

Farmhouse Kitchens: Dave And Dee's Homegrown Mushrooms

By John Shields

As I entered the growing room of Dave and Dee Scherr's oyster mushroom operation, the first thought that came to mind was of the motion picture "Alien." With the long rows of bulging black pods hanging from the ceiling, lightly shrouded in mist, with tiny little nodules poking out, it seemed all that was missing was a grim and determined Sigourney Weaver.

Lucky for me, I was with the smiling and gregarious Dave and Dee Scherr instead. I had imagined the growing room of a mushroom farm would consist of wooden boxes on the floor, loaded with rich soil and cute little buttons poking out, begging to be picked. In fact, the Scherrs' mushroom growing technique is a highly sophisticated method using pod-like grow bags, plumped with highly enriched soil, perfectly suited for growing a myriad of varieties of oyster mushrooms. The Scherrs' specially constructed building allows them to keep the moisture level in the air at an optimal level for propagation. Once the first little pin sets emerge from the grow bags, little time passes—about 8 to 12 hours—before the mushrooms reach full size, ready for harvest.

When Dave Scherr describes the various varieties he grows, you could close your eyes and imagine yourself in a wine tasting room. Dave, a vir-



tual "mushroom sommelier" enthusiastically describes his Italian Grey oyster mushrooms as "an earthy mushroom with a peppery aftertaste." The Chocolate Browns impart a "subtle nutty finish." When I sample these mushrooms, freshly picked from the grow bags, I find Dave's descriptions are right on the mark.

Dave and Dee haven't always grown mushrooms. Five years ago, they left established careers to follow their entrepreneurial dream. Dave recalls, "many of our family and friends thought we were crazy leaving our professional jobs to start growing mushrooms." As a specialty agricultural product, oyster mushrooms seemed a good bet: they are relatively easy to grow and relatively few farmers grow them. A 2003 Penn State Cooperative Extension study reported just 51 oyster mushroom growers in the entire U.S. It also reported plenty of statistics that showed a steady and significant increase in the consumer appetite for specialty mushrooms such as oysters, so-called because their caps are shaped like their namesake bivalve.

Responding to that appetite, Dave and Dee have grown their business through "basic common sense and a lot of trial and error," Dave says, as well through savvy marketing and the development of close personal

relationships with chefs and restaurants. Dave and Dee have also been instrumental in the development of the Chesapeake Oyster Mushroom Growers Association, which provides growers with a collective voice and a marketing platform.

SUMMER SUCCOTASH WITH OYSTER MUSHROOMS

Fresh lima beans are best for this delicious summertime favorite. If fresh are not available use a small dried lima bean and cook for about 10 minutes longer than the fresh. While normally served warm, the succotash may also be served chilled, or at room temperature, over a salad garnished with vine-ripened summer tomatoes and cucumbers.

- 1 cup young lima beans
- 1 cup fresh sweet-corn kernels (about 2 ears)
- 6 tablespoons butter
- 2 cup coarsely chopped oyster mushrooms
- Juice of ½ lemon
- Salt and pepper to taste

Place the lima beans in a saucepan and add enough slightly salted water to just cover the beans. Bring to a boil, cover, and simmer until the beans are barely tender, about 15 minutes. Add the corn and simmer for 10 minutes more.

As the beans and corn cook, melt 3 tablespoons of butter in a sauté pan and cook the mushrooms for 5 minutes.

Drain off the water from the beans and corn. Add the mushroom and the remaining 3 tablespoons of butter. Add the lemon juice and season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve hot or warm. Serves 4 to 6.

relationships with their customers. The Sherrs now sell their mushrooms to the finest specialty retailers, restaurants and chefs in the Hampton Roads and Richmond areas. They spend countless hours traveling the expanse of highways and back roads of Virginia, but they would not have it any other way. "It's not the same, having other people deliver the produce to our chefs," Dee says. "By showing up regularly and talking with them, they come to trust us and help us to better understand their needs."

The mushroom farm in the small town of Sedley, Virginia is the hub of Dave and Dee's diverse operation, but not its full extent. Dave and Dee realized the chefs they worked with would be interested in other produce as well. So they began convincing other local farmers to grow gourmet produce instead of commodity crops. They now have an amazing network of rural Virginia farmers growing the gamut of yellow sun gold tomatoes, heirloom tomatoes, hydroponic tomatoes, small tender greens, and even an orchard harvesting figs, persimmons, pears and berries. "We have brought passion back to the farmers," Dee says, "showing them that by growing these high-value crops it creates a new source of income." In following their entrepreneurial dream, Dave and Dee have also created new sources of culinary delight for diners in southern Virginia.



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SESAME & HONEY OYSTER MUSHROOMS WITH FRIED GREEN TOMATOES

This is a fantastic summer appetizer. The mushrooms are scented with honey and sesame, and paired with the summer southern classic, fried green tomatoes. Dave and Dee prepare the mushrooms by themselves in the cooler months as a homey warm appetizer.

- 3 tablespoons sesame oil
- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 tablespoons honey
- 1 pound oyster mushroom caps
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 4-6 thick-cut fried green tomatoes (recipe follows)

Heat the sesame oil in a heavy bottomed sauté pan over medium heat. When oil is hot add the butter and let it melt completely. Add the honey and bring the mixture to a boil. Reduce heat and add the mushroom caps. Season lightly with salt and pepper. Remove from heat.

Prepare the fried green tomatoes. Place the tomatoes on individual plates, slightly reheat mushroom mixture, and spoon evenly over the tomatoes. Serve at once. Serves 4-6.

FRIED GREEN TOMATOES

- 4-6 tablespoons butter or mixture of butter and vegetable oil (a little bacon grease doesn't hurt)
- 2-3 green tomatoes, cored and sliced ½-inch thick, soaked in milk or buttermilk
- Equal amounts all-purpose flour and yellow cornmeal, well seasoned with salt and pepper, for dredging
- Pinch of sugar

Melt the butter and/or oil in a frying or sauté pan. Drain the soaked tomatoes and dredge in flour/corn meal mix. Shake off excess. When butter has melted and pan is hot, add the tomatoes and fry for about three minutes on each side, sprinkling each side with a little sugar. Remove and drain on paper towels.

Phot of John Shields by Aaron Springer. Mushroom photo by Patrick Evans-Hylton.