



FUNKY FUNGI

## FUNGI FACTS

Fungi didn't always have a kingdom of their own; they were historically categorised as plants. Carl Linnaeus observed their differences, and placed them in a separate kingdom. He called this 'cryptogamia', or 'hidden reproduction', because they reproduce without flowers or seeds, using spores.

We now understand fungi to be more closely related to the animal kingdom than plants. Their cells contain chitin, a molecule also found in insect exoskeletons. They take in nutrients and use enzymes to break things down, making them excellent decomposers. They are incredibly diverse, sometimes beautiful, and often weird!

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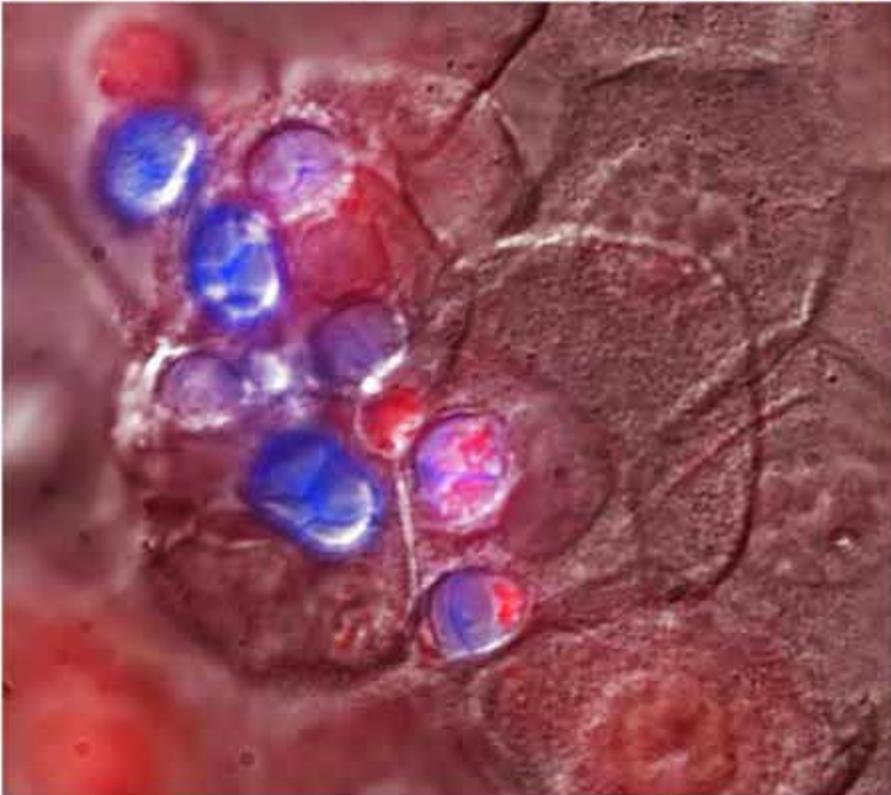
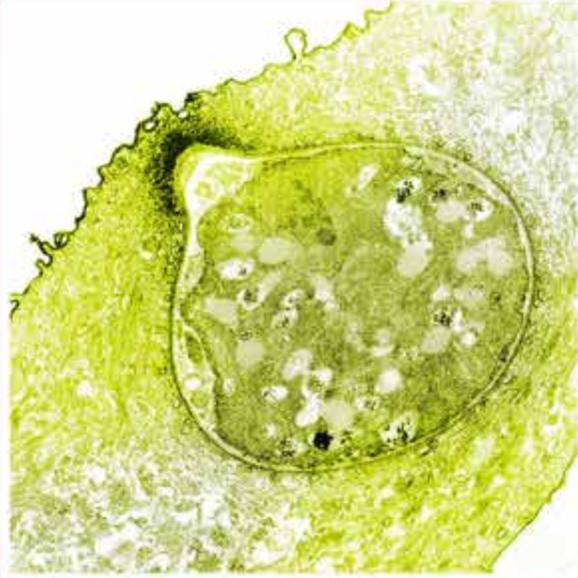
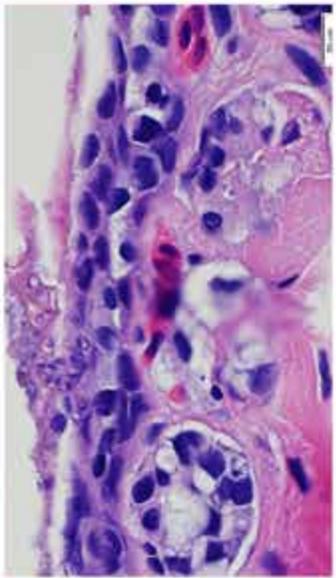
## ARMILLARIA OSTOYAE

