

Under the Spell of the Magic Mint
Deep in the forests of Oaxaca, Mexico, grows a plant with psychedelic properties that rival LSD's. Local shamans say it can



Maria Sabina, on a Mexican postcard. Below, the author (left) with locals in Huautla.

bring you wisdom for life. Ethnobotanists say it has the potential to cure many of our physical and mental ills.

And various authorities in America say it's a scourge of our suburbs and must be stopped. Christopher Ketcham goes on

a consciousness-altering search for the truth about *Salvia divinorum*



Jonas and I chewed the psychedelic sage in a hotel room in the town of Huautla de Jimenez, in the high, cool Sierra Mazateca, where the Mazatec shamans grow the plant and use it for healing and divination.

I at first felt nothing and was waiting for the thwack of the drug, pulling bedcovers over my head, when I heard a groan—*Dios*—and looked up and saw Jonas had stripped naked and wrapped himself in sheets of yellowed cotton. Then he crashed to the floor and against the bathroom door and rolled across the room, chirping and clicking, and I thought this was hilarious and went into a fit, until I abruptly remembered the warning of the shaman, who said that the madness of the abuser begins with a foolish laugh. So I shook it off and stood up and went to make sure Jonas was all right.

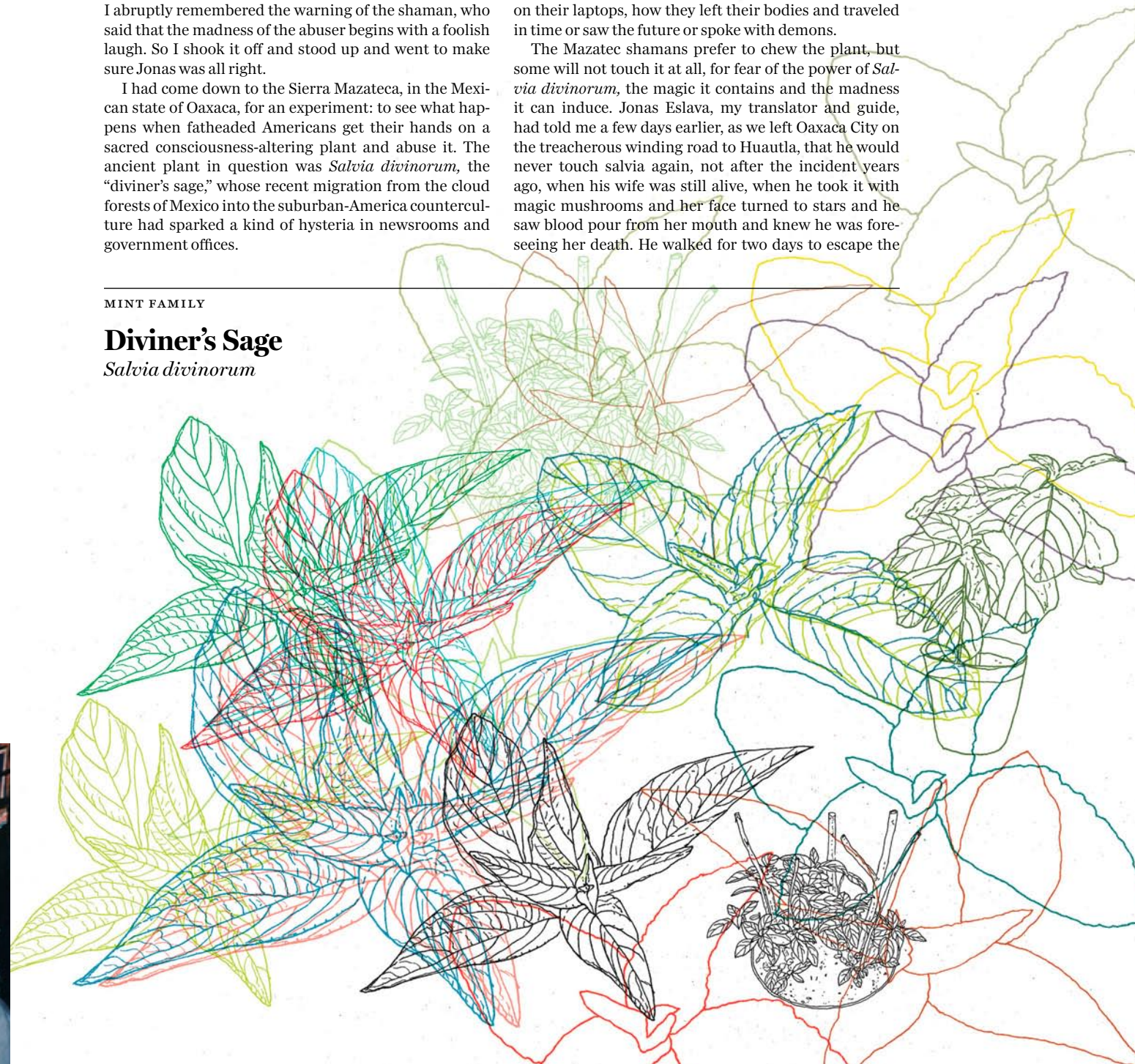
I had come down to the Sierra Mazateca, in the Mexican state of Oaxaca, for an experiment: to see what happens when fatheaded Americans get their hands on a sacred consciousness-altering plant and abuse it. The ancient plant in question was *Salvia divinorum*, the "diviner's sage," whose recent migration from the cloud forests of Mexico into the suburban-America counterculture had sparked a kind of hysteria in newsrooms and government offices.

