

Fun with Fungus

A quintessentially Cornellian course has taught thousands of students about the wonders of 'Magical Mushrooms'



UP TO THE GILLS (clockwise from above): Hodge (at right) with students; a hallucinogenic mushroom, *Amanita muscaria*, found near campus; a "flowerpot dapperling" growing in CALS' Bailey Conservatory

On Tuesdays and Thursdays in the spring, hundreds of undergrads flock to Kennedy Hall's Call Auditorium to learn fascinating facts about fungi—from their use as tasty ingredients to the deadly diseases they can cause to the hallucinogenic trips they enable. And along the way, says CALS professor Kathie Hodge, PhD '98, students pick up key scientific concepts. "It's kind of like a stealth biology class," she says. "You learn important ideas in biology through this whimsical lens of fungi."

The wildly popular course—entitled *Magical Mushrooms, Mischievous Molds*—has helped Cornellians satisfy their science requirement for more than a generation. Offered since 1991, the class has entered the pantheon of quintessentially Cornellian courses, along with *Intro to Wines* and *Psych 101*. In fact, on the *Daily Sun*'s list of the 161 things that every Cornellian should do before graduation, *Magical Mushrooms* is one of just four classes deemed essential (along with the aforementioned two, plus *Intro to Tree Climbing*). Few college courses, after all, culminate in an end-of-semester feast—and Hodge's students are treated to a dizzying menu of fungi-derived dishes, from mushroom soup to blue cheese and more.

Magical Mushrooms was the brainchild of Hodge's former colleague George Hudler, now a professor emeritus of mycology. As Hodge—who took over teaching it in 2015—describes it, what was originally envisioned as a small class comprising a few plant science students snowballed into a Cornell phenomenon

whose enrollment has approached 500 in some years. And its popularity stretches beyond the Hill: since Hudler made his course notes freely available, versions of *Magical Mushrooms* have sprouted up as far away as Hawaii.

Each lecture focuses on some aspect of fungi, including plant and animal diseases, household molds, and medicines. Striving to avoid scientific jargon, Hodge aims not only to connect the topic to everyday life, but to present the information in an entertaining and accessible way. A lesson on fungal diseases, for example, includes information on the potentially deadly mycotoxins that can grow on peanuts. But she introduces it in absurdist fashion: by displaying an Internet meme of a dog wearing a business suit, comically scooping peanut butter from a jar with human hands.

Students can take *Magical Mushrooms* as a lecture for three credits or add a week-

ly lab for an additional credit. Some lab activities aren't for the squeamish; early on, students take a microscopic look at fungi growing on horse dung collected from the Big Red polo stables. (Says current student Nathan Laurenz '22: "It was actually kind of beautiful.") Other labs have students identify lichens from the Ag Quad's Minns Garden, make slime mold "pets" to take

The class's labs include having students identify lichens from Minns Garden, make slime mold 'pets,' and learn methods of killing mold—which, Hodge admits, 'is very sad for me.'

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Magical Mushrooms boasts a dozen teaching assistants; dubbed the 'Shroom Squad, they sport matching polo shirts bearing a logo of cartoon mushrooms sprouting from a patch of grass. "The course teaches you about something that you thought you were familiar with, but you really are not," says Zeran Rico Lin '18, a former plant sciences major who loved the course, went on to join the 'Shroom Squad, and is now earning a PhD in bioscience at Rockefeller University. "You don't realize how close these creatures are to our lives."

Asked to account for the course's enduring popularity, Hodge cites, among other things, a bit of creative marketing. "I think we trick people into taking the course because of the title," she says. "But then they get hooked anyway." ■

— Mónica Bandi '19