

The Mushroom Fundi

Table Mountain attracts all kinds of people – cyclists, hikers, tourists and the “mountain goats” who run to the top every day. And then there’s **Gary Goldman**, wandering around with a basket... What’s he up to – a picnic?

WORDS & PICTURES **SOPHIA VAN TAAK**

Even before we meet, there’s a sense of adventure in the air. “Bring a pocketknife and a headlamp,” Gary Goldman tells me in a WhatsApp message, followed by directions to the rendezvous point.

And now I’m here, shivering in the early morning dark in one of the highest streets in Newlands. A bakkie up the street flashes its lights and a silhouette gets out. Two four-legged shadows follow.

Gary greets me and retrieves a basket for each of us from the back of his bakkie. He calls the dogs softly and guides me to a gate in the fence – a shortcut into Newlands Forest.

I’ve never experienced the forest in this way. The dogs, Jack and Russell, take the lead in our headlamp beams. Moss-covered tree trunks float like spectres. A stream murmurs somewhere in the dark. Save for the sound of our footsteps on pine needles, everything is quiet. It rained last night and the soil breathes out the freshest, earthiest aroma.

Soon we reach the overgrown ruin of a cottage, once called Paradise. In the time of the Dutch East India Company, this was the home of the forest’s master woodcutter. And during the first British occupation of the Cape, Lady Anne Barnard lived here for a while with her husband Andrew, who was the colonial secretary. There were fruit trees around the cottage and Lady Anne kept chickens, small antelope, a breeding pair of secretarybirds and even a seal

and a penguin in the brook!

The stories give the ruin a fantastical aura. But the magic we’re looking for is even deeper in the forest. Before we can continue, we first have to locate Jack, who is deaf and partially blind. Over there! A white ghost staring into nothingness. His dulled senses have lost our track.

As we walk, Gary tells me about his past, which was very far removed from the outdoors. “In the 1980s, when the whole world was boycotting South Africa, IBM and Apple also withdrew from the local market. But South Africans had to get computers from somewhere, so Warwick Smith-Chandler and Arthur Hughes founded Computer Warehouse. They imported containers full of parts and I was one of the guys who built up the PCs for them.”

He stops for a moment, scans the area and adjusts our course slightly.

“The business was a giant success. When they sold it in 1988, my wife Essie and I made enough from my shares to travel the world for ten months. We went everywhere: Rome, Singapore, Australia, Hawaii, Los Angeles, New York, London...” he counts on his fingers. “We lived in Greece – on the island of Ios for a few months – and enjoyed it so much that we bought a bar and ran it for four years: the Tomato Bar. It was a wonderful time! The island lifestyle... I dived and spearfished and...”

Suddenly Gary crouches down and wipes away a layer of dry leaves on

the ground. Carefully, like someone defusing a bomb. And there it is, the reason we’re here – a mushroom as big as a saucer!

He slides his fingers down the side of the thick stipe, pulls the mushroom free and wipes off the soil. “Hmm... smell this!” he says, holding the mushroom to my nose. “The aroma, the taste... the world loves them.” He drops it into my basket. “There you go. Your first porcini! Now you’re also under its spell.”