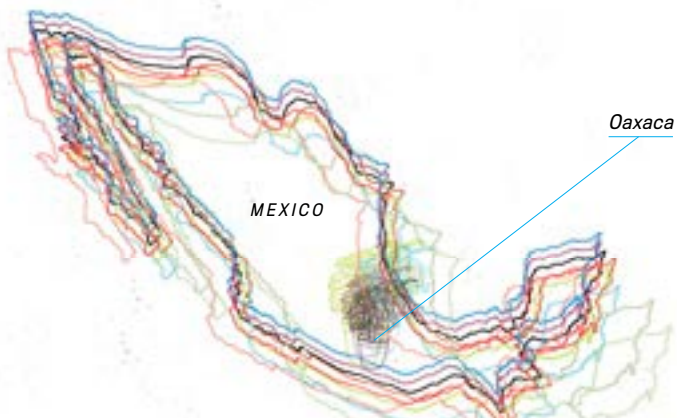
The active ingredient of *S. divinorum* is salvinorin A, perhaps the most powerful naturally occurring hallucinogen known to man—approaching the potency of the epically powerful lysergic acid diethylamide. Fittingly, the kids in the States had dubbed it the "legal acid"—since it is, indeed, mostly legal, but probably not for long—and smoked it in bong, chattering about the high afterward on their laptops, how they left their bodies and traveled in time or saw the future or spoke with demons.

The Mazatec shamans prefer to chew the plant, but some will not touch it at all, for fear of the power of *Salvia divinorum*, the magic it contains and the madness it can induce. Jonas Eslava, my translator and guide, had told me a few days earlier, as we left Oaxaca City on the treacherous winding road to Huautla, that he would never touch salvia again, not after the incident years ago, when his wife was still alive, when he took it with magic mushrooms and her face turned to stars and he saw blood pour from her mouth and knew he was foreseeing her death. He walked for two days to escape the

MINT FAMILY

Diviner's Sage
Salvia divinorum





vision, awaking under a piñon tree in the sun in the scrubby hot hills outside Oaxaca.

"What do you see now?" I said as he lay on the floor. Jonas, eyes wide, would not speak.

It was in Oaxaca that modern Westerners discovered the magic of the psilocybin mushroom, courtesy of the last man you'd expect to make such a find, a banker named R. Gordon Wasson, who in 1955, vacationing from his job as a vice president of J.P. Morgan in New York, financed an expedition into the Sierra Mazateca to satisfy his lifelong fixation on the powers of mycology. In the tradition of the grand amateur, Wasson's adventuring became historic. The self-taught naturalist set out to chart the relationship of psychoactive fungi to myth and folklore in primitive societies and ended up sparking something of a worldwide psychedelic-mushroom craze.

When he arrived at Huautla de Jimenez in June 1955, his guide in the mysteries of the mushroom was a female shaman, a *curandera*, named María Sabina, who was then 61 years old and whom Wasson would make famous in her old age. Welcomed to a hut for a ceremony in the dark of night, Wasson ate twelve morsels of the sacred *Psilocybe hongos*, Sabina shouting "violent, hot, crisp words," clapping and chanting a "full-bodied canticle, sung like very ancient music," Wasson would write later in a 1957 issue of *Life*. He reported visions that began with "courts, arcades, ...resplendent palaces." Then the walls of the hut dissolved, and Wasson rose over the mountains, "poised in space, a disembodied eye, invisible, incorporeal, seeing but not seen." Wasson wondered what the first upright Homo sapiens had concluded when, rooting in the woods, they discovered the miracle of the fungus. "When we bear in mind the beatific sense of awe and ecstasy and caritas engendered by the divine mushrooms," he said of his experiences with Sabina, "one is emboldened to the point of asking whether [such mushrooms] may not have planted in primitive man the very idea of a god."

It was also from María Sabina that Wasson learned of another magic plant employed by the Mazatec shamans, a mysterious broad-leafed, white-and-violet-flowering shrub of the genus *Salvia* that, like the mushrooms, produced visions of god (Wasson dubbed this family of awe-inducing psychoactive flora entheogens, or "that which makes god appear within"). But the entheogenic power of this new salvia went unmentioned in the *Life* article, and anyway the Indians were more protective of the secret of salvia than of the ubiquitous *hongos*.

