

## Thoreau and the Election Cake Fungus

By *Cherrie Corey and Brent Ranalli*



Left: Thoreau's October 1856 sketch of an election cake fungus.

In the particularly unsavory presidential campaign season of 2016, Thoreau's descriptive references to "election cake" fungi leapt off his journal pages and caught our attention. On July 29, 1853, Thoreau wrote that he had observed "shining & glossy yellow fungi--like an election cake atop." Over the course of the next six years he made at least nine other references in his journal to election cake fungi.<sup>1</sup>

Election cake was a sweet yeast bread traditionally served on Election Day in 18th and 19th-century New England. It was a descendant of the English "great cakes" and part of a lineage that also includes the modern fruitcake.<sup>2</sup> We find no evidence that anyone before Thoreau (or since) ever referred to a fungus as resembling an election cake. The association appears to have been one of Thoreau's own inimitable similes. This raises two questions: What was it about this particular fungus that inspired Thoreau to give it this nickname in his journal? And to which fungus might he have been referring?

The nickname could conceivably have something to do with the timing of the fungi's appearance. Most of the references in Thoreau's journal fall in the month of October, which was election season. (Election Day in Massachusetts in the 1850s fell in early-to-mid November.) But in several entries, Thoreau clearly uses the phrase "election cake" to describe the *appearance* of the fungus.

Election cake was meant to feed a crowd of out-of-town relatives and guests—or, in later years, of clients for voting the party ticket. Typically, it was prepared in large quantities. (One recipe, the earliest in print, calls for "thirty quarts of flour, 10 pound butter, 14 pound sugar, 12 pound raisins, 3 doz eggs, one pint wine, one quart brandy . . .")<sup>3</sup> This fact suggests another possible explanation: perhaps, for Thoreau, an "election cake" fungus is a fungus of enormous size. Thoreau does describe one as a "great toadstool . . . nine inches in diameter, and five high, with a stem like the bole of an oak,"<sup>4</sup> but others were only 3 inches across, or described as "small." When in multiple entries Thoreau comments on the crickets and grubs consuming the election cake fungus, he may have in mind how enormous the toadstools appear to those tiny creatures, or he may be comparing, in his own mind, these wild foragers with his own townfolk on Election Day.

The shape of the toadstool is an even more plausible hypothesis. Cooked right in the hearth, election cakes would have been large round loaves. And burdened with brandy, wine, and fruit, they probably would have spread wide and not risen very high. Thoreau could, possibly, be talking about a toadstool with a gently rounded (i.e., not bulbous) cap. He

made a drawing to accompany the October 20, 1856, entry, and it does have the flat bottom and slightly rounded top of a heavy loaf baked in the hearth.<sup>5</sup> On October 29, 1855, he contrasts the election cake fungus with another that is "hemispherical."<sup>6</sup>

In the drawing, the right edge of the toadstool cap appears to be curving slightly downward. This too could be a characteristic feature of the election cake fungus. This misshapen quality could be what Thoreau meant when he described the top of a mushroom to be "slightly curving like a great election cake."<sup>7</sup> On October 29, 1855, he appears to contrast the election-cake fungus with another mushroom that is "very regular."<sup>8</sup> We can easily imagine that a giant, spreading election cake might characteristically hang over the edge of the table or tray, or over the top of the ring or hoop placed around it to stop the spreading.

Some election cake recipes, though not the oldest ones, call for a glaze. A glazed loaf would be consistent with Thoreau's contrast between "shining and glossy yellow fungi" that resemble election cake and the "dead yellow and orange" specimens that do not.<sup>9</sup> Even without a glaze, a bread prepared with so much butter and sugar might be shinier or yellower than your typical loaf. Indeed, Amelia Simmons' 1796 recipe observes that the addition of butter and sugar renders the loaf "much whiter and lighter."<sup>10</sup> Four of Thoreau's journal entries (July 29, 1853; October 20, 1856; October 20, 1857; September 1, 1859) refer to a yellow color. Two entries (July 29, 1853; September 1, 1859) refer to a glossy or glazed surface.<sup>11</sup>

In the entry dated October 16, 1859, the last in the series, Thoreau makes a tentative identification: "That election-cake fungus which is still growing (as for some months) appears to be a *Boletus*." Based on Thoreau's descriptive details, his finding some among pitch pines (per entries dated October 29, 1855 and October 20, 1856), and their fruiting between the end of July through October, we would suggest that Thoreau's election cake fungi were most likely "Slippery Jack" fungi: *Suillus brevipes* (short-stemmed Slippery Jack), *S. granulatus* (Granulated Slippery Jack), and/or *S. luteus* (Slippery Jack). *S. granulatus*, in particular, has an orange-brown to brown-yellow cap that is sticky when wet and shiny when dry. As illustrated in the accompanying image, it has a gently curving cap. All associate with pine habitat and are known to grow in the Concord area. These fungi are all examples of boletes. The genus *Suillus* was not formally applied by taxonomists until many decades after Thoreau's death.

During Thoreau's lifetime, a taxonomic system for fungi was being elaborated and modernized in Europe and North America. One of Thoreau's most respected botanical colleagues,



Photograph by Cherrie Corey

Above: *Suillus granulatus* (Granulated Slippery Jack) in old pine woods north of Punkatasset hill.

