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Phoenix Tail Mushrooms

Saturday, November 04, 2006 - Rural Delivery

Aiman Samy has been growing Phoenix tail mushrooms, also called Oyster mushrooms, for about three years.

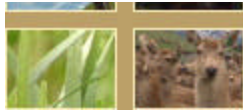
Originally from Asia, it is actually the third most popular mushroom world wide. The mushroom was discovered in New Zealand in 1994 in the wild – before that they were not allowed into the country because authorities didn't think it existed here. In the wild they grow on fallen logs and are seen most often in New Zealand on cabbage trees.

Strangely, they grow in light rather than darkness. They need light while the fruiting body is developing, and if kept in the dark they won't colour up at all, and the stems grow a bit too long, says Aiman.

"We use pasteurised straw which is pretty much made up of the same stuff as wood, and we fill up bags the size of a punching bag and stuff straw inoculated with spores into them, so it is like an artificial tree trunk," he says.

"It takes about three weeks to for the spores colonise the straw and after that they start fruiting. We punch holes in the bags, and the fruits form where the

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holes are because there is more air. The bags are made from plastic ducting that is used in glasshouses for air circulation, it comes in big rolls and it is like a long tunnel and we tie knots at each end."

The company produces up to 300 kg per week of oyster mushrooms. The growing room is about 120 square metres and is like an insulated, temperature and humidity controlled tunnel house. Aiman imported it from California and added with fibreglass Batts, shade cloth and silver paper in layers to stop the Hawke's Bay summers heating it up too much.

Straw and lucerne is mixed dry and put into baskets, pasteurised by being immersed in water being heated to 73° C. The material is drained and cooled, the sporn mixed in, bagged, and taken into the growing room.

Picking consists of pulling the fruit out of the holes and trimming the stubs off them. They are then packed in punnets of three different sizes, 100, 150, and 250 g, and they go to restaurants.

"The mushrooms fruit in big bouquets, and we have some customers who prefer them like that, and so we put those in 2 kg boxes. We like to chill them as soon as they are picked before retail dispatch," says Aiman.

"They should be held chilled in the supermarkets. If they are not chilled, oyster mushrooms will continue growing after they are harvested so they can deteriorate very quickly. "

Aiman has now been selling his crop for two years, but the going has been tough.

"It has been like a roller coaster ride to be honest. I had been wanting to do this for most of the last 10 years and I had been researching it and heard about one or two small growers, and I actually thought that the public were ready for it," he says.

"But I was wrong. People don't know about them, and it takes a lot of work promote them. Supermarkets will stock them but most people don't know what to do with them even though there are recipes on the packs, so I go to supermarkets and demonstrate cooking them. When I do that they sell in one day three or four times what they normally would sell in a week."

That's not surprising because oyster mushrooms are absolutely delicious and have quite a different flavour to the typical flat and brown Western mushrooms, according to Aiman.

"It is more meaty and chewy, almost buttery in texture, and it is mild in flavour although it probably depends on your taste buds – about half my customers at the Hawkes Bay farmers market will say it is quite strong like a field mushroom, and the other half say it is quite mild," he says.

"You wouldn't want to add too much else in with them in cooking. I find the best way to eat them is sautéed by themselves with a little bit of butter, and I tell

everyone to just keep it simple, so simple pasta sauces and risottos. There's a man at the markets who swears by his omelettes with oyster mushrooms in them."

"One of my real favourites is a raw mushroom sliced with a bit of cheese on toast, put it under the grill until the cheese melts, it is absolutely delicious. We have also made a tempura out of it, and it was deep fried and only took about 30 seconds to cook, that is almost raw but the texture and flavour is divine."

"But I'm not really a chef, I'm just a guy who wanted to grow mushrooms."

There are about four companies growing the mushrooms – a large producer in Auckland, Mytopia Mushrooms, and a couple of small operators.

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