Wasson's report drew swarms of pilgrims to Huautla. A young Harvard professor named Timothy Leary read the

piece and soon founded the Harvard Psilocybin Project, turning on buddies Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. (It was said, but never confirmed, that the Beatles and Bob Dylan and even Walt Disney also came to eat psilocybin.) The hippies who by the mid-1960s descended on the Sierra Mazateca eventually became disrespectful of the natives, walking naked and hallucinating in the villages, chasing chickens through the mud streets. Finally, around 1969, *federales* raided the communes and arrested the foreigners, and for more than a decade the Sierra Mazateca was mostly sealed to the outside world. For many more years, the secret of salvia lay dormant in the mountainsides.

The road from Oaxaca City to Huautla runs through northern Oaxaca's organ-pipe-cactus desert and hot craggy ranges; then it vaults into the air, climbing 400 hairpin turns into the cloud forest of the Sierra Mazateca, where there is no shoulder to keep you from running off the cliffs. Jonas, who was 32 and looked 20 but sighed like he was 80, said the road was haunted with the lives it had taken. "There were two *autobús* on the road to Huautla once that smashed together, full of families, and they fell down the mountains," Jonas said, and when the wind kicked up in the rainy season, the women picking *matz* and coffee could hear the wailing of the passengers.

I'd been warned about the roads by an ethnobotanist named Daniel Siebert, who lives in Malibu, California, and whom some news outlets had taken to calling the Timothy Leary of *Salvia divinorum*, largely for his encyclopedic knowledge of the plant and its history. In his *Salvia divinorum User's Guide*, which has been translated into seven languages, he has cautioned that salvia is "intolerant of ignorance." Unlike Leary, though, Siebert had no visible following except perhaps among the few scientists who suspected, as Siebert had early on, that the action of *S. divinorum* pointed toward an entirely new center of hallucinogenic activity in the human brain. When I first met him, he had come to Oaxaca City, a colonial capital of grid streets and seventeenth-century cathedrals, to speak at a conference about the use of mind-altering substances. Held in a swank hotel on the periphery of the old town, the conference, called Mind States, had drawn the usual contingent of mostly young, wealthy American neo-hippies attracted by the lineup of venerated figures in the world of psychedelic research. Among the speakers, for example, was Sasha Shulgin, the white-haired chemist who helped popularize the therapeutic use of MDMA (that's Ecstasy to you).

When Siebert stepped to the podium and asked how many in his audience had tried salvia, more than half of the hundred or so people in the room raised hands.



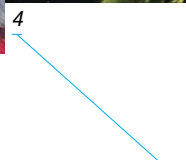
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Siebert was taken aback; he looked almost touched. In a clear, sweet alto that came off as a whisper, Siebert described how he had first experienced the plant in 1989, when he ate twenty-six "very bitter" leaves and looked out from the deck of a friend's home and saw little "hobbit houses" nested in the hills. "These were the homes of fairylike beings, childlike, with enormous eyelashes," he said, "and it all seemed completely normal." The height of the intoxication lasted perhaps an hour—very short, very intense. (Smoking, the preferred method of American teens, telescopes the peak period to roughly ten minutes.)

Siebert had journeyed to Huautla in the early 1980s, when the road to the Sierras was still unpaved and the town's 20,000 Indians lived in tin shacks and adobe huts. Throughout history, distant central governments—Aztec, Spanish, Mexican—rose and fell, but the Mazatecs kept their own time on the folded peaks. By the time Siebert wandered into the village, the Indians had loosened up somewhat with regard to their sacred sage, but not much. The *curanderas* of the Mazatec, the "women who cure," told Siebert what they had told Wasson: They called their plant Yerba de la Pastora, or in the language of Mazatec, *ska María Pastora*, or just *pastora*: the herb of Mary, shepherdess, the lady of the leaf, who watched not merely over the lives of men but over the blades of grass and the animals who fed from the land. If you were sensitive to her, if you listened, *pastora* showed the way to live the good life. Her wisdom was sought when the question of the seeker that needed answering, the sickness that needed curing, was very complex and very grave and could not be answered or cured by the simpler magic of the mushroom.

In Oaxaca City, I met salvia smokers from Denmark, Germany, France, Britain, Australia. In Death Valley, I met a salvia smoker hiking in the salt badlands.

