

In the Spotlight

WEDNESDAY, MAY 12, 2021

LIVING HISTORY



by Gene Pisasale

The mushroom industry is Chester County's leading crop—and a survivor

By Gene Pisasale
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cook." Mushrooms go quite nicely with that item. Child used mushrooms in many of her delicious offerings.

Agaricus bisporus, the mushroom that many people recognize, is the most common type served in the U.S. and Europe. Mushrooms come in numerous varieties: white, button, champignon, Swiss brown, chestnut, baby bella and several others. Cultivated for human consumption in more than 70 countries, the popularity of mushrooms is strongest in Asia, where it commands a significant percentage of overall agricultural production.

Taxonomy of this tasty morsel is a bit complicated. Described by English botanist Mordecai Cooke in 1871 in his *Handbook of British Fungi*, it has been named and re-named over the past century to its present nomenclature.

You may think that "the

fungus among us" was just something you joked about in science class, but today mushrooms are big business. Visitors to Kennett Square know it as "the Mushroom Capital of the World" for good reason. This area of southern Chester County produces roughly half of all the mushrooms grown in the U.S.

How did this local industry get started? You have to go back to the 1880s. Carnation grower William Swayne was trying to find a use for unplanted space in his greenhouses and decided to start cultivating mushrooms. Over the ensuing years, he and others recognized that it could become a cash crop. They hired mostly Italians to do much of the physical labor. Some of the Italians subsequently started their own farms and eventually became major mushroom growers themselves. By the 1950s, mushroom farming became a significant local business and the Italians began expanding their operations, later bringing in migrant labor, mostly from Mexico to take over the physical duties.

Today Pennsylvania holds the number one rank nationwide in mushroom production, although other states, including California, generate significant volumes. Canada is also a mushroom producer. Aside from button, crimini and portabella types which are enormously popular, in recent years specialty mushrooms like Shiitake, oyster and Maitake varieties have come to the forefront. Mushrooms are not only delicious in soups and with beef, they have beneficial health properties like being non-fat, high in fiber and B-vitamins. Some even offer immune system support—characteristics which have been highlighted in scholarly publications and consumer media. The American Mushroom Institute (AMI) based in



Photo courtesy Mark Rutt of Design Design for American Mushroom Institute
Brown mushrooms are pictured growing in soil.

Avondale, is a trade organization which represents growers, processors and marketers of mushrooms in the U.S. AMI president Rachel Roberts and Lori Harrison, the director of communications for the organization, provided a wealth of information for this article.

There are many local growers, including To-Jo, Basciani, Giorgio, Mother Earth and others. Phillips Mushrooms in Kennett Square is the largest producer of specialty mushrooms in the country, offering Shiitake, Maitake, oyster, Beech, Royal Trumpet and other varieties, including organic mushrooms. They even have a mushroom store called The Woodlands, bringing shoppers a wide array of fresh-picked offerings. One of the largest mushroom growers in North America, South Mill Champs, has deep roots in the community. Its operations date back to 1932 when the Pia family at Kaolin Mushrooms started offering products to the region. Offices are here in southern Chester County. The present-day company was formed through a merger of locally based South Mill and Champs, based in British Columbia. Consolidation and scale may be the keys to industry survival. They're planning



Courtesy photo
Kennett Square is known as the Mushroom Capital of the World.

to build a large facility in nearby Elk Township.

With disruptions on businesses caused by the coronavirus, one might wonder how the mushroom industry is doing these days. The most notable negative impact on sales was for food service enterprises supplying restaurants and schools across the country, many of which sharply curtailed operations over the past year. Growers who focused mostly on those markets likely saw sharp declines in volumes; statistics by company are not available.

The USDA announced that overall year-to-year industry volumes decreased by roughly 4 percent through June 30, 2020 for Agaricus producers in Chester County. Those mushroom companies that

are focused on the retail or supermarket sector likely had somewhat steadier sales due to people cooking more meals at home. Because mushrooms are so versatile—widely used as a great side dish and equally tasty as part of other entrees—the overall industry appears to have weathered the storm reasonably well. So, remember, if you're about to cook steaks, chicken or turkey, make some soup or even an all-vegetarian meal, mushrooms can be a perfect addition to your dinner table.

Gene Pisasale is an historian and author based in Kennett Square. He has written ten books and conducts an historic lecture series throughout the region. His latest book is "Forgotten Founding Fathers: Pennsylvania and Delaware in the American Revolution." His books are available on www.Amazon.com and through his website at www.GenePisasale.com. He can be reached via e-mail at Gene@GenePisasale.com.



Photo courtesy Mark Rutt of Design Design for American Mushroom Institute

White mushrooms are the most popular kind of mushroom.



Courtesy photo

Cremini and Portobello Mushrooms.



Photo courtesy Mark Rutt of Design Design for American Mushroom Institute

There are many mushroom houses in southern Chester County.



Courtesy photo

Wild mushrooms.



Courtesy photo

A Roman mosaic of mushrooms from 350 B.C.