

Mastering the Mushroom

Following the journey of the shiitake, from farm to table

As the weather cools and we ease into fall, Janell Baran is hoping for an increase in her crop.

Baran grows shiitake mushrooms – along with a variety of culinary and medicinal herbs – at Blue Owl Hollow in Newark. She sells at both the Granville and New Albany farmers markets, but with the hot temperatures this summer, her booth has been light on mushrooms.

“Everything is an experiment,” says Baran. “I can’t control when we get rainfall in this environment.”

But no matter the weather, shiitake mushrooms are worth getting to know a little better – from the farm to your table.

Growing Green

Baran and her husband purchased Blue Owl Hollow, a 130-acre tree farm, in 1998. Over time, Baran has worked to perfect her sustainable method of growing shiitakes.

“We bought the farm as a place to live, but always wanted to get into farming,” says Baran. “We loved the tree farm so much (that) we wanted to use that (aspect) as well. Mushrooms were something that fit in really well with what we were doing.”

To start, Baran scours her property for good logs. Most of the logs come from fallen tree limbs or trees that have been identified as weak or in need of trimming. This summer, she has a large stack of logs from trees that were felled by the late June derecho. Baran prefers using oak logs – as she points out, “shiitake” means “oak mushroom” in Japanese.

Baran walks to a shed that she has transformed into a prepping station for the logs. She drills small holes in each log, spacing them in a diamond pattern. Then, similar to planting a seed, Baran uses an inoculation tool to fill the hole with mycelium – mushroom spawn.

Once all of the holes are filled, the logs’ holes and ends are sealed with food-grade wax. This step is important for keeping moisture in the logs and shielding them from outside contaminants, Baran says.

“The success rate and longevity are so much greater,” Baran says of sealing the ends with wax.

After sealing, the logs are carried to a shady, moist area on the edge of the woods where they will incubate

anywhere from six months to two years, depending on factors such as weather, spawn viability and the size of the logs.

At this point, some logs are set aside for sale at farmers markets, where Baran offers them for \$25 to people who wish to grow their own mushrooms.

When the logs finally begin producing mushrooms, Baran “forces” them by simulating an ideal environment for fruiting. They are soaked in a tub of rainwater overnight, then propped up in a protect-





Baran paints over holes in the inoculated logs with food-grade wax.



Labels tell what strain of mushroom spawn populates the log and when it was inoculated.



Baran stacks inoculated logs in the woods to allow the mycelium to spread throughout the log.



ed area along one side of her house to be monitored for the next few days. At that time, Baran says little buttons typically start to appear, and mature mushrooms emerge after about a week.

After fruiting, the logs go back into stacks in the woods for a six- to eight-week resting period before they are forced again. Each log will fruit for anywhere from three to five years.

Bountiful Benefits

Shiitakes have long been hailed as an important food in East Asian cultures. But they're not just rich in history – they're also packed with nutrients.

"Mushrooms can be a significant source of vitamin D if they're exposed to sunlight while growing," Baran says.

Paul Stamets, an American mycologist and author of the book *Mycelium Running: How Mushrooms Can Help Save the World*, goes one step further with this conclusion.

"I suspect that mushrooms are nature's best land-based food source for vitamin D," says Stamets in his book. "Beyond vitamin D, mushrooms are packed with other immune-enhancing agents."

Shiitakes are also believed to possess qualities that lower cholesterol, prevent heart disease and combat the development and progression of cancer. Scientific studies are currently being conducted to examine these claims.

One thing is certain, though. In order to reap all of their benefits, they can't be consumed raw.

"You have to actually cook the mushrooms to release the vitamins and minerals," says Baran.

In his book, Stamets explains why this is the case.

"Uncooked mushrooms pass through the digestive tract largely intact, imparting little if any nutritional benefit," says Stamets. "When cooked, however, they are highly digestible and are excellent sources of nutrition."