In Brooklyn, I met salvia freaks in shithouse bars. A study of 520 salvia users conducted in 2004 by Erowid.org, which catalogs the culture of psychoactive substances, found that 93 percent were male, with an average age of 23. Ninety-three percent of users smoked the leaf rather than chewed it, as traditionally prescribed by the Mazatecs; 81 percent said they'd use the leaf again. My wife's sister, who was 18 years old and had just graduated from high school in rural Maryland, told me how her friends bought it from a Web site, one of hundreds that retail the leaf for about \$30 a gram (a gram being sufficient for ten or fifteen serious trips). She smoked it in a rented house on the Maryland shore, sucking at a homemade bong that had a Ping-Pong ball floating on the water. "Some of the guys were smoking the Monster," she said. The Monster was Ecstasy, marijuana, crack, and salvia mixed in a

blunt. She didn't want the Monster. But salvia alone in the Ping-Pong bong: "I held it for ten seconds and looked around and saw that the world had turned digital. Made of zeros. All repeated. Neon white, yellowish, pinkish. I tried to talk, but nothing came out. One guy thought he was skinny as a fence post. Another guy thought he was the Nintendo 64 Super Mario Brothers game." Salvia was universally liked.

In October 2002, a 15-year-old Rhode Island boy named Daniel Moffa smoked salvia before going to school one morning. Then he went to purchase a bag of marijuana from a local dealer. He and the dealer, who was 16 years old, had apparent differences, and Moffa, who later claimed to be hallucinating on salvia, stabbed the dealer close to the heart, nearly killing him. Daniel Siebert was contacted by Moffa's infuriated father, who tracked down Siebert through his Web site, Sagewisdom.org. The senior Moffa hoped to mount a "salvia-induced insanity" defense, a ploy that didn't travel far in the courts: Young Moffa was sentenced to five years in juvenile detention. Siebert found the kid's tale implausible. A deep salvia intoxication, he notes, precludes mobility (experienced users often talk about turning into a tree, rooted to one spot). Moffa's father has since said his son has been diagnosed with bipolar affective disorder, and that salvia played a secondary role, at best, in the incident.

Still, *S. divinorum* had graduated from an obscure plant into the class of dangerous drugs, known on the street not by the Latin or as the mystical shepherdess but as "Sally D," "the magic mint," "the Lady." The press caught on, and in 2002, Congressman Joe Baca (D-Calif.) seized on the opportunity to grandstand against the apparent scourge and cosponsored, with fellow Democrat Grace Napoli-tano, the Hallucinogen Control Act, which sought to outlaw salvia and criminalize its use and sale. The effort died in committee; there Baca let it rest. By December of that year, though, the DEA placed *S. divinorum* on its list of "drugs and chemicals of concern," the common precursor to prohibition. All that was now needed, Daniel Siebert told me back in 2004, was "a tragedy, some foolish accident, for salvia to go that way. It will probably happen."

In Huautla, I told Jonas I needed to find two things: samples of the plant and a shaman who would administer it ceremonially. He took me first to see his

cousin, Aurelio, a bony 19-year-old with coal black eyes who immediately offered to ply me with mushrooms at a competitive price. (Not a day went by that old men in the streets, or waiters in cantinas, or drunks sucking cane liquor, or children in packs, failed to offer to set me up with a banana leaf of mushrooms (continued on page 240)

1 Jonas, the author's guide, outside a shaman's temple.

2 Jorge the shaman, son of a famous curandera.

3 Figurines of Mary in Jorge's temple.

4 The sage plant *Salvia divinorum*, growing outside Daniel Siebert's home in Malibu.

5 A cutting of *Salvia divinorum*.

6 Jorge's temple, high in the mountains of Oaxaca.

1, 2, 3 & 6: COURTESY OF CHRISTOPHER KETCHAM

4: L.A. TIMES PHOTOS/NEWS.COM. 5: KEVIN EISENHUT/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL/NEWS.COM.

RUNOVER

and a *chamane* to take me tripping, and always *muy barato*). Aurelio and Jonas talked aside, and when Jonas informed his cousin we were looking for the rarer *pastora*, the boy raised his eyebrows and pondered. He concluded that we must climb to the top of the tiered town to find the family of María Sabina.

It was rainy and fog-strewn, and around us the mountains disappeared in cloud. Along the narrow streets, wild dogs teemed and fought and ran away, and I was tempted to throw a rock. “Careful! Some are *nagual*,” Aurelio said, using an Aztec word that described the animal form of a metamorph shaman, a shape-changer, what primitive Europeans called lycanthropes, whose chief specimen on the Continent was the werewolf. But *nagual* also referred to a magical bond the Mazatecs kept with the natural world: When a person is born and his soul formed, the Mazatecs say, so too is a soul double born among the animals. To throw a rock even at dogs rooting in garbage or sleeping in the gutter or ripping out one another’s windpipes was, quite possibly, to stone one’s secret self, one’s companion and shadow—one’s *nagual*.

We climbed high above the town to a peak, El Cerro de la Adoración, where along the mile of the black-forested height the faithful come to place pesos and goat’s blood and cacao beans and to light candles at the shrines of nested crosses. Aurelio explained that God trawls up here collecting the prayers, and sometimes, every three or four months, El Señor de Huautla, as Aurelio calls him, comes to town, “where he has many women. They surround him, they come running—I have seen this.” “You have seen this?” I ask in English, at which Jonas, who won’t translate, throws me a look, as if to say, “Aurelio has never been out of Huautla—let him be.”

