

At home with mushroom collector David Arora

Aleta George, Special to The Chronicle
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During California's rainy season, many Bay Area mushroom lovers head to Mendocino County to collect wild mushrooms sprouting from the forest floor. Mycologist David Arora used to do the same, but now all he has to do is step out his front door.

After living in Santa Cruz for decades, Arora, author of the popular field guides "Mushrooms Demystified" and "All That the Rain Promises, and More ...," has moved to a ridge outside Gualala, above the southern Mendocino County coast.

He bought his 2,800-square-foot house five years ago, but he didn't move in for two years. The house was built in the 1920s, but rebuilt after it was damaged by fire in the '50s. After Arora bought the home, he used a photograph of the house from the 1940s to restore some of its original features, such as a gable and a picture window in the great room. The large window overlooks a meadow that rolls into a pine forest. Beyond the forest sparkles the Pacific Ocean.

On the sloped roof above the windows is a hybrid solar array designed and installed by Larry Majorana, a retired NASA engineer. Half of the output from the 8-kilowatt system is fed into the grid and half is stored in batteries for use during the frequent utility outages.

The house is still a work in progress - he has the help of local carpenters Tom Rodgers and Scott Wigton - but it feels like home to Arora.

"Home is where the hearths are," he said, referring to the two stone hearths on which he roasts turkeys at Thanksgiving and grills wild mushrooms after forays. The main house has five fireplaces, including the two hearths.

Arora is a citizen of the world, extremely knowledgeable about the natural world and various cultures. His home feels like an international folk-art museum and natural history museum rolled into one. His unusual collections are on display, and he encourages visitors - and there are many - to roam the house.

In addition to collecting dried mushrooms, which he stashes in secret hiding places throughout his house, he collects handmade scissors, signs from African barbershops, bags made from bottle tops and toys made of Coca-Cola cans

He even collects chefs. Brigid Weiler and Jill Milton have cooked for Arora's Thanksgiving workshop for eight years, and Arora learned hearth cooking from William Rubel, author of "The Magic of Fire: Hearth Cooking: One Hundred Recipes for the Fireplace or Campfire."



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Guests Alan Mohr, Tish Moreno and Chris Sterling, with David Arora (right), enjoy a feast of mushrooms. After decades of living in Santa Cruz, Arora moved to Gualala, above the Mendocino County coast.



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The large living room fireplace grill is where Arora prepares mushrooms picked from his property. The main house has five fireplaces, including the two hearths.



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Arora installed a series of ponds and small waterfalls outside his home, including this goldfish pond outside the dining nook.

Birds' nests, dried pods

At the house's north end, near the front door, is a big, open room. At one end is the kitchen; at the other end is a round dining table and a few couches facing a hearth. Arora recently installed a new hardwood floor at this end of the house, with rose- and tan-swirled wood milled from several giant chinquapin trees that died on his property. Hanging from the rafters of the high, open ceiling of redwood logs are oblong birds' nests and 4-foot-long dried pods from Thailand. African baskets used for mushroom collecting hang above the front door, and Chinese paper beads strung in the doorways add color and texture to the room.

When Arora bought the house, the bathroom was in the center, but he moved it to the west wall. For privacy (and to let others know that the toilet is occupied), guests pull a colorful curtain across a French door. There's a second glass door-with-curtain to the outside, but that curtain is optional, as there's nothing in that direction but field and pine. And here, he's taken the idea of a glass brick wall a step further: In addition to embedding glass bricks in the wall, he has embedded red, blue and yellow vases in a variety of shapes and sizes. By day, the sunlight shines through the glass; by night, the bathroom light throws colored light onto the dark grass outside. The sink basin doesn't have a drain and is interchangeable with two other bowls hanging on the wall. After washing your hands, you pour the water into the toilet or simply toss it outside. (This encourages water conservation.)

