

Mushroom's role in the Declaration of Independence

By Michael Maciarello

The movie "National Treasure" is a fictitious story of a secret invisible map on the back of the Declaration of Independence. Ironically, there is a secret about the Declaration of Independence, which is related to a common fungus.

The mushroom, *Coprinus comatus*, also known as the inky cap, is common in mulched gardens, lawns and fields, often growing in large numbers. The young fruiting body first appears as a white cylinder emerging from the ground, and then the bell-shaped cap opens out. The white cap is covered with reddish-brown scales. The gills, which are crowded together and free from the stipe (stem), change color from white to pink to black and then secrete a black liquid filled with spores. It gets its name from the fact that it melts into sticky black ink-like ooze within a day or two of sprouting.

During colonial times, it was common practice in Europe to include secret encryptions in official documents to verify their authenticity. Most commonly, a small amount of the ooze from inky cap mushrooms was mixed with the ink used. The presence of the microscopic spores in the dried ink was a quick way to authenticate a document in question.

Our founding fathers were aware of the practice, and mixed the ink from the inky cap with the iron gall ink used to pen the

Garden Tales

Declaration of Independence. The Founding Fathers were not concerned about authenticating their declaration since there were 56 co-signers, instead they were concerned that King George III would regard the document frivolously, or reject the document out of hand. Including inky cap ink added another level of legitimacy to the document.

The inky cap is useful far beyond the antiquated practice of mixing it with ink for official documents. The young mushrooms are edible and regarded by gourmands as the perfect complement to scrambled eggs. Additionally, the mushroom has numerous medicinal properties. The extract has anti-tumor activity, anti-androgenic activity suppressing prostate cancer, and normalizes blood glucose levels.

Hobbyists use the inky cap's ooze as a natural dye, giving a dark blue or purple color to cotton and wool.

Other names for inky caps are shaggy mane, and lawyer's wig. They are seen growing in Delaware all summer and into the fall. If you encounter them this holiday weekend, be sure to admire their beauty and utility, and don't forget their role in our nation's history. Happy Independence



Submitted sketch/Katie Yost

Inky cap mushrooms beginning to turn to ink-like ooze.

Day!

Any person who ingests mushrooms or any other potentially dangerous fungi, does so at their own risk. If you have any doubts whatsoever about your identification of a wild plant or mushroom, don't eat it!

On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is

Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Michael Maciarello is a mycologist and herbarium volunteer. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost, Herbarium Educator) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or for more information about this article.

Coney Island hot dog eating contest adds women's pigout

By Verena Dobnik
Associated Press

NEW YORK — This year's Fourth of July race to stuff your face with hot dogs has a new women-only pigout.

"Serena Williams didn't have to beat Roger Federer to win the Wimbledon title, and we don't think Sonya Thomas should have to beat Joey Chestnut," said master of ceremonies George Shea.

Thomas, known as The Black Widow of competitive eating, set a women's world record July 4, 2009, by stuffing 41 hot dogs into her 105-pound frame in 10 minutes.

Thomas and nine other women will

compete Monday on Coney Island just before the men's stomach-churning Nathan's Famous hot dog feast, which this year again features world champion Chestnut, nicknamed Jaws. The 27-year-old from San Jose, Calif., ate his way to a fourth consecutive championship last year by downing 54 dogs for the \$20,000 purse.

Notably absent again this year is his chief rival, Takeru Kobayashi, who held the world record for hot dog eating from 2001 to 2007 but plans his own eating contest on a Manhattan rooftop seven miles away.

Three Chinese contenders flew in from Beijing to join the competition, which will

be televised live on ESPN.

Although women don't compete directly against men in most sports, Shea said, Thomas has beaten Chestnut in the past. She ate 181 chicken wings to his 169 during the National Buffalo Wing Festival in Buffalo last September.

Nathan's officials say they feel that women champions like the diminutive Thomas and Juliet Lee, also weighing about 105 pounds, "are not getting full exposure for their accomplishments; we're selling them short." Chestnut weighs in at 200-plus pounds.

Hence, the added competition on the same stage as the men.

"To me, this excitement is similar to when women were given the right to vote," says challenger Larell Marie Mele, a 133-pounder from Long Pond, Pa.

The female competition will start at 11:30 a.m.

To add to the day's yuck factor, a special pink champion's belt was made for the ladies — by sponsor Pepto-Bismol. The winner of the men's contest takes home the Nathan's mustard belt.

The pink belt made its debut at the annual contestant weigh-in Friday morning outside City Hall, with New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg presiding.

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