We marched higher into the muddy yard of a home of cinder block and tin where six chickens free-ranged and a goat loafed at his stake and a banana tree drooped with many little crescent-moon bananas bunched among the big leaves. This was the property of the grandson of María Sabina, who in the wake of Wasson’s attentions suffered a backlash among her peers. I’d been told that within a year of Wasson’s visit, her hut was burned to the ground and her family exiled to this mountaintop at the edge of town, where the old *curandera* lived for thirty-one more years. During that time, by dint of the marketing of the lucrative mushroom, she became a countercultural hero. Multiple books, at least one opera, and a movie have been written about her; T-shirts in Mexico City and Guadalajara and even Tijuana are printed with images of her wizened, leathery face.

Sabina’s grandson, a watchful man in his fifties, appeared from a doorway. He had long ago tired of ‘shroom pilgrims and cut short the pleasantries: A mushroom ceremony cost 2,000 pesos, about \$200. I want

to ask him questions, but if we’re not paying, he’s not talking. I mention *yerba de la pastora*. “Ah, no! *Pastora?* No! No!” He waves us off and walks away without saying good-bye. Jonas seethed at the offense. He promised now we would not leave Huautla until he had delivered me a shaman who would deliver us to salvia.



WHILE RECORDED USE of the magic mushroom had gone back over 500 years in Mesoamerica, salvia went unmentioned in the annals of the Aztecs and the conquistadors. Gordon Wasson had eaten a small dose of the leaf in 1961, six years after his first psychedelic summer in the Sierras. But it wasn’t until the fall of 1962, on a return trip to the Mazateca region, that Wasson, in the company of Albert Hofmann, Swiss inventor of LSD, plunged into the cloud forest on muleback to finally secure cuttings of the plant for identification. The first batch of acquired leaves was insufficient for the exigencies of lab work, but generosity, so characteristic of the Mazatecs, favored the expedition: A *curandera* deep in the jungle brought forth from her secret garden a bundle of the splendid-flowering plant, which was dried and sent to a University of California botanist named Carl Epling. Epling declared it an entirely new species of sage, and given its powers, he christened it *Salvia divinorum*.

But there remained the deeper question of chemical identity. Hofmann returned to Switzerland, to Sandoz Laboratories, to pin down the action of the plant. After several assays, he failed and last gave up. So, too, did a gifted young lab wizard named Sasha Shulgin, the future guru of Ecstasy, who was then employed with Dow Chemical and who in his spare time grew *S. divinorum* in his greenhouse. Both men, scientists of vision, were in this particular case victims of blinkered expectation. Hallucinogens to that point had all been classed as alkaloids—psilocybin and LSD chief among them—but *S. divinorum* did not hold to the pattern. *Pastora* was something truly new; its active ingredient was not an alkaloid. Thirty more years would pass before Daniel Siebert led the way to cracking the plant’s code.

In 1983, two researchers working independently, Alfredo Ortega and Leander Valdes, had isolated from the leaves of *S. divinorum* a compound they called salvinorin A. Ortega simply discarded the compound, neglecting to test further. Valdes, a graduate student in the United States writing his dissertation on salvia, suspected this was the psychoactive agent. But he made no attempt to test it on humans.

Daniel Siebert was baffled that Ortega and Valdes had avoided this obvious next step. But then again, they knew the perils. Siebert had no formal training as a chemist, certainly none as a researcher—he’d studied painting in college. In his California kitchen, Siebert followed the method of extraction

prescribed by Valdes, powdering the dried leaves, dissolving the powder in chloroform, repeating the process until he obtained a honey-thick tar that he further refined with methanol to a thimbleful of crystals: crude salvinorin A. He ignited the crystals on a sheet of tinfoil and inhaled the smoke. Nothing happened. He tried again. “I suddenly didn’t have a body, a house, an earth,” he said. “I was in no physical place.” Salvia had shattered “the fabric of existence. It is madness,” he wrote afterward. “Then I came out of it,” he told me, “and I realized—eureka!” Three months later, he completed a paper detailing the discovery of salvinorin A as the hallucinogenic principle in *S. divinorum*, with himself as test subject, and published it in a 1994 issue of the *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*.

But salvinorin A itself presented a further mystery. You can recognize its strangeness, its newness, from the first time you try salvia, if you’ve also tried LSD or psilocybin or mescaline. “My salvia experiences,” wrote one user on an Internet Listserv, “made even the most extreme LSD ones seem like a walk in the park.” Unlike any of these kissing hallucinogenic cousins, whose common trait as alkaloids is their binding to the serotonin receptors of the brain, salvinorin A does not target serotonin. In this respect, it is alone among hallucinogens. For this reason, too, *S. divinorum* fails to come under the purview of either the Controlled Substances Act of 1970 or the Federal Analogue Act of 1986, which together prohibit all the serotonin-binding hallucinogens. Salvinorin A instead produces hallucinations by oddly targeting the family of neurotransmitters known as the opioids, with a specific affinity for the kappa-opioid receptor.

