

Humans have consumed psilocybin, the naturally occurring psychedelic compound in magic mushrooms, for more than ten thousand years. Until the mid-twentieth century, the context was religious. That changed on 29 June 1955, when a vice president of J.P. Morgan named R. Gordon Wasson travelled to Mexico with a photographer to the mud hut of the *Mazatec curandera* (medicine woman) María Sabina and they became, in Wasson's words, the 'first white men in recorded history to eat the divine mushrooms.'

The subsequent *Life* magazine article written by Wasson in 1957, 'Seeking the magic mushroom,' opened a Pandora's box that would see, among other things, the birth of the American psychedelic counterculture, the defilement of the mushroom ritual and, ultimately, the banning of psilocybin across much of the world. The article also eventually led to Sabina's ruin as westerners came to her by the hundreds.

Wasson found that many cultures across the world worshipped mushrooms and had constructed elaborate religious ceremonies around their consumption.

Wasson made several trips to Mexico in search of those who still performed the mushroom rite, but it wasn't until 1955 in the Oaxacan village of Huautla de Jiménez that he was successful. He visited the town hall and asked an official if he could help him learn the secrets of the divine mushroom. 'Nothing could be easier,' the official replied. He took Wasson to a mountainside where the mushrooms grew in abundance, and then to higher ground where María Sabina lived.

Sabina was well respected in the village as a healer and shaman. She'd been consuming psilocybin mushrooms regularly since she was seven years old, and had performed the *velada* mushroom ceremony for over thirty years.

The intention of the all-night *velada* was to commune with God to heal the sick. The spirits, if effectively contacted, would tell Sabina the nature of the sickness and how it could be healed. Vomiting by the afflicted was considered an essential part of the ceremony. Each participant in the ritual would ingest psilocybin mushrooms as Sabina (who typically ingested twice as much) chanted invocations to coax forth the divine: 'Am I not good?' she would ask the spirits. 'I am a creator woman, a star woman, a moon woman, a cross woman, a woman of heaven. I am a cloud person, a dew-on-the-grass person.'

A lifelong Catholic, Sabina blended Christian elements into Mazatec ritual as she guided participants through their visions. Surprisingly, and in contrast to his predecessors, the local bishop did not consider Sabina's ritual heretical. 'The church is not against these pagan rites—if they may be called that,' Father Antonio Reyes Hernandez said. 'The wise ones and curers do not compete with our religion. All of them are very religious and come to our mass, even María Sabina.'

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Sabina was apprehensive of Wasson when he arrived, but agreed to conduct the ritual after assurances from the village official, who was a trusted friend. Wasson and his photographer tripped throughout the night as Sabina performed the *velada*, and their minds were summarily blown. ‘For the first time the word ecstasy took on real meaning,’ Wasson wrote. ‘For the first time it did not mean someone else’s state of mind.’

Sabina’s reluctance to introduce Wasson to the ceremony had less to do with him being a foreigner and more to do with the fact that Wasson and his colleague weren’t in need of healing.

‘It’s true that Wasson and his friends were the first foreigners who came to our town in search of the saint children and that they didn’t take them because they suffered from any illness,’ she recalled. ‘Their reason was that they came to find God.’

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Wasson returned to the States with a hell of a story. It piqued the interest of *Life* magazine, which bankrolled further trips to the village to report on and take photographs of the Mazatec ritual. It also attracted the attention of the CIA, which was in the middle of its covert mind-control program Project MK-ULTRA. Wasson became an unwitting agent after the CIA secretly funded Wasson’s trips to Mexico throughout 1956 under a shell organisation named the Geschickter Fund for Medical Research.

Wasson witnessed nine mushroom ceremonies in all, each conducted by Sabina. On one trip, he was accompanied by the eminent French mycologist Roger Heim, who identified the species of magic mushrooms and sent samples to Albert Hofmann, the Swiss chemist who had synthesised LSD twenty years earlier. Hofmann was able to isolate the chemical structure of psilocybin and create a synthetic version. His pharmaceutical company Sandoz began sending doses to research institutions and clinics across the world.

The psychologist Dr Timothy Leary, a rising academic star at Harvard, travelled to Cuernavaca, Mexico, in 1960 after reading the article. Despite his professional success, he described himself during this period as ‘an anonymous institutional employee who drove to work each morning in a long line of commuter cars and drove home each night and drank martinis like several million middle-class, liberal, intellectual robots.’ He purchased some mushrooms from a local *curandera* and, rather than partake in a mushroom ritual, ingested them by the pool of his summer villa.

I learned more about my brain and its possibilities and more about psychology in the five hours after taking these mushrooms than in the preceding fifteen years of studying and doing research in psychology. —Timothy Leary

Magic Mushroom (*Psilocybe* spp.)

Leary returned to Harvard and, after securing doses of psilocybin from Sandoz, started the Harvard Psilocybin Project with his colleague Dr Richard Alpert. Aldous Huxley, with his lifelong interest in altered states, served on the board.

Leary and Alpert developed pioneering concepts in psychedelic therapy such as ‘Set and Setting’.¹ They tested whether ingesting psilocybin could reduce recidivism in prison inmates (in the Concord Prison Experiment) and catalyse religious experiences in divinity students (in the Marsh Chapel Good Friday Experiment). The results were ringing endorsements of psilocybin’s mystical and therapeutic potential, but the experiments were later discredited for unsound methodology and omitting details related to the intense anxiety experienced by many participants.

Leary and Alpert were doing more than simply testing psychedelics in controlled experimental settings. They were tripping balls every weekend and urging their students to do the same. Once word got out to the authorities, Leary and Alpert were fired. Soon after, Leary began his public campaign exhorting America’s youth to ‘Tune in, Turn on and Drop Out.’ Alpert travelled to India and came back bearded, wearing a dhoti, and calling himself Ram Dass. By 1966, psilocybin and LSD were illegal in the United States.

Beatniks, hippies, celebrities like Bob Dylan and John Lennon, scientists and seekers of all stripes flooded the village of Huautla de Jiménez after the *Life* article was published. Sabina turned few away, although she frequently expressed misgivings about introducing Wasson to the mushrooms, and always emphasised what she saw as the mushroom’s true purpose.

The publicity was disastrous for the Mazatec community, who blamed Sabina for bringing misfortune to the village and defiling the *velada* ritual. Sabina’s house was burned down, and federales frequently raided her home, accusing her of selling drugs to foreigners. Hippies rented cabins in neighbouring villages. Tourists had bad trips and went raving naked through town.

In the 1970s, Mexican authorities banned the use of psilocybin mushrooms. The influx of tourists receded but, in Sabina’s eyes, the damage had been done.

‘From the moment the foreigners arrived to search for God, the saint children lost their purity,’ she said. ‘They lost their force; the foreigners spoiled them. From now on they won’t be any good. There’s no remedy for it.’

Wasson, for his part, agreed. He expressed remorse for the rest of his life for his role in popularising the recreational use of magic mushrooms. ‘A practice carried on in secret for three centuries or more has now been aerated,’ he wrote. ‘And aeration spells the end.’

1. ‘Set and Setting’ refers to the context surrounding an individual’s psychedelic experience. The mindset (Set) and physical environment (Setting) strongly affect the outcome of psychedelic experiences. The term was coined by psychotherapist Norman Zinberg and popularised by Timothy Leary.

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In one trial studying the potential of psilocybin to catalyse religious experience led by Dr Roland R. Griffiths, more than 70 per cent of the participants self-rated the experience as one of the five most important in their lives. Nearly a third rated it the single most important experience.

Illustration from *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, 1905
Winsor McCay