



Have you seen the mushroom man?

• RIVER VALLEY MUSHROOM FARMS •



Eric Rose is the owner of River Valley Mushroom Farms. He got into mushroom growing the way many of the producers I've talked to got into what they're doing—almost by accident. "My dad started the business," said Eric. "He was in the restaurant business in Illinois and had stuffed mushroom dishes on the menu. There was a mushroom farm down the road where he purchased his mushrooms.

Some days he would go to buy mushrooms and they would say 'No mushrooms today, come back in a couple days.' It made him crazy. So he got together with another guy who had grown up in the mushroom business and they started growing their own. As the farm got rolling, they were shorthanded and asked if I could help out. I walked into the mushroom house and was mystified and amazed at the same time. Thirty years later I still find the growing process fascinating."

Fascinating is an understatement. The whole process



is based on recycling. The first step is to make compost. Eric starts with material that's readily available in large quantities. He gets stable bedding (including the horse manure) from the racetracks in Chicago. He processes 40 tons at a time. The compost is pasteurized to eliminate unwanted bacteria. Eric buys mushroom spawn from companies specializing in rye or other grains that have been impregnated

with viable spawn. Those grains are mixed in the compost and left to grow. Mushrooms will not grow in compost alone, so after a few days the compost is covered with a layer of casing soil, usually peat moss. Then carefully controlled conditions, time, and nature take their course. The mycelium grow and when the temperature and humidity are correct they form mushrooms. The whole cycle (called a flush) takes about 45 days from start to finish. After three flushes the compost is depleted. That finishes the recycling process. The old, used compost is

(BELOW LEFT) Nutritious mushroom beds ready for picking. One medium portabella cap provides 22 calories, 0 grams of fat and 4 grams of carbohydrates, yet it is an excellent source of the B vitamin riboflavin; and a good source of the antioxidant selenium, potassium, phosphorus, the B vitamins niacin and pantothenic acid and copper. Portabellas also contain 4.3 milligrams of the antioxidant ergothioneine that may help protect the body's cells. Mushrooms are one of the few natural sources of vitamin D.



bagged and sold to gardeners who snap it up for use as an excellent fertilizer.

A complicated series of events have to happen in order to create baby mushrooms (called mycelium) which is why Eric buys prefertilized mycelium or spawn. Eric explains, "Mushrooms are like people. You need two spores to meet and like each other. Their spores then fuse together and form a fertile mycelium that's capable of reproducing. Oversimplified, if spore A and spore B germinate and don't meet, no mushrooms. If they germinate and meet but they're not compatible, no mushrooms. If they germinate and meet and there's no real attraction, no mushrooms. It's always surprised me that mushrooms grow at all in the wild."

Ten years ago, Eric was trying to figure out what to do with his mushrooms during the winter. Most of his business was to wholesalers and demand decreases that time of year so he found himself selling at less than production cost. Wholesalers' constant complaints were also a thorn in his side. "With wholesalers, the mushrooms were never good enough. They were always

too small or too big, they needed them yesterday or they didn't need them until tomorrow, or they weren't white enough or they were too white. They were never satisfied. It was killing me," said Eric. "It went on year after year and I thought there had to be another way. So I got into pickling. There's a lot of satisfaction in the growing but the canning is just fun," explained Eric. "I hear stories from people who buy our jars of pickled mushrooms. They tell us how much they enjoyed it or who they gave them to."

From the beginning, quality was Eric's primary concern. He doesn't sell anything he wouldn't put on his own table. "We make a pineapple salsa that's really good," explained Eric. "We just destroyed 40 cases of it because one of our staff tasted it and thought it was only O.K. They brought it to my attention and we put all of it in the dumpster. Not one jar is going to leave here that isn't first-rate." Everything is made in the farm's kitchen, using ingredients that are mostly grown on the farm as well. Asparagus, spinach, beans, carrots, beets, onions, potatoes, tomatoes, sweet corn, and various chili peppers

(ABOVE RIGHT TOP) Growing kits being prepared. The kits contain everything you need but patience. (Above right bottom) Special wood fiber blocks used for growing shiitakes. (BELOW) Three types of mushrooms grown at River Valley: white button, portabellas, and criminis.





all find their way into products that taste as fresh as the vegetables from which they were made.



Eric started with two flavors of pickled mushrooms and has expanded over the years to six but that's just the beginning. Most of the recipes came from Eric or one of his staff. "Somebody gets an idea and we try it," said Eric. "If it works, we'll make some and see if it sells." One of his newest products is an heirloom tomato salsa for the Rick Bayless Frontera Grill line that joins other salsas including Portabella, Key Lime Mango, Roasted Pineapple, and Mexicana. Eric has also developed a line of pasta sauces (Portabella, Garlic Lovers, and Wild Mushroom Burgundy), bruschettas (Spicy Olive and Shrommschetta), a Portabella Wasabi Steak Sauce, and a Five Cheese Garlic Spread that makes incredible garlic bread.

One of their most fun items is a grow-your-own kit to grow button or portabella mushrooms at home. The kits are ready to go. All you have to do is follow the instructions included and the kit will provide you with up to ten pounds of mushrooms. The kits are intriguing and will have the whole family keeping watch.

The store on the farm carries River Valley products plus select items from other producers and is a great place to visit and taste their pickled mushrooms and terrific sauces. In addition, River Valley Mushroom

Farms products are available on-line, at select retail locations, and at 20 farmers' markets in Chicago and four in Milwaukee.

Eric Rose likes what he does. It's been a roller-coaster ride to where River Valley Mushroom Farms is now, but Eric's passion for and fascination with mushroom farming have never wavered.

(ABOVE LEFT) All of River Valley's products are made and canned at the farm in their in-store kitchen. (ABOVE MIDDLE) Pasta sauces are just one of the many products available at the River Valley retail store and on their website. (ABOVE RIGHT) River Valley Mushroom Farms staff is always ready to help you with your selections. (LEFT) Many of the delicious products can be sampled at the store.

• IF YOU GO •

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PORTABELLA BURGUNDY GRAVY

- 1 pound portabellas
- ¼ pound shallots
- 2 cans brown gravy
- 3 ounces Burgundy wine
- 2 teaspoons chopped parsley
- ½ teaspoon Dijon mustard
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Butter

Sauté portabellas and shallots in butter. Add brown gravy. Heat through. Add Burgundy wine, chopped parsley, Dijon mustard. Salt and pepper to taste. Simmer five minutes and serve.