None of this was known until 2002, when a biochemist at Case Western Reserve University, Bryan Roth, who had heard of salvia’s effects from an undergraduate, contacted Siebert for extracts of salvinorin A to test its action on the human brain. That in the messy world of human biochemistry, salvinorin A would bind as an agonist to the powerful and wide-reaching kappa-opioid receptor, and only the kappa-opioid receptor—most agonists tangentially tweak a variety of receptors, producing unwanted side effects—was unprecedented and, in the community of biochemists, frankly shocking.

Thus salvinorin A suggested a universe of medicinal opportunity. It effectively mimics the actions of the neuropeptide dynorphin, the body’s natural kappa-opioid agonist, which means it could modulate everything from pain response to tissue healing to appetite and mood (perhaps explaining salvia’s use among the Mazatecs for the treatment of stomachache, headache, and rheumatism). Kappa receptors flooded with dynorphins are suspected to be responsible for the onset of schizophrenia and dementia, whose symptoms are not unlike the radical time and space dislocations experienced in a

salvia vision. “Pharmaceutical companies have long been interested in substances that mimic or block the actions of dynorphin,” says Dr. Bruce Cohen, who is working on salvinorin A derivatives at the labs of a Harvard teaching hospital. High levels of dynorphins have also been known to counteract cocaine addiction by stifling the craving response among related opioid receptors. Daniel Siebert reports that he has received dozens of testimonies from alcoholics and drug addicts who cured themselves using salvia. He showed me scores of letters from salvia users who found it alleviated depression; one man claimed the leaf turned him from the brink of suicide. The anecdotal evidence and preliminary scientific studies together point toward a “unique mechanism of antidepressant action” in salvinorin A, according to a 2001 report in the *Journal of Clinical Psychopharmacology*. The report cited the case of a 26-year-old Australian woman plagued by untreatable depression who, after medicating with a mild dose of salvia leaves chewed three times a week, enjoyed a “total remission” of symptoms. Researchers at the University of Mississippi and the University of Iowa are also hotly pursuing the salvinorin A question. No one among these scientists wants to see a prohibition scare shut down their efforts.



HUAUTLA IS A wonderful town in which to do nothing and not know the time. I ate mushrooms during the day and walked through the mountains listening to the barking of the *naguals* and the wind in the clouds, and Jonas in his shiny black shirt and black slacks and cowboy boots seduced Indian girls by the side of the road. Then, one day, a young shaman with gold teeth, Jorge Aurelia Aurora, son of a famous *curandera*, agreed to consult with us on the powers of salvia. Jonas brought the news with his usual flamboyance: “I found your *chamane*! I am fucking good!”

We climbed the town in the hot afternoon, to a place where the road turned to dirt and a tall blue cross on a pink cement altar marked the steps to Jorge’s home. Jorge was lean and handsome in a sinister way, and wore a mustache and wisp of beard. He took us to a tin-shack temple where icons of Mary covered the walls. He told us of the salvia ceremony: The altar where the shaman prays always faces east. Offered to the spirit of *pastora*, to Mary on the walls, are flowers, honey, cocoa, water, laurel, *plumas de guacamaya*. Copal incense is burnt, so is tobacco. As with the mushrooms, the leaves are eaten in selected pairs. It must be dark, preferably after midnight. You must be quiet. Then *pastora* will come. Sometimes she appears as a giant woman.

But alas, Jorge could not officiate to bring her forth. “I have never taken *pastora*,” he said. “I am afraid of her.” His mother, Aurelia, yes, because she understood *pastora*’s

wisdom. A young shaman administering *pastora* will drive himself crazy, said Jorge, which reminded me of the rabbinical tradition that warns against a youthful reading of the Kabbalah—its secrets too much for the jejune.

“Well, could I see where the plant grows? A plot in the woods?”

“Ah, no. Only the curer can go and find the plant. He must talk to her, make friends with her, explain why she is being cut. She is shy, *muy delicada*. She does not like strangers.” Jorge gave me a thoughtful look. “Why are you so interested in *pastora*? Why not a mushroom ceremony instead?” A pecuniary gleam in his eye. “The mushroom, you know, is so much easier. *Pastora—mucho trabajo*! You must abstain from sex for fifty-three days before taking *pastora*. Hard for people!” He laughed. Then Jorge told us of a Westerner who mistreated salvia, failed to keep to the abstinence bargain, and ended up stripping naked, running crazily through the streets of the town. “Many people become naked,” Jorge said, “when *pastora* chases them. Very sad.”

