

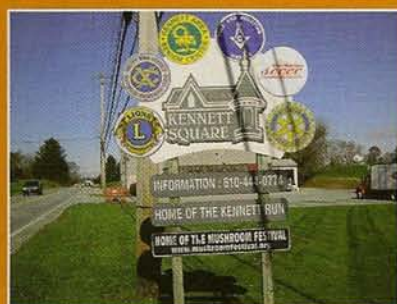
Mushroom

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Changes in
Kennett Square



At the market
in South Korea

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Update South America in Argentina

On 13 and 14 November 200 participants from 13 countries gathered in Buenos Aires to investigate the topic of "Edible and Medicinal Mushrooms in Latin America". This "Primer Encuentro Latinoamericano de Productores de Hongos Comestibles y Medicinales FUNGI 2009" aimed to be the first of its kind.

The driving forces behind the event was Agroconsultora Plus, a consultancy and training agency for the agricultural sector. The goal was to increase levels of professionalism in the sector and improving profitability. A total of five panels were formed focusing on topics as commercialisation and research. A specific subject was detailed in greater depth in an introductory presentation, followed by short presentations, before moving on to a round of questions. This approach gave the floor to no less than 28 speakers from the Americas.

Mushrooms in South America

Olga García Araya was the first speaker, with an explanation of the historic and current status of mushroom growing on this continent. Mushrooms were first cultivated in Mexico in the 1930s, using technology imported from the USA. Other South American countries followed. From a mere 2000 tons in 1970, production rose to 70000 tons in 2006. Mexico accounts for more than 50% of this production, of which 70% is destined for the fresh market. The second most important producer is Brazil with 21% of the total volume. In Brazil production for the fresh markets is underdeveloped, which explains why it is hampered by growing imports from China. Since 1994 the number of farms has halved, but production has risen, not only caused by up-scaling, but also by improved levels of efficiency.

Exotics

Growing button mushrooms might well be a professional undertaking, but this does not apply to other varieties of mushrooms. Oyster mushrooms for example, in second place regarding production volume, are usually grown on tiny farms with little knowledge or means. Many joint projects are started as a way of providing the more vulnerable members of society with a way of making a living. Growers are also increasingly recognising the importance of cooperation.



Olga Garcia Araya at the conference.
Photo and report by Magda Verfaillie.

This has led to various, more effective and commercial cooperative forms. Today only half the oyster mushrooms are sold fresh, but there is a noticeably rising demand. This offers extra opportunities for local growers, as the fresh markets prefer locally grown mushrooms.

The cultivation of other lignivorous mushrooms has a marginal significance in South America. However, Rafael Henríquez from Chile spoke on the possible importance of truffle growing in countries including Argentina and Chile. This type of cultivation is theoretically promising.

Inhibiting factors

In her presentation Olga gave an overview of the inhibiting factors preventing the development of mushroom growing. The first problem is the rising costs of energy and raw materials. Despite the gigantic stockpiles of waste from agriculture and forestry in the farming regions of South America, it remains difficult to get affordable raw materials to the right locations. The logistic problems are even greater for the fresh mushrooms that have to be transported over huge distances in an often sub tropical climate, with inadequate cooling facilities. Preserved mushrooms are an uninteresting alternative, as the market is being flooded with growing imports from low cost production countries. Since the economic crisis, banks have also been more reticent to extend credit facilities. Fortunately the micro credit system grants small growers a limited starting capital.

Panel discussions

The emphasis in the panels was primarily on the cultivation of oyster mushrooms and other lignivorous mushrooms. Francisco Fernandez Michel from Fungitec, Mexico, started by sketching the situation of oyster mushroom production in South America, the US and Europe. I rather missed an emphasis on the importance of strict hygiene in his lecture, as a lack of this is a major obstacle to success. Another panel covered the subject of 'cooperation'. They gave examples, including rural initiatives in Colombia, Mexico and joint ventures in Patagonia.

Two panels dealt with market issues. The conservative consumption behaviour in South America is severely limiting the development of the sector. Whereas Europeans annually consume an average of 3 kg of mushrooms, in Argentina, for example, average consumption barely reaches 35 gram. There is no real tradition of eating mushrooms, and way too little promotional activity. However, interest in a balanced diet is also on the rise here, and equally attention for the health beneficial aspects of food. Which brings us to the final theme; 'mushrooms as nutraceuticals'. A speech on the famous *Agaricus braziliensis* couldn't fail to be part of the presentation, but there was also a contribution on *Grifola frondosa*. Apart from a few beginner's mistakes, the event was very well organised. The next one will likely be held in two years' time. ■