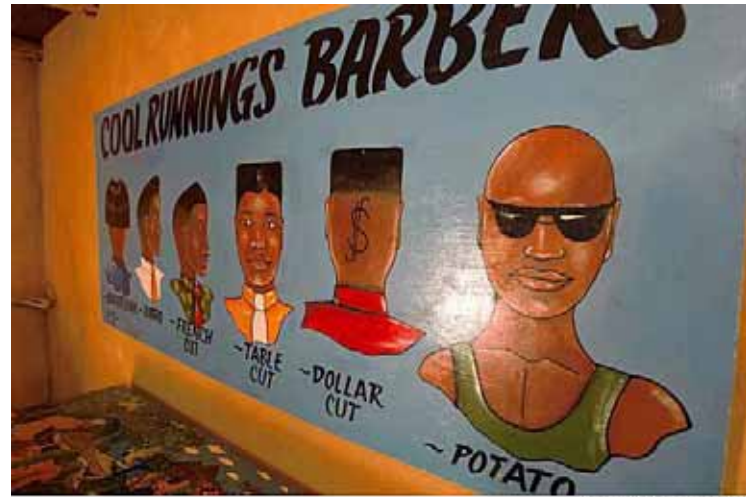
Mushroom stairs

Opposite the bathroom is what Arora calls the African store, which is filled with more collections: handmade soldered oil lamps, black leather sandals, stoves and cooking utensils handmade from recycled metal parts.

A large mushroom sculpture takes up one corner of the room and reaches to the ceiling. At first it isn't obvious that the large, solid, flat-topped mushrooms are stairs that lead to a loft, where a cozy bed is walled in by a rainbow of scarves.

In the middle of the house is the great room, where guests gather for dinner. Arora redesigned the room by raising the ceiling, adding barked redwood beams and installing a huge picture window worthy of the stupendous sunsets. A yard-wide artist's conk (a type of shelf fungus), intricately carved with an idyllic mountain scene, serves as a centerpiece. Arora explains in "All That the Rain Promises" that this type of conk has a white underside that stains brown when scratched.

In front of the stone hearth is an old cobbler's bench that's used as a cook's table for grilling the wild matsutakes, shrimp russulas or boletes found on his property. On the rough-hewn long table near the window, during a reporter's recent visit, were tossed napkins and colorful rolling pins used to make the Indian bread chapati. (Each guest gets a rolling pin and clanks it against everyone else's before making a toast.)



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Among Arora's decor is this sign from an African barbershop.



Eric Luce / The Chronicle

During the day, sunlight lights this bathroom glass display.



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David Arora is a fan of pu-erh tea. He collects the tea, which is pressed into round cakes.

After dinner, Arora and his friends might spin an antique bingo wheel modified with a Mexican Loteria game or go to the boar's head, an outbuilding without electricity, and play mah-jongg by oil lamp.

"It only cost \$100 to fix up that room," Arora said of the boar's head. "It shows that you don't have to spend a lot of money to create a popular space."

When Arora bought the house, the back of it butted up against a hillside. Arora terraced the hill and planted lush gardens on the east and south sides of the home. He also installed a series of ponds and small waterfalls. The entire east wall of the great room opens to a koi pond enclosed by a terrarium.

Arora spends most of his time in the south end of the house, where there is an electric heater, small kitchen, dining nook, bedroom, office - and tea collection. In keeping with Arora's extraordinary collections, this is not your ordinary tea: He collects pu-erh tea, a large-leafed tea pressed into round cakes, which grow more valuable as they age. He artfully displays the round cakes in their decorative packaging on shelves. Arora buys the tea during his frequent visits to Yunnan, China, the world's largest exporter of wild mushrooms.

Annual mushroom hunt

Arora leads an annual Thanksgiving-weekend mushroom foray in nearby Albion and impromptu forays at his house. Going on a foray with him is like going with a walking, talking mushroom encyclopedia.

He started collecting mushrooms as a kid in Pasadena, when he kept his head down on rainy days to keep water off his glasses. In high school he started the Fungus Federation, a club whose members tied skilletts to their belts, clanked down the halls and cooked wild mushrooms on Bunsen burners after school.

Although Arora encourages visitors to roam his house, the man himself remains a mystery. When asked if he was born in Pasadena, he said: no, India. When pressed for details of how that came about, he replied without the slight stammer that sometimes accompanies his words, "Because my mother was there."

You could say his house is like a mushroom. Mushrooms fruit out of a fungal mat that grows below the surface and lives symbiotically with the flora of the forest. Just as a mushroom doesn't reveal everything about the fungi from which it fruits, a house doesn't reveal everything about its occupant. Arora and his stories are as subterranean as the mycorrhiza web from which a mushroom fruits.

Resources

For forthcoming mushroom-hunting events or hearth-cooking seminars go to davidarora.com.

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Arora's home includes a guesthouse near his main house.



Eric Luse / The Chronicle

Arora's tea collection consists of round cakes that he displays in their decorative packaging on shelves in a room in the south end of his house. Arora buys the tea during his frequent visits to Yunnan, China.



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Arora washes dishes in one of the smaller kitchens of his home in Gualala. At right is the dining nook.