**Armillaria ostoyae**, also known as honey mushrooms because of their sweet taste, is much more than meets the eye. One example of this species, in Oregon, USA, is one of the largest organisms on the Earth! Spanning roughly 3.4 miles, but most people can't see how big it is. That's because most of its body lives underground as little thread-like structures called mycelium.

It is over 2400 years old, and is nicknamed 'the Humongous Fungus'. The easily recognisable mushrooms, called 'fruiting bodies', only pop up across the forest in the autumn, and are there to release spores for reproduction. Despite their innocent appearance, the ostoyae is harmful to the surrounding conifer trees in the US and Canada, causing Armillaria root disease. They attach to the tree roots via fine filaments that tangle together and leak digestive enzymes. Essentially the mushroom will feed off the tree roots and kill the trees it's attached to!

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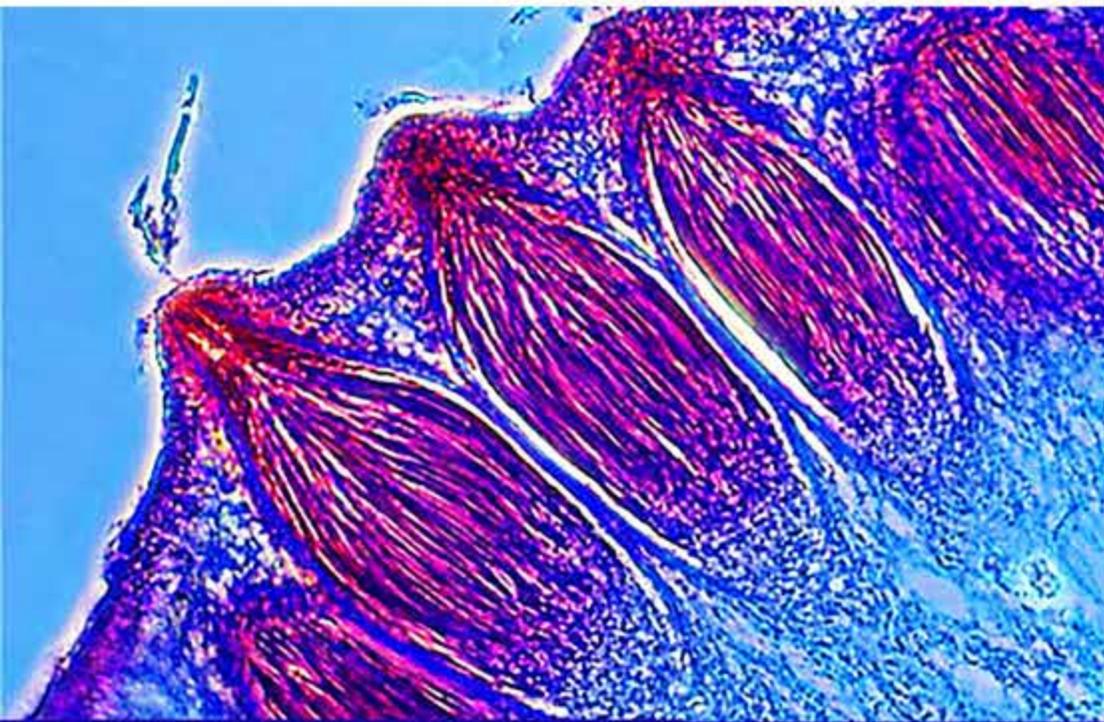
## BATRACHOCHYTRIUM

Many scientists believe we are currently going through a mass extinction (a period in history when the earth loses at least 50% of species). One of the hardest hit groups in the current mass extinction are the amphibians. This is partly because they have a complex lifecycle that requires a multitude of environments, so they are particularly vulnerable to habitat loss.

