



# Marvelous Chester County Mushrooms

by Lori Baer

When you live in the boonies, you'll latch on to anything that puts your hometown on the map. My husband and I lived in the boonies of Chester County, Pa., about five miles west of Kennett Square, for nearly 10 years. During that decade whenever we traveled and signed our names and locale in B&B journals, hiking trail registries or event rosters, we'd always add the tag line "mushroom capital of the world!" Without fail, we'd head off giggling like a couple of kids who used silly fake names.

We've since moved, but haven't outgrown our love of mushrooms that inevitably took root during our time in Chester County. After all, "mushroom capital of the world" is no joke. The most recent census (2002) indicates Chester County accounts for 81 percent of Pennsylvania mushroom farms, 67 percent of Pennsylvania production, and 37 percent of total U.S. production. Ranking first in mushroom production nationwide, Pennsylvania is a mushroom powerhouse and the commodity is the state's largest cash crop.

For more than a century, Southeastern Pennsylvania has been the hub of mushroom production. The year 1885 marks the beginning, when William Swayne, a successful Kennett Square florist, maximized the space beneath his greenhouse benches to grow mushrooms. Locals took notice as business became a commercial success, and the industry in Kennett Square literally mushroomed.

To appreciate mushroom farming, it's important to understand how mushrooms are grown. Cultivated mushrooms are raised indoors in the dark, and their lives begin in a laboratory. The lab inoculates sterile cereal grains with miniscule spores, the natural seeds of a mushroom too tiny for growers to handle. The inoculated grains are then incubated to produce spawn that can be sown like seed.

Outdoors on the farm, compost is prepared using wheat or rye straw, hay and/or crushed corn cobs, or manure-based compost is made of stable bedding from local race tracks and horse stables. Inside the grow houses, compost is pasteurized to kill pests. Stacked wooden trays hold the pasteurized compost that's then mixed with spawn and covered with peat moss. Temperature and humidity are carefully controlled, and the first harvest takes about a month. Mushrooms mature in intervals, so picking by hand is continuous for six to ten weeks, after which the bed is emptied, the growing area is pasteurized again with steam, and the process repeats for a new crop. Like all farming, growing mushrooms is labor intensive.

Also like many farms, the business carries rich family tradition. You won't find factory mushroom farms in Chester County. Instead you'll discover mom-and-pop farms passed down to sons and daughters, nieces and nephews. Third or fourth generation growers are commonplace and 86 percent of the county's mushroom businesses employ family.

To those who believe food energy comes not only in the form of calories or soil health, but also from love and pride of growers and handlers, this legacy of family may account for the wholly satisfying taste of fresh mushrooms. Mushrooms are rich in umami, the fifth taste our tongues are capable of detecting in addition to sweet, sour, salty and bitter. Mushrooms' umami gives dishes a savory, meaty quality with a full-bodied mouthfeel. Think portabella burger.

Though mushrooms are often grouped with vegetables and provide many of the same nutritional benefits, they are actually fungi. The bulk of the fungus industry consists of the white button, but other mushrooms commonly cultivated include crimini or baby bella, portabella, maitake, shiitake, enoki, oyster and beech—each offering a cornucopia of culinary possibilities.

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## CARE AND HANDLING OF MUSHROOMS

Select mushrooms without visible moisture on the outside or in the pack.

To store bulk/loose mushrooms, place in a paper bag or keep in the original package and refrigerate.

Mushrooms with open veils have more intense flavor and are usually better when cooked. (The mushroom's veil is a very thin layer of tissue that protects the mushroom while it develops and "opens" as the mushroom matures. Not all mushrooms purchased have veils; sometimes, veils appear covering only the gills—the ribs on the underside of a mushroom cap; sometimes the veils cover the entire mushroom.)

To clean mushrooms, use a soft brush to remove any traces of peat moss or soil; or rinse quickly and pat dry. Soaking fresh mushrooms or rinsing open-veiled mushrooms may add excess moisture.

*Source: Mushroom Council*

No dish says Chester County mushrooms more than a bowl of mushroom soup. A rich broth earthy in flavor and color, creamy and comforting with bites of fresh 'shrooms, it's a soup that stands alone kicking crackers to the curb.

"When I was growing up the staple at the Thanksgiving table was always cream of mushrooms," said Kathi Lafferty, a Kennett Square-born native, about the origins of mushroom soup. "My grandmother made a great cream of mushroom; it was a side dish, it wasn't gravy for your potatoes, and oh, they were excellent; they were so good. And so everything's based on that kind of recipe."

Lafferty's got the fungi credentials. She's owner of The Mushroom Cap, the Kennett Square store devoted to mushrooms and their history, and married to a mushroom grower. Her husband Tom and his brothers, Phil and Steve, operate the family mushroom business, Lafferty and Sons, which began in 1946 by the brothers' father, Philip.

Lafferty's interest in mushrooms and watching her hometown of Kennett Square thrive led her to volunteer as coordinator for The Mushroom Festival, now in its 23<sup>rd</sup> year. Voted one of the top ten festivals in Pennsylvania and featured on the Food Network's All American Festival show, The Mushroom Festival has grown to host more than 100,000 fans enjoying unique mushroom festivities and savory mushroom edibles.

With mushroom soup the center of the culinary stage and the focus of an annual cook-off, the street festival also includes cooking demos, farm tours and exhibits, a soup and wine fest, bobbing for mushrooms, live music and over 160 food and novelty vendors. The reach of mushroom dishes extends well beyond Lafferty's grandmother's cream of mushrooms to include all things mushroom—portabella fries, maitake bites, mushroom stuffed crab, pumpkin mushroom soup and the sell-out mushroom ice cream.

Nonetheless, soup remains the attraction. Lafferty says she meets lots of tourists in her shop all asking the same question: Which restaurant has the best mushroom soup?

"People hear about how we're the mushroom capital of the world and when they come into town, they want to taste mushrooms, and they want mushroom soup," Lafferty says. "You can now walk into any restaurant in town and get a bowl of mushroom soup, and that's great!"

Always held the weekend after Labor Day, this year's festival runs September 6–7. The festival is organized by hard-working, fun-loving

volunteers on a mission to "promote the mushroom, educate consumers about the health benefits of mushrooms and to promote tourism in Southern Chester County, all while financially supporting local and regional charities through a grant process." Longwood Gardens, approximately 15 minutes from Kennett Square, is another popular Southern Chester destination.

Luckily, the nature of the mushroom business provides year-round availability so you don't have to wait until September's festival to celebrate the many delicious varieties. As for me and my husband who no longer reside in the "mushroom capital of the world," each meaty mushroom bite from the stove or off the grill takes us back, giving way to the new catch phrase: "the fungus is still among us!"

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