Charles C. Frost of Brattleboro, Vermont (with whom Thoreau botanized in Brattleboro in September 1856), was credited with classifying many New England mushrooms and particularly the boletes.<sup>12</sup> Yet the scientific names and taxonomy of even the more common species didn't appear to make it into Thoreau's lexicon, as did those of the vascular plants, perhaps because catalogs of New England fungi species were not more widely published until after his death. Still, Thoreau afforded the fungi and "toadstools" the same courtesies of his keen observations—even if he did not attempt to taste them, any more than he partook of Concord's annual election rituals and the cake-eating crowds they attracted.

• **Cherrie Corey** is a field naturalist, photographer, educator, and forty-year resident of Concord who recently relocated to southern Vermont. She blogs at [www.senseofplace-concord.com](http://www.senseofplace-concord.com).

• **Brent Ranalli** is an environmental policy professional and the incoming editor of the *Thoreau Society Bulletin*.

### Notes

1 July 29, 1853, in Henry D. Thoreau, *Journal, Volume 6: 1853*, ed. William Rossi, Heather Kirk Thomas (Princeton University Press, 2000), 277. Thoreau makes additional reference to the election cake fungus in his *Journal* on the following dates: August 9, 1853; October 29, 1855; October 20, 1856; October 20, 1857; October 4 and October 10, 1858; and September 1, October 2, and October 16, 1859.

2 Alice Ross, "Hearth to Hearth: Election Cake," *The Journal of Antiques and Collectibles*, October 20, 2003.

3 Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*.... (Second Edition, Albany, 1796; reprinted by Applewood Press, Bedford Mass., 1996), 43

4 August 9, 1853 in Thoreau, *Journal*, Volume 6: 1853, 294.

5 Entry for October 20, 1856, in Henry D. Thoreau, *Journal*, Manuscript Volume 22: September 7, 1856 - April 1, 1857; see bookmarked transcript and manuscript at [http://thoreau.library.ucsb.edu/writings\\_journals22.html](http://thoreau.library.ucsb.edu/writings_journals22.html).

6 Entry for October 29, 1855, in Henry D. Thoreau, *Journal*, Manuscript Volume 18: September 3, 1854 - May 12, 1855; see bookmarked transcript at [http://thoreau.library.ucsb.edu/writings\\_journals18.html](http://thoreau.library.ucsb.edu/writings_journals18.html).

7 August 9, 1853 in Thoreau, *Journal, Volume 6: 1853*, 294.

8 October 29, 1855 in Henry D. Thoreau, *Journal*, Manuscript Volume 18: September 3, 1854 - May 12, 1855.

9 July 29, 1853 in Thoreau, *Journal, Volume 6: 1853*, 277.

10 Simmons, *American Cookery*, 44.

11 The very first entry refers to a fungus with an "umbrella" shape. Here Thoreau might be referring to an entirely different fungus than in the other entries. (This is also the only entry from as early in the season as July.) In this first entry, it is specifically the color and glossiness of the cap ("shining & glossy yellow") that inspire the comparison to election cake.

12 Entries for September 5-10, 1856, in Henry D. Thoreau, *Journal*, Manuscript Volume 21: April 23, 1856 - September 6, 1856 and Manuscript Volume 22: September 7, 1856 - April 1, 1857; see bookmarked transcripts at [http://thoreau.library.ucsb.edu/writings\\_journals21.html](http://thoreau.library.ucsb.edu/writings_journals21.html) and [http://thoreau.library.ucsb.edu/writings\\_journals22.html](http://thoreau.library.ucsb.edu/writings_journals22.html). Roy E. Halling, "Boletes Described by Charles C. Frost," *Mycologia* 75, no. 1 (1983), 70-92.



The Thoreau Society wishes to thank the Thoreau Bicentennial Committee and all the Thoreau Bicentennial Ambassadors

#### Thoreau Bicentennial Committee

Rev. Barry Andrews, Magdalena Bermudez, Michael J. Frederick, and Dianne McConville Weiss, Chairpersons

Victor Curran	Mark Gallagher	Jayne Gordon	Richard Higgins
Jeff Hinich	Kristi Lynn Martin	Deborah Medenbach	Michael Schleifer
Natasha Shabbat	Richard Smith		

#### Thoreau Bicentennial Ambassadors

Nancy Austin	Douglas Brinkley	Doug Capra	Andrew Celentano
Rev. Howard Dana	David Dilts	Ernesto Estrella	Rochelle Johnson
Megan Marshall	Deborah Medenbach	John Myers	Howard Nelson
Dennis Nosen	Howard D. Paap	Tom Potter	Donna Przybojewski
Kevin Radaker	Audrey Raden	Michael Schleifer	Christopher Shultis
Corinne Smith	Jesse Paris Smith	Richard Smith	Todd Thompson
Jeff Wallner	Laura Dassow Walls	Dianne Weiss	Michael West
Elizabeth Witherell	Robert Young	Transcendentalism Council of First Parish in Concord	
Women's Parish Association, First Parish in Concord			

#### Thoreau Bicentennial International Ambassadors

John Caffrey and Family	Antonio Casado	Jean Cloutier	Jeff Hinich
Shoko Itoh	Michiko Ono	Henrik Otterberg	Jan Pouwels
Richard Smith	Ali Taghdarreh	Jongmyoung Choi Yoo	Inhoo Yoo
Thoreau Society of Japan			