But another reason they are dying out in large numbers is the deadly effects of a fungus called *Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis*. The fungus eats away at the skin of many amphibian species, which stops respiration and leads to death. Up until relatively recently, the fungus existed only in one small part of the world, and all the amphibians there had over time evolved resistance to it. It is humans driving the spread of this microscopic fungus across the world to populations of amphibians who have no resistance. Researchers are looking for ways to protect the affected populations, but many amphibian species have already gone extinct locally.

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## CLAVICEPS PURPUREA

**Claviceps purpurea**, also known as the ergot fungus, is an organism that grows on rye. When eaten, it can cause a terrible condition called ergotism, or 'St. Anthony's Fire'; symptoms include hallucinations, vomiting, or loss of limbs to gangrene! The 'fire' in its name is a reference to the burning sensation sufferers felt in the limbs, as ergotism constricts the veins.

In the Middle Ages, monks in the Order of St. Anthony specialised in treating ergotism, as they were skilled at amputation using tranquilising and circulation-stimulating plant-extracts. Since the Middle Ages, controlled doses of ergot have been used to induce abortion in pregnancies or to stop maternal bleeding in childbirth and post-pregnancy.

Compounds derived from ergot have also been used to develop hallucinogenic drugs. In the last decade there has been increased interest by researchers in the value of these to treat a number of mental health issues.

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# PANELLUS STIPTICUS

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## PANELLUS STIPTICUS

Commonly known as the bitter oyster or the luminescent panellus, members of this species are found in eastern parts of North America. They are **bioluminescent**, which means they can create their own light! There are about 70 other fungi species that are bioluminescent. Although the intensity of their light is generally low compared to many other bioluminescent organisms, fungi can glow continuously for days, so their total emission is comparable with that of most brightly luminescent organisms such as fireflies.

*P. stipticus* grows in groups or dense overlapping clusters on the logs, stumps, and trunks of deciduous trees. As a wood-rot fungus, *P. stipticus* is useful in breaking down wood that other organisms would struggle to, making it an important recycler of nutrients in the food chain. It's this capacity that it is being explored for use in **bioremediation**, meaning it can be used to breakdown some organic or waste pollutants.

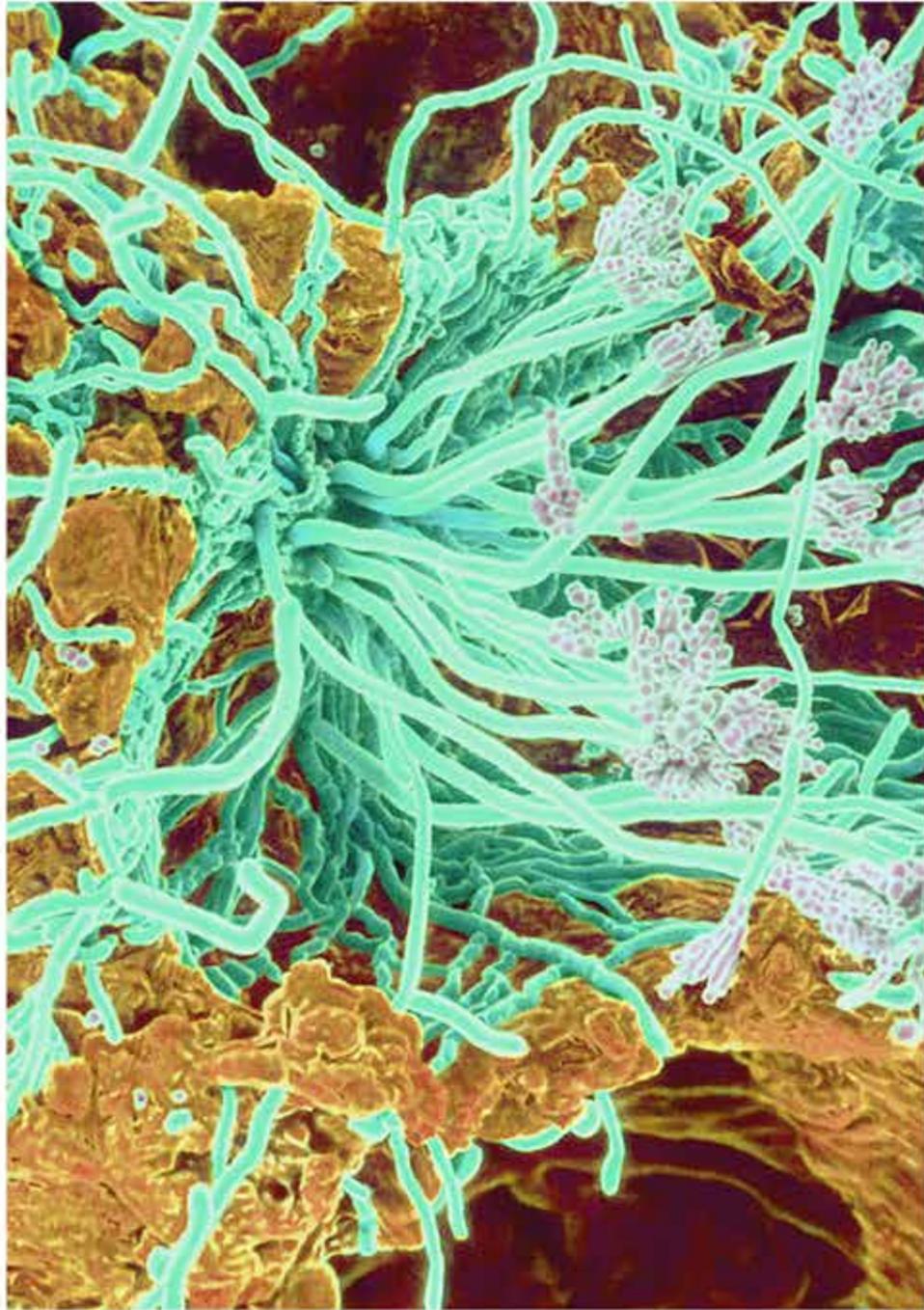
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# PENICILLIUM

