

Producers

OUT OF THE **WOODS**

There's something magical stirring deep in the countryside of Ceredigion...
Anna Blewett enters a Welsh wonderland on a very special mushroom hunt



The lush hills and valleys of Ceredigion, the coastal county of West Wales best known for its spectacular beaches and connections to the great Dylan Thomas, make an unlikely location for a colony of exotic Far Eastern fungi. Having visited the region many times – and seen mile after mile of the rain-softened fields, rocky coastline and sandy coves which present a picture-book stereotype of the Welsh landscape – I find it hard to imagine such a foreign and fabulous harvest blossoming here.

Nonetheless the small hamlet of Maesymeillion, some 12 miles from Lampeter as the crow flies, is home to Maesyffin Mushrooms – an award-winning producer of organic shiitake mushrooms run by grower Gary Whiteley. And so it is, on a wet and windy winter afternoon, that I find myself ducking out of the howling gale and torrential rain and into the eerie calm of the most surreal garden shed I've ever seen.

Keeping it Arboreal

Ordinary enough from the outside, the small building is actually a nursery for shiitake – the East Asian mushroom that's popular around the world for its delicate flavour, fantastic texture and reputed health benefits. Gary first experimented with growing fungi six years ago, when his curiosity about sustainable crops led him to investigate this ancient food source. "I knew nothing when I started," he admits. "I'd had an allotment but never grew mushrooms. Then once I began it took some time



to get the consistent supply right. Some days I'd be picking ten kilos, others none!" The help of experts from Carmarthenshire-based Humungus Fungus – which helped Raymond Blanc establish his 'vallée de champignons' – set Gary on the road to success and since 2003 he has devoted his time to a commercial crop of shiitake which he sells fresh, dried or in pate form through local retailers and farmers' markets.

The first stage of production starts with the spawn, which colonises the host block and grows into the 'mycelium' of the shiitake. "The mycelium is a bit like the body of the plant," begins Gary, "whereas the mushrooms are like flowers. As with all plants, it blooms to reproduce and it's the resulting mushrooms I harvest." All fungi need a host to sustain their growth. "My fruiting blocks are essentially artificial logs," explains Gary. "Into specially designed, breathable bags I put a mixture

of woodchip, sawdust and nutrients – basically bran and gypsum – which is pasteurised to knock out any existing fungus that might compete with the shiitake and then inoculated with the shiitake spawn.

"For me a big motivation for this operation is to recycle, so I use whatever suitable wood is around," he continues. "This process can turn a waste product from forests and sawmills into something very useful." Mushrooms are a great crop for those interested in permaculture – the quest to 'live lightly' on the planet and provide for the needs of humanity whilst reducing our impact on the environment. But why focus specifically on shiitake? "They've got a good shelf-life and they're very tasty," starts Gary. "They're also immune building and antiviral. You can eat them fresh or dried."

In Bloom

They're also fascinating to behold. As the mycelium spreads it binds the sawdust together into a solid lump which will later provide a home for the mushrooms. A healthy mycelium is a soft white colour, so a quick visual check will give Gary a clue as to which bags are harbouring a strong specimen and which have succumbed to the odd rogue enemy. "Fungi is probably the most numerous species on the planet," he points out. "We only know about perhaps ten percent of them. In a cubic inch of soil there are enough fungal cells to stretch more than eight miles if put end to end." Whilst each healthy bag closely resembles a very mouldy packed lunch box, they have an earthy smell and gentle warmth that hints at the goodness inside.



Gary's Shiitake Sandwich

1 Fresh shiitake mushrooms
Butter or oil
2 slices bread, toasted

Caws Cenarth Smoked Caerffili, sliced

Rocket

Chilli-infused oil

- Thickly slice the shiitake and fry over a gentle heat for 25 minutes in butter or oil until they become slightly crispy and their meaty flavours develop.

- Pile the mushrooms on the toasted bread, top with sliced cheese and a scatter of rocket leaves and drizzle with the chilli oil.

- Add the sandwich lid and serve.

INSPIRED TO HAVE A GO?

Buy your own fruiting block from £16.35 at www.maesymush.co.uk, or call T. 01545 590467

Once the shiitake spores have colonised each artificial log, it's time to put them to work.

"In the wild the mycelium lies dormant waiting for the conditions to bloom," explains Gary. "That's usually spring and autumn but essentially it occurs when the fungi perceive a threat and want to reproduce to survive. So you might get an earthquake or – more likely – cold weather and lots of rain and poof! Lots of mushrooms!" To create this sense of panic in the cosy comfort of the mushroom sheds the mature fruiting blocks are simply moved and left for a few days to start the shiitake growing.

When this has taken place the blocks are moved to the grow shed – and what a Walt Disney wonderland it is! From the racks around the walls sprout fairytale-perfect mushrooms, their round caps dotted with white flecks that could almost have been painted on for effect. "When the first flush of shiitake starts I might harvest them from the blocks two or three times a day," says Gary. "There are the perfectly-shaped round ones that grow on top but also the flatter mushrooms that sprout from the bottom of the block and might escape my notice for a day or so." These delicately-fanned fungi have the most elegant shape and intricate gills, a reminder that even a two-day-old mushroom carries an amazingly complex engineering.

Once each block's first flush of mushrooms slows, they are rested before being plunged into cold water to set in motion a second, third and sometimes fourth bloom of shiitake. "I'll harvest maybe half to three quarters of a kilo from one block," explains Gary. Once spent, the artificial logs are either knocked down into a soft compost or dug into Gary's vegetable beds. "I cover them over and grow my potatoes on them," he says proudly. "They'll break down over time so it's the perfect sustainable system. There's no wastage and no nasties are produced."

What is left, of course, are the delicious shiitake; very special mushrooms with a distinctive flavour and texture. When fresh they deliver a delicate taste and brilliantly firm texture which is great in salads, sauces and broths. Once dried, Gary's shiitake have a pleasingly woody flavour with an unmistakably garlicky taste. "Lots of people say they can taste

garlic," he agrees. "They're actually packed with umami, the savoury taste that is important in Japanese cooking."

Besides the culinary qualities of his mushrooms, Gary is also keen to point out the implications that such crops could have for the way we grow and source our food. "I'm not interested in telling people to eat mushrooms that have been freighted half way around the country," he tells me as we stand in the poly tunnel which has become the resting place for the spent fruiting blocks. "That'd clog up our roads with even more lorries, cause endless pollution and the result would be a tired old mushroom that's not at its best. What's the point of that? I sell my mushrooms locally, and encourage anyone further afield to have a go at growing their own."

The calming sense of still which spreads from the warm growing rooms quickly evaporates once back on the flooded and branch-strewn lanes of Ceredigion. With rain hammering on the windscreen it's tempting to think that life must be rather lovely in the cosy warmth of a growing shed, where organic structures are very slowly but surely breaking into bloom. But for the paper bag of picture-perfect shiitake on the car seat next to me, it could all have been a strange dream.



Caws Cenarth (literally Cheese of Cenarth) is an award-winning dairy based around ten miles from Maesyffin Mushrooms. Its Smoked Caerffili is available at www.cawscenarth.co.uk, call T. 01239 710432. Both Maesyffin Mushrooms and Caws Cenarth are past winners of Wales The True Taste Food & Drink Awards. Meet more at www.walesthetruetaste.co.uk

