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Nutrition Notes: The Growing Interest in Mushrooms

A Spotlight on Mycoterra Farm



By Bi-sek Hsiao, PhD, MS, RD, LDN

Interest in culinary and medicinal mushrooms has blossomed in recent years. Julia Coffey, founder and owner of Mycoterra Farm and Mass Food Delivery in South Deerfield, MA, has been keeping pace with expanded public interest through her mushroom growing and food delivery businesses. I met with Julia at her farm on a sunny, summer day to learn more about her businesses, and the role of mushrooms in diet and health.

Mycoterra Farm is one of only several women-owned mushroom businesses in the country. Julia started her mushroom-growing business in 2009 in a closet of the basement of her family home in Westhampton, after returning home from more than 10 years of learning about mushrooms in the Pacific Northwest. Keeping up with consumer demand, her operation expanded to 2 greenhouses which reached capacity before the mushrooming business moved in 2017 to a converted former horse farm in South Deerfield. Mycoterra Farm is now the largest mushroom farm in Massachusetts, growing an average of 3,000 pounds per week of mushrooms indoors year-round in their half-acre facility.

Mycoterra Farm focuses on gourmet and less common mushroom varieties. Shitake are most popular among their customers,

making up 70-80% of their production. In addition, they grow several varieties of Oyster mushrooms (including Phoenix, Italian, blue, black, pink, white, and yellow varieties), as well as Chestnut, Pioppino, Lion's Mane, and Maitake for cooking and eating, and small quantities of Turkey Tail and Reishi for making extracts. Fresh mushrooms are sold directly to customers at their farm store, through Mass Food Delivery, at 8 winter and 15 summer farmers' markets across the state, and wholesale to local restaurants, colleges and universities, grocery stores, and community-supported agriculture farms. Dried mushrooms, liquid extracts, grow kits, and plug spawn are sold through their farm store, online, and through Mass Food Delivery. You can also buy buckets of compost made from exhausted substrate (what the mushrooms grow in) after mushrooms are harvested. Using this nutritious compost is key in Mycoterra Farm's regenerative practices, allowing them to restore an old gravel bank, prevent erosion, and build fertile soil in their gardens and nearby forests.

Mushrooms are nutritionally unique for having the ability to make vitamin D2 (ergocalciferol) when exposed to UV light or sunlight, making them one of only a few non-animal, natural sources of vitamin D.

Julia's sibling company Mass Food Delivery started in 2020 during the COVID pandemic in response to the demand for contact-free food delivery systems. Sharing space with Mycoterra Farm in South Deerfield, Mass Food Delivery operates like a food hub, sourcing locally-produced food from the Northeast (including their own vegetables and mushrooms) and delivering food to individuals through an online ordering system. Over the past 3 years, they have delivered farm-fresh food to over 4,000 households in Massachusetts, distributed over 11,000 boxes (110 tons) of free produce through the USDA Farm to Families Program, and donated about 3 tons of produce to local pantries and soup kitchens. Mass Food Delivery was a key partner for LifePath during the pandemic, enabling LifePath to offer monthly deliveries of farm-fresh food boxes to 400 older adults over a 10-month period.

When asked further about how the pandemic affected her businesses, Julia described a growing customer base. People were cooking more at home and looking for dietary options like mushrooms to boost their immunity. Many more people were

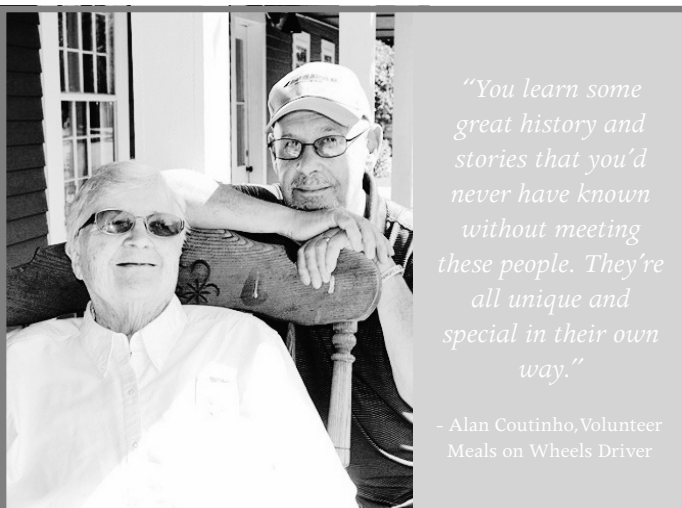
interested in mushrooms after the release of the documentary film Fantastic Fungi, which brought attention to the beauty of mushrooms, and stimulated public interest in the medicinal properties and the role of mushrooms in regenerating life on Earth. Mushroom grow kits became a hit because they made the perfect "pets" for people stuck at home during the pandemic.

Chefs and home cooks enjoy working with mushrooms' meaty and savory flavors called umami, which can reduce the need for salt in dishes. While culinary varieties tend to be soft or meaty in texture when cooked, some varieties of mushrooms, like reishi, turkey tail, and chaga, are too tough to be eaten as food and are used in the form of medicinal extracts like teas, powders, and tinctures.

Mushrooms are nutritionally unique for having the ability to make vitamin D2 (ergocalciferol) when exposed to UV light or sunlight, making them one of only a few non-animal, natural sources of vitamin D. However, not all mushrooms are grown in UV light-exposed environments, so some may not provide any vitamin D. A 3.5 ounce serving of mushrooms grown in the wild or commercially treated with UV lamps can contain 400-1200 IU of vitamin D. Many mushrooms are also excellent sources of B vitamins riboflavin, niacin, and pantothenic acid, and the minerals selenium and copper. Mushrooms are naturally low in calories, sodium, and carbohydrates, and contain zero cholesterol and fat, making them appealing to people trying to eat healthier.

The health benefits of mushrooms have been gaining research attention. Mushrooms contain high concentrations of ergothioneine, a sulfur-containing amino acid with strong antioxidant activity that may lower cancer risk. Mushrooms also contain polysaccharides that act as food for friendly gut bacteria. One review of 17 cancer studies suggested that eating the equivalent of about 2 mushrooms per day could lower cancer risk by 45%. While the bulk of research seems to be focused on cancer prevention and treatment, research also suggests the potential of mushrooms to boost nerve growth, protect the brain and prevent cognitive decline, support healthy blood sugar and cholesterol levels, reduce inflammation, and provide an overall boost to immunity.

If you're looking to add mushrooms to your diet, check out the information and recipes on Mycoterra Farm's website at mycoterrafarm.com. One of my favorite ways of eating mushrooms is in the form of noodle soup made by boiling fresh or dried mushrooms in a small pot of water with vegetables and protein (like chicken, tofu, or boiled eggs), then adding noodles, miso for seasoning, and scallions and cilantro on top. Mushrooms make a great addition to soups, stir-fries, omelets, pasta dishes, and pizza. Use your creativity to explore the endless possibilities, and enjoy the flavors, nutrition, and health that mushrooms may bring to your life.



"You learn some great history and stories that you'd never have known without meeting these people. They're all unique and special in their own way."

- Alan Coutinho, Volunteer Meals on Wheels Driver

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