

Delicious Gourmet Mushrooms Grown Locally in High Demand

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News

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The meaty and succulent oyster mushroom gracing your restaurant entrée has a very fresh aroma which tells you it was harvested that morning. The mouth-watering mushroom is especially tasty because it was grown locally in a nearby, sustainable, indoor farm in Peekskill known as the Westchester Mushroom Company.

Founded by Austin Schatz, Jonathan Vantman and Benny Liu, the Westchester Mushroom Company was created just after the pandemic. Schatz, who was born and raised in Ossining, became passionate about the environment and worked for Teatown Lake Reservation as marketing manager. He later became the manager of *Fable Farm, an Ossining-based farm* and food hub dedicated to sustainable agriculture and education.

Vantman and Lui also worked at Fable Farm where all three became dedicated to growing food locally and sustainably.

“We all fell in love with the idea of growing mushrooms and started to cultivate them at Fable Farm in small batches,” Schatz recalled. “I wanted to start using skills I learned at Fable to make an impact.”

The freshly grown mushrooms at Fable always sold out quickly, confirming that gourmet mushrooms were in high demand.

But Fable Farm didn’t have enough indoor space so Schatz rented a tiny cubicle the size of a shipping container where he grew mushrooms and delivered to a few local chefs. The demand increased and after a year, it was time to boost production and move into a bigger space.

“We took a risk because local chefs were willing to give us a shot,” said Schatz. “They wanted fresh mushrooms and were willing to pay more for them. We are now able to grow super efficiently in an enclosed, controlled environment.”

Today, the Westchester Mushroom Company currently occupies a 1,100-square-foot space in the Atrium at Charles Point on John Walsh Blvd. in Peekskill. The one room, indoor farm has six square black growing tents with micro controlled environments, each equipped with temperature and moisture gauges. One wall is lined with steel shelves filled with clear plastic bags for cultivating mushrooms.

Growing mushrooms requires a good dose of scientific knowledge for the multi-level process. The goal is to replicate conditions for mushrooms growing in the wild, usually found on trees or the forest floor. A growing medium is prepared, known as a substrate and is usually some kind of bulk material.

Schatz said the substrate they use is hardwood sawdust from local lumber mills. Oak sawdust is the most ideal for growing mushrooms.

“We prepare substrate by cooking the material to pasteurize it and kill unwanted microbes. Then we introduce the mushroom fungus culture which consumes web like structures known as mycelium, which takes over the material and digests it over weeks,” Schatz explained.



The process takes anywhere from four to six weeks to six months, depending on the type of mushroom being grown in the special plastic bags which are mini sterile environments. According to Schatz, shitake and maitake mushrooms can take four to six months whereas pink oyster mushrooms can grow in couple of weeks.

All in all, they grow about 12 different types of mushrooms during the year, including an assortment of oyster mushrooms (blue, pink, golden, PoHo, Italian, black pearl, king), lion’s mane, chestnut and pioppino. Most are grown according to the season.

“In the winter we grow different types than in summer,” Schatz noted. “Growing seasonally is part of our sustainable practice. For example, since pink oysters are tropical mushrooms, they are best grown in the summer as opposed to in the winter when it’s super cold and takes more energy to keep our space warm.”

The attraction to eating mushrooms is not just via our palate, but also from a more innate and astonishing, genetic ancestral connection.

“We have a close relationship with mushrooms,” Schatz explained. “Humans share a single cell ancestry with mushrooms.”

Research has shown that as fungi, mushrooms have a similar genetic composition to humans. Outwardly one example is when mushrooms are exposed to sunlight they can produce Vitamin D — just like humans.

Mushrooms for medicinal use are also in high demand, especially the white shaggy lion’s mane known to be beneficial to mental health, the heart and digestive system.

“We’re asked every day about medicinal mushrooms, some requests are made jokingly, others are quite serious,” said Schatz. “The medicinal interest is high and that may be a possible market for us in the future.”

Westchester Mushroom Company’s mushrooms are on menus at Sweetgrass Grill and Grassroots Kitchen, both in Tarrytown, Tavern at Graybarns in Norwalk, CT, Augustine’s Salumeria in Mamaroneck, Rivermarket in Tarrytown, Peter Pratt’s Inn in Yorktown Heights, Maria restaurant in New Rochelle and Hilton Point Provisions in Rye. The mushrooms are also sold in all DeCicco & Sons stores.

Daily deliveries are made to these restaurants by Schatz and Vantman who take the carefully wrapped boxes of fresh mushrooms to chefs who prepare them for dishes appearing on the daily menu.

“There’s been a huge demand for tons of specialty mushrooms coming from restaurants looking for new and different types,” said Schatz. “Their requests for particular mushrooms and the amount changes from week to week. Our goal is to deliver the mushrooms right after they are harvested. We are always looking for more customers so we can grow more mushrooms.”

Westchester Mushroom company

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Abby is a local journalist who has reported on breaking news for more than 20 years. She currently covers community issues in The Examiner as a full-time reporter and has written for the paper since its inception in 2007. [Read more from Abby's editor-author bio here.](#) Read Abby's archived work here: <https://www.theexaminernews.com/author/ab-lub2019/>