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## PENICILLIUM

This mould transformed human health in the 20th century. Its name is derived from the Latin root *penicillum*, meaning "painter's brush", referring to the shape it takes as it grows. It was discovered by accident, when Scottish biologist Alexander Fleming went on holiday, leaving his lab untidy with samples of staphylococci bacteria exposed. When he returned, he saw that some of the samples had mould growing on them, and where the mould grew, much of the bacteria started to die off.

Fleming realised whatever this fungus was, it must be effective at killing the bacteria. He isolated and identified it, naming it penicillin. This story reveals how chance events are developed into scientific findings. Fleming actually couldn't figure out how to mass produce penicillin, but scientists resolved this by the 1940s, and it is still used to treat life-threatening bacterial infections like pneumonia to this day.

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LOREM IPSUM



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## PHALLUS INDUSIATUS

Going by a number of names including long net stinkhorn, crinoline stinkhorn or veiled lady, this fungus comes from the family Phallaceae, or stinkhorns. Indusiatus, a Latin adjective meaning "wearing an undergarment", refers to the distinctive lace-like netting that comes from the head of the mushroom.

All stinkhorns reproduce by making a slimy substance that contains its spores. This slime stinks of rotting flesh, attracting various insects, which eat the slime and re-distribute the spores when they poo. It breaks down dead wood, playing an important role in tropical wooded ecosystems.

It is a culinary delicacy in China, and is often served in soups. It is considered sacred and used in many different religious traditions in Latin America, Africa, and the South Pacific. Stinkhorns also appear to have anti-inflammatory properties that help to suppress cancers' growth.

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## PILOBOLUS CRYSTALLINUS

When people think 'fast', most people don't think 'fungus'. However, *Pilobolus crystallinus*, commonly known as the 'Dung Cannon' or 'Hat Thrower', is a unique species of fungus that is known for its speed.

The dung cannon adheres its spores to vegetation to be eaten by grazing animals. It then passes through the animals' digestive systems and grows in their poo. Although these fungi only grow to be 2-4 cm tall, they can shoot their sporangium (a vessel containing their spores), up to 2 m away. Due to an increase of pressure in a sack of mucous underneath it, the sporangium can accelerate 0-45 mph in the first millimeter of its flight, which equivalent to a human being moving at 100 times the speed of sound!

