

## SAN MARCOS FUNGUS FARMERS HOPE THEIR BUSINESS REALLY MUSHROOMS

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San Marcos, Calif. By John Barhman, San Diego TRIBUNE

When it comes to the fungi, Craig Anderson favors, forget that joke about how "they treat us like mushrooms" You know the one , they keep us in the dark, and feed us.....

At Anderson's business Golden Gourmet Mushrooms there is a light , as well as computer - controlled temperature, humidity and air. His mushrooms are feed brans, soybean meal and fiber (not to mention corncobs, sawdust and limestone) but definitely no fertilizer. The exotic organic mushrooms Anderson grows are unlike the run-of-the-mill variety the jokes suggests. They are gourmet, speciality mushrooms with exotic- sounding and royal names. enoki, hon shimeji and king eryngii. They also require a special taste and definitely, a larger wallet, since they are more expensive than the common mushroom found in groceries. But they're worth it., says Anderson.

"Button mushrooms, the most- common sold here in the States have nutritional value of cardboard." he contends. The three types of mushrooms Anderson harvests are sweet, nutty -tasty or crunchy, depending on the variety. They are packed with protein and essential amino acids, he says and are rich in vitamins B and C, as well as high in minerals such as iron and potassium. And they're a good source of fiber. On top of that ,they are low in fat and calories.

But the humble button mushrooms and it's close relative, the portobello, account for about 98 percent of the 860 million pound of mushrooms sold annually in the United States. Anderson who lives in Del Mar and his partner Nick Connor of Rancho Santa Fe, hope to start turning those numbers around. They hit upon the notion of raising speciality mushrooms in 1988, while both were working in Japan, Anderson was an investment banker and Connor in the import- export business. "People there in Japan, as well as Europe, were eating large volumes of mushrooms" Anderson said earlier this week in an office that overlooks the 13 acre mushroom-growing operation. The company is located off Marilyn Lane, just outside the San Marcos City limits in Twin Oaks Valley area. At that time, as I recall it, people in United States were eating four pounds of mushrooms a year and people in Canada about eight pounds. But in Asia and Europe they were eating in the amount of, from the low teens all the way up to fifty pounds.

We just thought there was great marketing possibility for gourmet , speciality mushrooms in this country. They came back to the United States, and in 1988 launched Golden Gourmet Mushrooms. "We kind of got off in fits and starts in the beginning", Anderson recalled. "We were growing too much of one variety and it was a little difficult developing a market. In 1992, the pair and their general manager, Steve Farrar, began using a more efficient "bottle technology" that was invented in Japan. "This allowed us to greatly increase productivity and give us a very predictable yield of product." Anderson said, The business has been growing like, well mushrooms ever since. A 1996 newspaper story said the company did \$4 million in annual sales. Anderson said he preferred not to reveal current figures. In nature, these types of mushrooms grow on logs. Commercially, they're are grown on suspended columns of wheat straw that resemble tackling dummies. With the bottle process, Golden Gourmet starting cultivating them in quart-sized plastic jars. The technology is mostly mechanized. One machine hallows out a small hole for the mushroom tissue culture to be placed in the jar of plant food. The cultures are inserted in a sterile spawning room, free of germs and other contaminants. The growth process goes through several stages. The bottled fungi are moved from room to room, where lighting, carbon dioxide level , moisture and temperature are computerized. controlled.

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