I told Jorge that I first learned about *pastora* because young men and women in the United States had recently started using it without care, as a drug, to get high.

“How do they take it?”

“They smoke it.”

He shook his head as if hearing awful news. “It’s no good. They don’t know the terrible risk they are taking. Moreover, *pastora* should not be mistreated like that. She will not like to be smoked.” He paused. “I wish,” he said very slowly, “I wish I could come to the United States and hold an orientation with American children who take *pastora* to warn them. That little by little they will become...*tonto*.”

“What do you mean?”

“Their minds will be blind. They will become fools.”

Jorge said he had some business to attend to. Mushroom pilgrims from Israel. But he would do us a favor. He would go into the forest above the town and pick some leaves from his plot and provide us with a sample. For a small fee, of course. “*Claro*,” I said.

Later, leaf in hand, Jonas and I went to a soiled little cantina on the edge of town and ordered Sol and tequila. Across the road was a filthy whorehouse, two stories that leaned badly, where the women in rags called from their falling-down windows, looking like serpents. Our waitress was a round-arsed transvestite with long legs, rare among the short, stubby women of the Mazatecs. Jonas was in love. “Oh, I would love her for all time if she was not a man!” We got drunk. We started asking around about *pastora*. We told the story of our search, of Jorge, and of María Sabina’s grandson. All listened and said nothing. The bartender finally spoke up: “This may not have been a Sabina grandson. There are many Sabina-family fakers. They are as numerous as the dogs. It is a business.

It is their survival.” The bartender happened also to know something about *pastora*. He was willing to speak, but not if we used his real name. “Call me Victor Ubalva,” he said.

“Victor, how do you use *pastora*?” “To cure ills. To see the future. To solve money problems.”

“What were your money problems?”

“Well, I was not doing well,” Victor replied. “I took *pastora*, I asked these questions—how can I solve my money problems?—and now my brother owns this bar and I work here. I don’t want to say more.”

Around 1 A.M., the bars closed, the cantinas swept clean, Jonas and I were wasted with nowhere to go. On such a binge, I usually don’t like to stop until the sun is up and I’m near collapse. There was only one thing to do, which was to eat some of that fresh leaf that Jorge had given us and keep the night going. Back at the hotel, I stuffed a couple of leaves in my mouth and handed over a bunch to Jonas, who looked at them and me and remembered his vow that he would never do it again, not after he saw his wife dying in a flood of stars.

Things went badly after that. Jonas clicking in his native Zapotec and rolling around naked—Jorge had said it would happen—and finally, the tequila besting the shepherdess, falling off to stunted sleep in a corner of the floor. I felt...dumb, fogged up, like I was wearing a layer of old gray chopped meat over my eyes. It’s said that 15 percent of people who first try salvia experience nothing whatsoever, as if the neural pathways have to learn salvinorin A. Jonas knew *pastora*. That was clear. Maybe it was ancestral. Later, I came out of the stupor and took a walk in the town, feeling suddenly guilty, like I’d poisoned the poor guy, and depressed that we’d eaten the leaf like dumb drunks. The sea of dogs parted, the moon shone, and high above the town I walked along the cliffy paths to the shrines where the prayers had been laid for the Lord of Huautla to gather them up.



IN THE MORNING, Jorge stood over me. “Jorge,” I croaked. He’d somehow gotten in the room, and now he wanted an extra hundred pesos for the interview and the fistful of leaf. He smiled his gold hyena smile, noting that he’d raised his mushroom ceremony fee to 1,800 pesos, having learned from me—for which he gave thanks—that his competitor, María Sabina’s grandson, was charging 2,000 pesos.

Whatever the market would bear. Perhaps this is the kind of spirituality we in the godless West deserve: the kind you get gouged for on the back end of the deal.

In the end, it just might be greed—coupled, naturally, with fear and ignorance—that will get salvia illegalized in the States. Ten years ago, there were perhaps a handful of distributors of the leaf, on the Internet, in head shops. Daniel Siebert estimates the number

of Web sites selling salvia increased one hundredfold between 1995 and 2005. A Google search of “*Salvia divinorum*” produces almost three-quarters of a million hits—and as in any market, salvia purveyors fight for sales share with the weapons of marketing: promotions, price slashing, steady “improvements” to the product. Many vendors now sell superpotent leaf impregnated with pure salvinorin A. “So many people selling it, so many of them irresponsible, targeting the huge teenager market,” Siebert tells me. He keeps his prices high because he doesn’t “want salvia to be the price of bubble gum. It’s not LSD or marijuana or a party drug. I’ve tried to approach these vendors. They tell me to go to hell.”