The mucous inside the sporangium helps it adhere to surrounding vegetation, thus completing the story of how an inconspicuous, foul-smelling fungus earns the title of one of the fastest known things on our planet.



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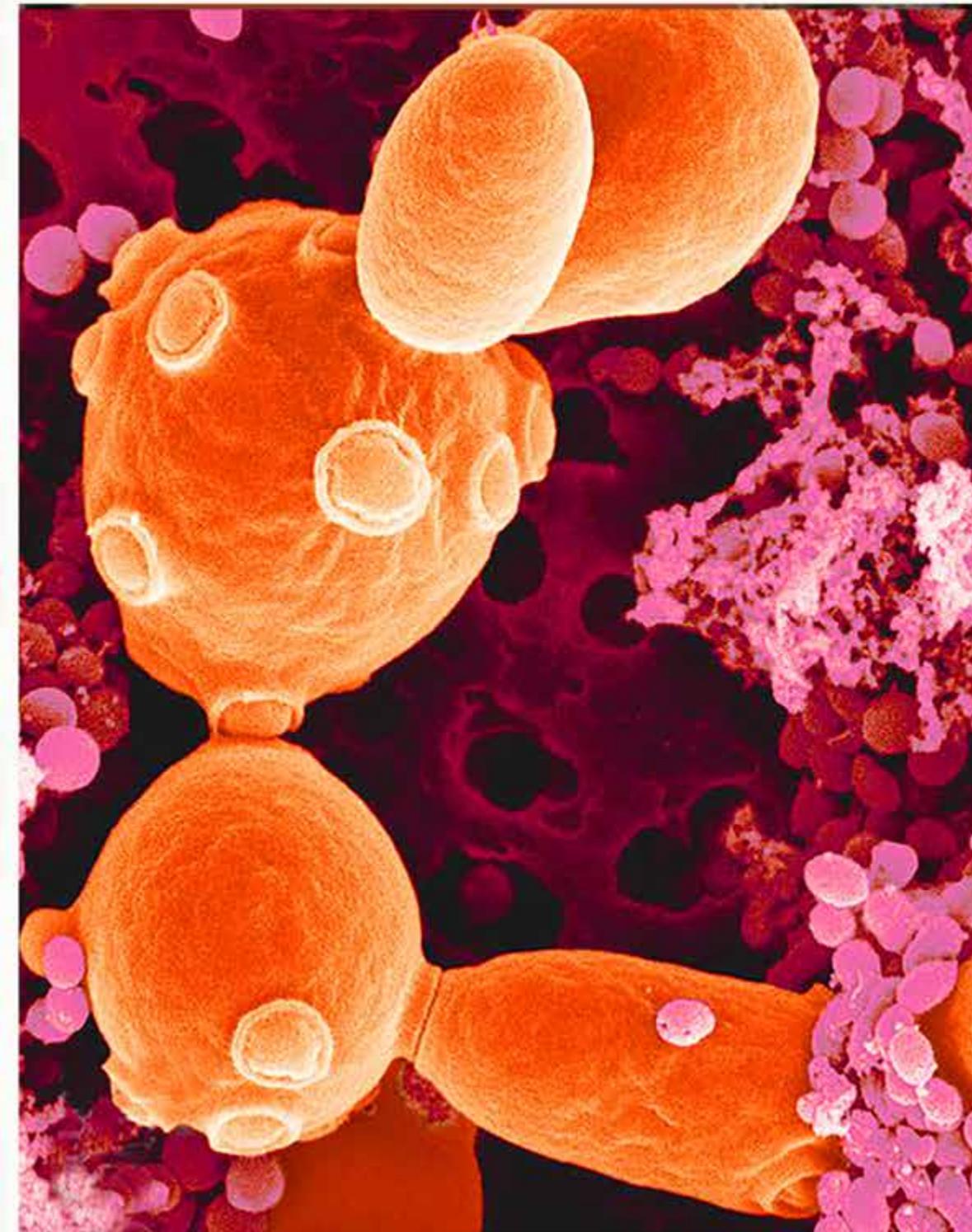
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## YEAST (SACCHAROMYCES)

Bread, cheese, wine, and beer: as humans, our relationship to these foods is ancient, but none of them would be possible without yeast. Yeast is a unicellular (single-celled) fungus that aids in the process of fermentation, which is central to how these foods are produced. There are about 1,500 different species of yeast, including saccharomyces.