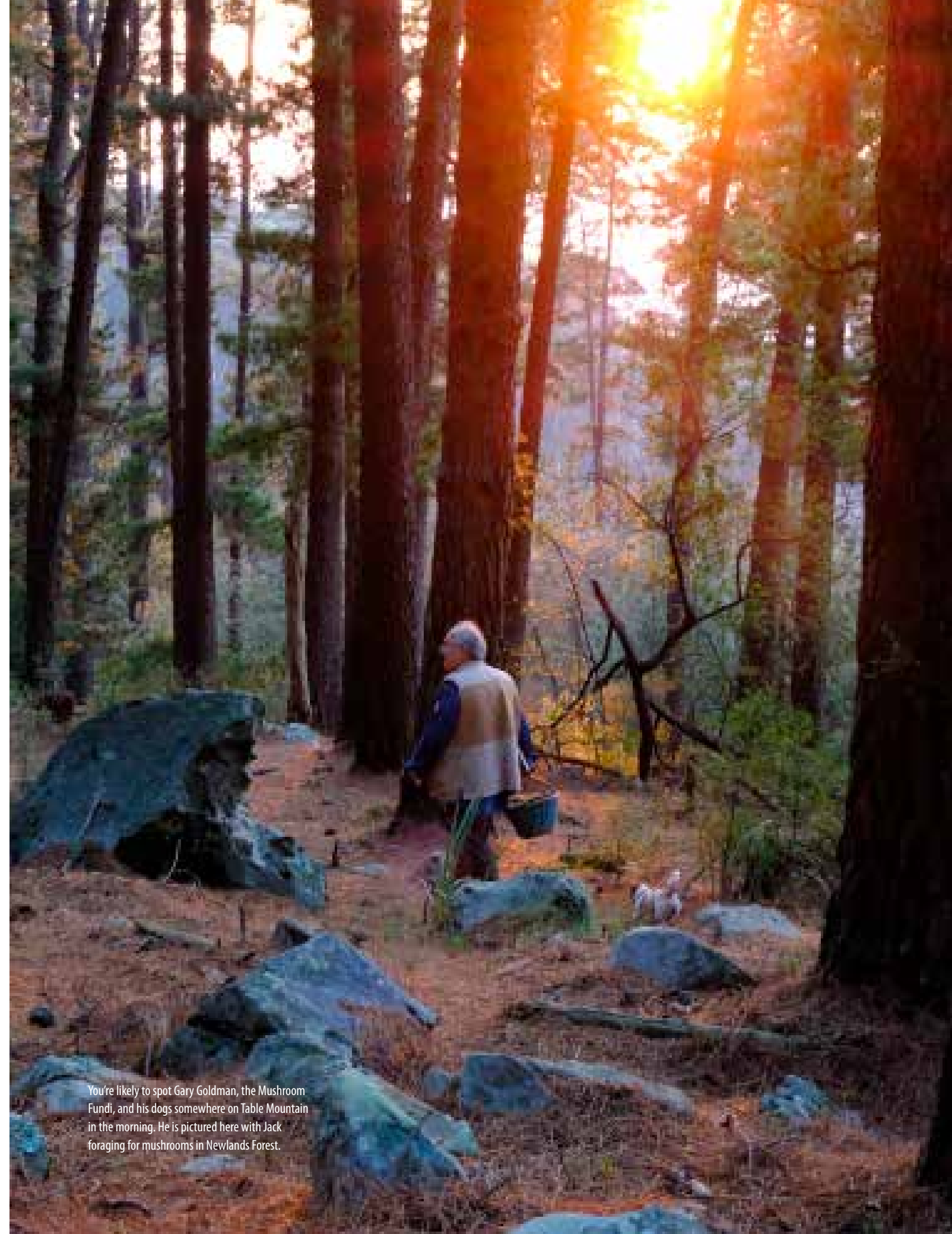
How did he know where to look? The mushroom wasn’t even visible above ground!

“Ag, you get to know the mountain,” he says. “At this time of the year, I know porcinis grow under oak trees. A little later in the season, I’ll look for them under the pines. I’ve found 45 edible species on this mountain – you just have to know where and when to look. If you see leaves lifting slightly from the soil, like there’s a mole underground, it might be a mushroom.”

A few steps further, he pushes some leaves to the side again and picks another big one. It’s like hunting for Easter eggs!

In the dark, under the dense canopy, I can’t tell exactly where we are. “Are we near Hiddingh Ravine, below Maclear’s Beacon?” I ask.

But Gary doesn’t hear me. He’s down on his knees next to a crop of new mushrooms. This time they’re pine ring mushrooms, which have a slight indent in the middle of each cap. I crouch



You’re likely to spot Gary Goldman, the Mushroom Fundi, and his dogs somewhere on Table Mountain in the morning. He is pictured here with Jack foraging for mushrooms in Newlands Forest.

down to look; Russell and Jack dig around, too. But we don’t have Gary’s experience and keen eyes.

He shines his headlamp against a growth on a log. “This one is an oak mazegill. You see the gills under the cap? They’re dense and wavy, like a labyrinth. It’s one of the saprophytic mushrooms. They grow on dead plant matter or animals carcasses and break them down. You also get mycorrhizal fungi: They live in symbiosis with their host and grow on its roots. The tree roots provide carbohydrates to the mushroom and in turn the mushroom spreads a network of fungal strands called mycelium underground, which the tree uses to absorb water and minerals like phosphate. And the third group is parasitic fungi – they attack living plants. They can rot a tree from the inside. When the tree finally crumbles and falls over, they become saprophytic and can live happily in the environment they created for themselves for the next eighty years.”

No wonder people call Gary the Mushroom Fundi. There seems to be nothing about them Gary doesn’t know.

So, how does a computer boffin become the Mushroom Fundi, I ask.

“You quit smoking!” he laughs. “It must have been around 2000... Yes, I was 43 when I moved to Observatory and suddenly Table Mountain was so close. We could see Mowbray Ridge and Newlands Forest from the backyard. My two boys were still toddlers and I’d kick a ball with them in a small field down the street. At that stage I smoked sixty Camels a day and I’d see stars when I tried to run after them. I realised I would have to stop smoking if I wanted to see them grow up. That’s when I started hiking.