A single shiitake produced from a recently "forced" log. The hot temperatures this summer have limited Baran's crop.

What's Cooking?

Baran's Blue Owl Garden Emporium, where she produces more than 80 varieties of dried herbs, gives her a variety of fresh ingredients to work with in the kitchen.

She's developed numerous recipes, which she often brings with her when selling her products at farmers' markets. Among her favorites is Grilled Sage and Mushrooms, a dish that combines a mixture of mushrooms and sage atop slices of grilled bread.

"The Grilled Sage and Mushrooms is great for outdoor eating," says Baran. "That's one we like to feature because we produce (both) herbs and mushrooms."

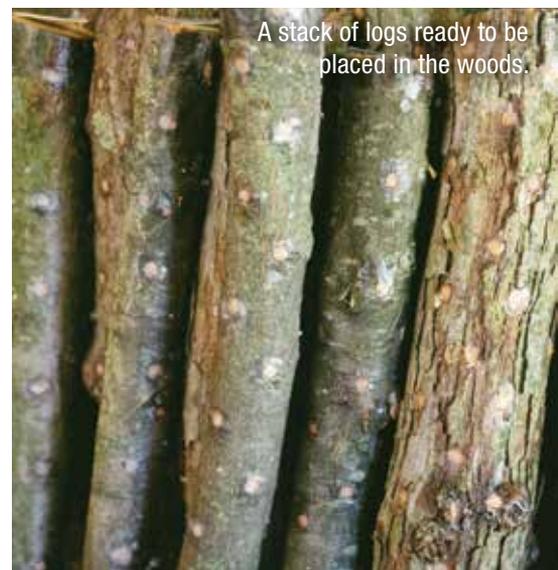
Baran says shiitakes also serve as a great alternative to ingredients such as chicken or beef.

"Shiitakes are the red meat of the culinary fungal world," says Baran. "You can substitute them for red meat in recipes if you're vegetarian."

When bought fresh from a farmers market, the mushrooms can last up to a week in the refrigerator. If dried, they can be preserved for much longer.

Baran hopes to someday open her own retail store where she can sell the herbs, mushrooms and other items she produces. For now, her shiitake mushrooms are available at farmers markets for \$5 a pint.

Rose Davidson is a contributing writer. Feedback welcome at laurand@cityscenemediagroup.com.



A stack of logs ready to be placed in the woods.



Recipe

Grilled Sage and Mushrooms

Yield: 2 servings, Time: 30 minutes

Ingredients:

- 1 oz. fresh sage
- 1 Tbsp. butter, softened
- 2 large slices of bread
- 1 pt. fresh mushrooms, chopped (½ – ½ lb.)
- 2 Tbsp. butter
- 2 Tbsp. extra virgin olive oil
- 3 Tbsp. chopped shallots
- ¼ tsp. sea salt
- ¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 1 Tbsp. balsamic vinegar

Directions:

1. Melt one tablespoon butter in a small bowl.
2. Save a few sage leaves (such as the small terminal clusters) for garnish. Chop the remainder fairly finely. Add ½ Tablespoon to melted butter. The remainder of the sage will go in with the mushrooms.
3. Mix sage with melted butter and spread on the sliced bread. Stack the slices so that butter runs down through them and set aside.
4. Melt remaining butter with olive oil in large skillet over medium-high heat. Add shallots and cook until soft, stirring often to prevent burning. Add mushrooms, salt and pepper, and cook until mushrooms reach desired level of tenderness. Add more butter or oil if necessary – mushrooms should be lightly browned and al dente, neither dry nor mushy.
5. Add remaining sage and cook, with frequent stirring, for one minute.
6. Add vinegar and stir until liquid evaporates – a matter of seconds.
7. Remove mushroom mixture from bowl.
8. Turn heat up slightly in skillet and fry bread until brown and crispy on both sides.
9. Put grilled bread on plates, heap with mushroom mixture, garnish with reserved sage leaves and serve.

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