Yeast is also a model organism that is widely used in biological research. Using *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*, we have learnt more about the genes that affect aging in mammals than from any other organism. It shares the complex internal cell structure of plants and animals. In nature, yeast cells are found primarily on ripe fruits such as grapes.





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## TERMITOMYCES TITANICUS

Termitomyces titanicus (common name Chi-ngulu-ngulu) is largest edible mushroom yet discovered. Its cap can reach up to a 1 metre, and it can grow up to 52cm tall. Despite its size, it wasn't formally categorised until 1980. In its local habitat, West Africa, people have long known of its existence and used it for food.

It belongs to a group that lives in a tight symbiotic relationship with different species of termites. Most termite species can digest plant matter, but a few can't completely finish the job. Those that associate with Termitomyces cultivate the fungi, then return with twigs and leaves they have partially-digested. The mushroom then breaks them down further so that the termites can eat them. In this way termites and chi-ngulu-ngulu cooperate across kingdoms to both species' mutual benefit.

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# LACTARIUS INDIGO

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## LACTARIUS INDIGO

This beautiful, edible fungus grows naturally in eastern North America, East Asia, and Central America. When cut, it oozes a creamy indigo substance that turns green quickly from exposure to air.

Thread-like, underground parts of its body connect to the roots of trees, forming structures called mycorrhiza, which is greek for "fungus root".

This is usually an example of a mutualistic symbiosis, which means both organisms benefit from the relationship. The fungus gives minerals and amino acids to the tree, while the tree gives fixed carbon to the fungus. Some mycorrhizal associations link many trees across a forest, allowing the trees to communicate via the fungus through chemical signals. This has been dubbed the "Wood Wide Web". More than 90% of land plants rely on this sort of interaction, showing how crucial fungi are to plant life.

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# HYDNELLUM PECKII

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## HYDNELLUM PECKII

**Hydnellum peckii** is an inedible (though non-toxic) fungus. This strange-looking mushroom has a number of imaginative names, including strawberries and cream, the bleeding tooth fungus, the red-juice tooth, and the Devil's tooth. This species produces strange and sometimes useful chemicals; one has been found to have anti-clotting properties. It also **bioaccumulates** the heavy metal caesium from the soil, the presence of which many other living things might find toxic.

Hydnellum peckii is a mycorrhizal species; thread-like underground parts of its body connect to the roots of trees. This is often an example of a mutualistic symbiosis, which means both organisms benefit. The fungus gives minerals and amino acids to the tree, while the tree gives nutrients to the fungus. Some mycorrhizal associations link many trees across a forest, in a network that has been dubbed the "Wood Wide Web." More than 90% of land plants rely on this sort of association with fungi.

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# GANODERMA LUCIDUM

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## GANODERMA LUCIDUM

The *Ganoderma lucidum* (also known as the lingzhi or reishi mushroom) is a flat, shiny, kidney-shaped mushroom with a cork-like texture. In China, this species is revered as the 'mushroom of immortality', and it has been used in traditional Chinese medicine for over 2,000 years.

It grows at the base and stumps of deciduous trees, especially that of the maple. However, only two or three out of 10,000 such aged trees will have these growths, and therefore its wild form is extremely rare. Today, it is effectively cultivated on hardwood logs or sawdust/ woodchips.

The mushroom's vegetative structure, or mycelium, includes of a mass of long, branching threads (hyphae) that are strong enough to be used in a number of sustainable substitutes for plastic, polystyrene, leather, and even bricks! This is a great example of how fungi can be used to develop ecologically friendly alternatives to more wasteful manufacturing products.

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**RHODOTUS PALMATUS**

## **FUN FUNGI FACTS:**

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- They are nature's most important *decomposers* (dee-kōm-pōh-zerz) and help break down dead or decaying organisms
- Scientists believe that only 1 in 10 fungi species have been identified! That means that 90% of the types of fungi out there are still to be discovered.
- Some kinds of fungi provide food or medicine, but others are deadly to both plants and animals



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