“The first morning after I stopped smoking, I parked at the edge of this forest and headed out. I had a Dalmatian at the time – Sambuca. But we couldn’t even reach the first trees – I barely made it to the fire station heli pad! I could see the Saddle at the top of Newlands Ravine and I told myself my goal was to make it up there. One day.”

Gary cleans a few more mushrooms

with a brush and stows them in his basket.

“Before Greece and Computer Warehouse and all that, I was a navy diver for four years. When I left the navy, I still dived at Cape Point for crayfish and abalone. In those days, the quota was four crayfish and four abalone each, per day. *Per day!* Can you imagine? So, I was a forager long before the mushrooms. The day I saw my first porcini – the size and shape of it – it was like finding abalone on land.

“When I young, we were always warned about eating wild mushrooms in the veld. ‘Be careful, they’re poisonous, don’t even touch them!’ But I just had to know – were these things edible?”

The harvest in our baskets is coming along nicely, and Gary lists them as we go: “bay bolete, panther, blusher, dyeball, deceiver, crabmeat russula, turkey tail...”

He continues with the story of his mushroom awakening. “Back then I didn’t know anything. Those first porcinis made me go to the library and all the books said you had to ask an expert whether a mushroom was edible before adding it to your food. Well, I’m still looking for that expert! He doesn’t exist. There was no one I could ask, so I became the expert.

“I’m quite skilled with Excel spreadsheets and I started putting the information from the mushroom books into a database: the botanical name of every species, its common name, size and colour. And when I went on my walks, I picked every fungus I saw and took it home to see if I could identify it using all the information I had. I didn’t know the mycology terms, but I kept reading with a dictionary close by.”

In 2019, to make life easier for other mushroom hunters, Gary published his own book – *Field Guide to Mushrooms & other Fungi of South Africa*, with Dr Marieka Gryzenhout of the Department of Genetics at the University of the Free State. The guide has thorough descriptions and colour photos of 200 mushroom species, and includes their distribution, habitat, appearance, names and uses. There are also notes on the

characteristics you have to study to identify a mushroom: Is the cap smooth or does it have warts or scales? Is it bell-shaped, egg-shaped or flat? Turn it over and look at the gills – do they look like a fan or are they forked? And where’s the stipe – in the middle or slightly to the side? There are even a few recipes for mushroom dishes. Gary is already working on a new version – this time he’ll cover 430 species!

The sunrise bursts through the canopy like a searchlight. For a while we sit on the ground and listen to the forest waking up. Far below, somewhere, the commuters of the Southern Suburbs are heading off to work and the paths are filling up with more dogs, hikers and mountain bikers.

“Morning, Gary! Found anything good?” a woman asks, coming over to peek in our baskets.

“Hey, mushroom man! It’s good to see you’re out and about!” a cyclist greets as he whizzes past.

Seems like there’s a whole community of people who start their day on the cool slopes of Table Mountain. And why wouldn’t you? It’s so peaceful here, and everything feels so fresh.

