is documented in two different varieties, var. *porphyrocephalus* and var. *pallidus*.

Given the amount of information contained in this book, the price I found online, \$128, is quite reasonable. Perhaps this type of book is not for every mushroom enthusiast. But I think that any mushroom club, university, or herbarium should have a copy on their shelf.

[Editor’s note: All books reviewed in *NJMA News* are available for members to borrow from our library. Contact Igor Safonov (njmycomember@gmail.com).]