The desire for the product grows in Huautla, and farmers have adapted accordingly. Jonas had told me how the economy had been devastated by free trade, how NAFTA wiped out fair prices for the coffee bean and the corn crops that once fed the villages of the Sierra Mazateca. The farmers gladly found a niche market peddling salvia to foreigners, as distasteful as this was to the elder shamans. The irony is that it’s easier to find salvia on the Internet from a middleman than in the place where the shamans tend the leaf. “They will sell to a computer but not to us,” said Jonas. This was perhaps as inevitable as the depredations of NAFTA: distant markets, out of sight, out of mind.

It was inevitable, too, that the tragedy foretold by Daniel Siebert would come to pass. On January 23, 2006, a Delaware teenager named Brett Chidester, who had apparently been smoking salvia routinely, committed suicide by asphyxiating himself with stove fumes in a tent in his father’s garage. His grieving parents found an essay he wrote about his salvia use: “Salvia allows us to give up our senses and wander in the interdimensional time and space,” Brett wrote. “Also, and this is probably hard for most to accept, our existence in general is pointless. Final point: Us earthly humans are nothing.” His parents were convinced that salvia had led their son to suicide. So were Delaware legislators, who that spring passed Brett’s Law, illegalizing salvia statewide. The mainstream media smelled a story in Brett’s corpse: He would be the poster child for the perils of the “new” drug. On CNN’s *Anderson Cooper 360*, the threat was clarified for the outset—“Others are at risk as well,” intoned Cooper—and the obligatory expert was trotted out, one Steven S. Martin, associate director of the Center for Drug and Alcohol Studies at the University of Delaware. “It’s been particularly found that heavy doses of salvia can lead to depression,” Martin tells us. Which, on its face, is exactly wrong. When I called Martin to ask about his sources, he told me they were “anecdotal.” “Professor Martin must be fabricating his information about *Salvia divinorum*’s leading to depression,” offered Daniel Siebert. “I know of no evidence to support such a claim.”

Inspired by the efforts in Delaware, lawmakers in Alaska, New Jersey, Illinois, Pennsylvania, North Dakota, Iowa, Utah, Texas, California, and Oregon followed suit, offering to control the terrible leaf, possibly soon to join Louisiana, which in the summer of 2005 became the first state to criminalize the possession and sale of *S. divinorum*, mandating prison terms of up to ten years for selling the leaf, five years for possession, and tens of thousands of dollars in fines. Missouri also criminalized possession, with equally draconian penalties. (Most recently, Tennessee in May 2006 and Oklahoma in June 2006 criminalized some forms of possession or distribution.) New York State, where I live, now has a bill in the works, too, though it’s relatively modest: a \$500 fine for possession. Thus begins the slide down the slippery slope. The legislator who crafted the original New York law, Assemblyman Carl Heastie, was reportedly inspired by “the nature of the drug’s euphoria and its dangerous side effects,” according to an aide. “There were some kids in Rochester who had overdosed on salvia,” the aide said. “They had taken it and gotten violent and uncontrolled.” When I asked for substantiation of these events, the aide faxed me a report from the *Ithaca Journal*, which said nothing about Rochester but did quote a police source with the state Community Narcotics Enforcement Team: “We have no experiences with [salvia] at this point. No one has reported problems with it.”



ON MY LAST DAY in Huautla, I found a shaman who would not take money. Lisa was elderly, living alone in a stucco house among a maze of banana trees, where I found her quietly sweeping old corn husks from her deck. She wouldn’t do a ceremony for 4,000 pesos. Nor for 6,000 or 10,000 pesos. She said that those who know salvia well, who have truly befriended her, do not need to ingest her. Hold her to your body, she said. If your stomach is sick, hold her there; the leaf dries up in an instant and your sickness is gone. And that was all she would say.

It wasn’t until I got back to Brooklyn that I tripped properly on the leaf. I had brought home Jorge’s stash, and I also had gotten a bitter tincture from Daniel Siebert. In addition, I’d made it through customs with a load of psychedelic mushrooms, fresh sweaty monster caps as big as my fists, bought from a coked-up Indian at 7,000 feet in the sierras. So the supply was secure; I didn’t have to leave my room for some time. I choked the foul tincture under my tongue or smoked the leaf, drinking beer to stay calm, closing my eyes, keeping the room dark and quiet. One night I turned into a cactus. I watched a distant light across the desert, a shower of stars. I was a child with my father on the island of Nantucket. I walked across a dune to a cliff by the ocean where a group of cavemen ridiculously tried to fly away in a hot-air balloon, which sank into the sea, drowning the

ape-men with an unhappy farting sound.

Several times my wife said she found my body on the floor. I was rolling around naked, speaking in tongues, but she said there was no mind in the eyes, that I didn’t recognize her. I told her the next day that something was in the room. A homunculus. The *nagual*. I began to feel the presence widely, on the street, on subways, in supermarkets. Once I heard it talking to me from behind a wall. Around the tenth or twelfth trip on salvia, I threw out the rest of my stash and gave it up forever.

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