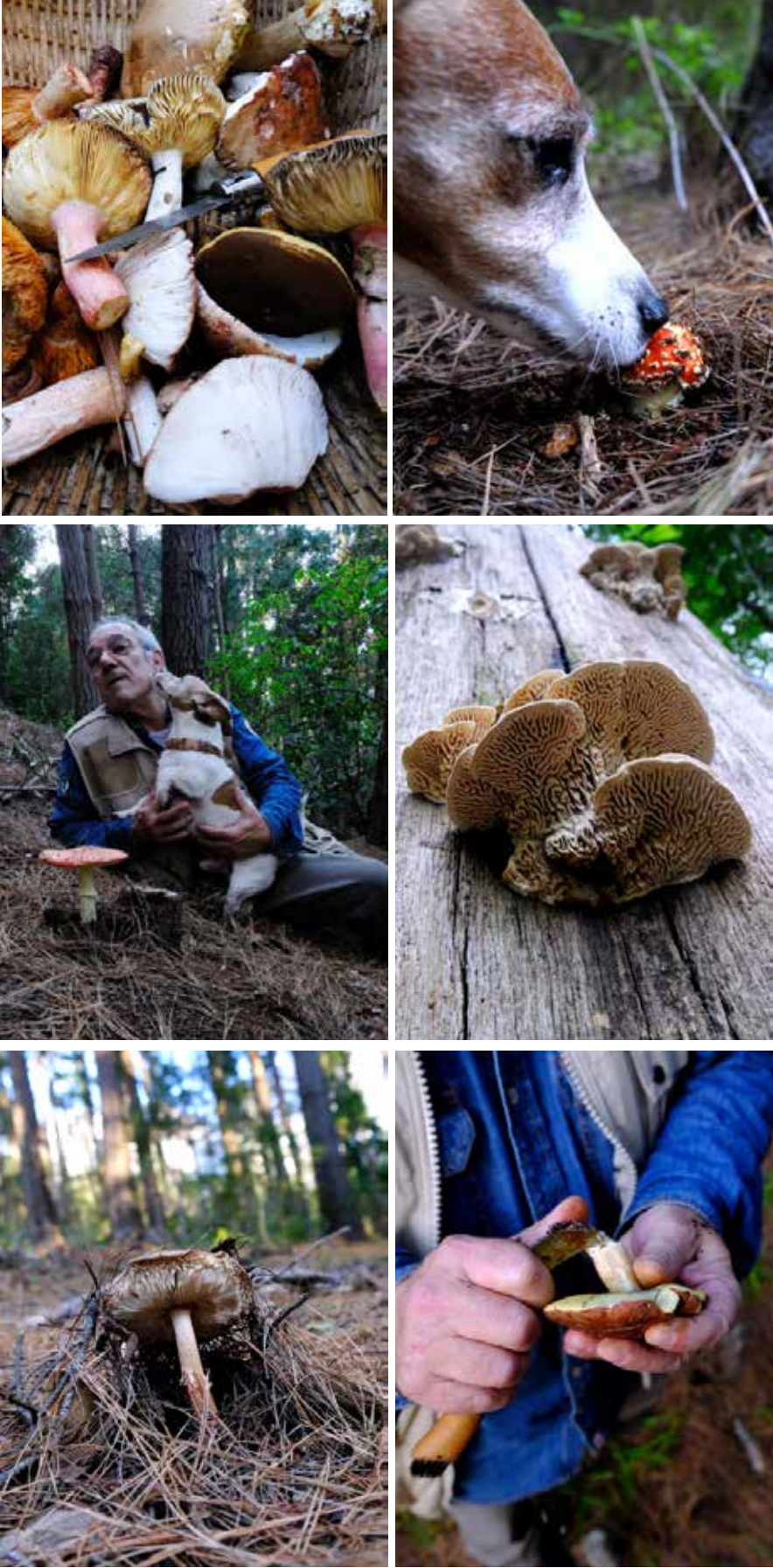
When Lady Anne sailed back to England aboard the *Scarborough* after nearly five years at the foot of Table Mountain, she wrote to Andrew, who had to stay behind for work:

My Dearest and Best Beloved,
Never can I cease to recollect (while I possess memory) the sweetness of those drivings out to Paradise, the name of our little country house half way up a stupendous mountain, hyenas and jackalls, monkeys and eagles, my neighbours, the mild expanse of pure air above my head, and the all-seeing eye to look down on the innocence of our pleasures.

“Hey Gary, do you think Lady Anne looked for mushrooms?”

But Gary is no longer sitting next to me. We’ve lost Jack again!

Source: *Defiance – The Life and Choices of Lady Anne Barnard* by Stephen Taylor



Clockwise from top left: Sophia and Gary’s morning harvest included: porcini, blusher, shrimp russula (with the pink stipe; it smells like seafood), bay bolete and saffron milk cap. The fly agaric looks just like a toadstool from a fairy tale, but Russell knows, this one is for sniffing only! Oak mazegill growing on an old tree trunk. Bay bolete is a meaty and sought-after mushroom. A mature blusher. Gary, Jack and a huge fly agaric.

TIPS FOR MUSHROOM HUNTERS

➤ You should be able to find mushrooms in any forest or plantation in South Africa. Most species appear when temperatures drop to 4–8 °C and it has rained continuously for a few days. The season depends on the rainfall region you live in.

➤ Mushrooms begin to appear on Table Mountain in March and April. Gary says: “As soon as waterfalls form on the mountain, you can mark your calendar – there will be mushrooms exactly two weeks later.”

➤ Mushrooms can be found for about two to eight weeks at a time, but every species makes its appearance under different conditions. As one species starts to wane, another takes its place.

➤ Never cut a mushroom off at the ground, because the remaining stipe will rot and die and not grow again. Rather pick the entire mushroom by pulling it from the soil.

➤ You need a permit (free) to collect mushrooms on Table Mountain. Send an e-mail to newlands.fieldrangers@sanparks.org. A permit is valid for three months.

Want to learn more?
Contact Gary Goldman: ☎ 073 936 2378

The Field Guide to Mushrooms & other Fungi in South Africa costs R500 at wordsworth.co.za

