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Urban Farming is Mushrooming Up All Over



Say the word “farm” and visions of rolling hills with rows of crops, a barn and silo, maybe a tractor or two come to mind.

That is, unless you are talking about a mushroom farm. Enter one of Charlotte’s newest GoToBeNC agricultural endeavors – Urban Gourmet Mushroom Farm. Located in a small office space this farm is more of a warehouse, comprised of several rooms fitted with metal shelving to house its quick growing crop.

The metal shelves are lined with inoculated bags of mushroom spores. In the correct environment (that is, 12 hours of light followed by 12 hours of dark all at 90% humidity), the mushrooms grow from the bags, and in just days they begin to pop – in just weeks a flush of mushrooms covers the entirety of the block. The ‘shrooms are then carefully harvested by hand and taken to market or the kitchen of 30 plus local area chefs.

Then the block is allowed to flush once again.

If you’re a farmers’ market shopper, then you have probably seen the vast array of these fabulous farmed wild mushrooms in booths at both the Atherton and Matthews Community Farmers’ markets and possibly at the Noda Farmers’ Market, as well as the midweek Highland Market in the University area.

The farm was started by a trio of friends, Jeffrey Mason, Hiram Ramirez and Michelle Smith in June of 2015. The process of farming mushrooms is fascinating, and though it looks simple, there actually is a science to it all – really... it’s called Mycology: the science that encompasses the field of Mushrooms.

After several years of detailed research on the topic, Urban Gourmet Mushroom Farm started with their first harvest of Oyster Mushrooms, Shiitake Mushrooms and Lions’ Mane Mushrooms. Next came the Maiitake or “hen of the woods” variety and the trumpet mushroom – this food writer’s personal favorite.

Charlotte is loving the variety of fungus, among us!



The results are some of the freshest mushrooms in our area, and chefs the likes of Ben Philpott at Block & Grinder, Bruce Moffet at Barrington’s, Stagioni and Good Food on Montford, Clark Barlowe at Heirloom, Majid Amoorpour at Bistro La Bon, Paul Verica of Heritage in Waxhaw, and Matthew Krenz at The Asbury in Uptown Charlotte are loving the opportunity to cook with such wonderful product.

The real beauty, though, is that this luxury isn’t limited just to those in the culinary industry – now locally harvested varieties of wild gourmet mushrooms are available to home cooks as well.

STORING YOUR ‘SHROOMS

Once you purchase local mushrooms, storage is important. Properly stored they will last at least a week depending on the variety. The end result of improper mushroom storage could be at two ends of the same spectrum. Either the ‘shrooms will be dried out or they will be slimy and begin to mold.

To properly keep these magnificent local mushrooms, store them in the paper bag you’ll get them in at the market. Don’t wash them until you are ready to cook and keep the bag with the top lightly rolled down. Shake the mushrooms up every 2-3 days to keep them fresh.

The health benefits are amazing. With more potassium than a banana, mushrooms are also a wonderful source of vitamin D, niacin, riboflavin and iron.

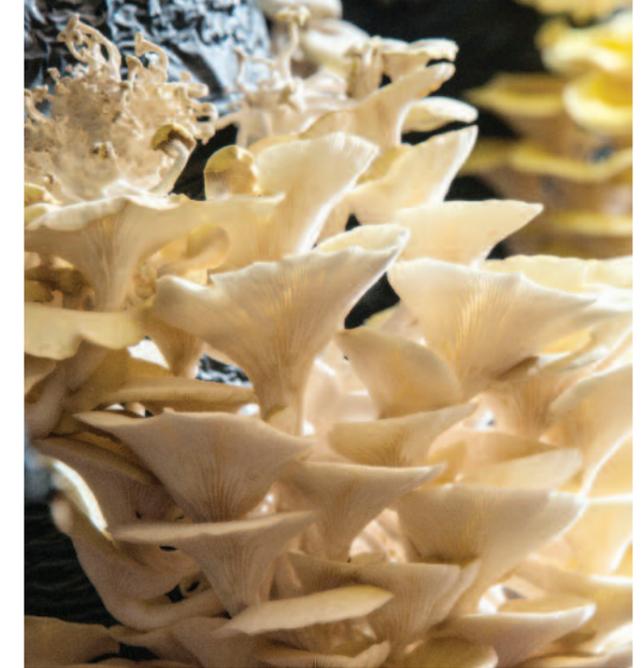
With this writing the trio that once started Urban Gourmet Mushroom Farm have gone their separate ways. Ramirez and Smith continue to operate the original farm. Mason now operates his own mushroom operation - Gourmet Mushroom Farm - selling to chefs and the public as well. With the beautiful product that all of these growers produce, there is certainly enough business to go around. Follow each of these farms on their individual social media, and you’ll see where to find them.

Meanwhile, try cooking with any of these fabulous mushrooms this weekend. Unlike the standard button mushroom which pretty much takes on the flavor of whatever sauce it is served with or whatever it might be stuffed with, the rich savory umami of these mushrooms stands alone. Saute them in butter and serve with steak or use them as a center of the plate entrée. They can also be used as you would like in risottos, in flans and savory sauces or in a recipe such as the Mushroom Bread Pudding shared for this article by Urban Gourmet Mushrooms’ own Michelle Smith.

While Michelle bakes her bread pudding in small ramekins or mini muffin tins, you could easily prepare

this in a 13x9 inch pan and cut into squares for serving along side your favorite grilled steak, pork chop or chicken.

Then once summer has passed, use the recipe, with a bit less milk, in place of your traditional stuffing for Thanksgiving and holiday family dinners.



MICHELLE’S URBAN GOURMET MUSHROOM FARM BREAD PUDDING

- 4 cups fresh bread cubes cut from your favorite brioche or challah
 - 2 Tbsp. fresh minced or dried thyme leaves
 - 1 Tbsp. fresh minced or dried summer savory leaves
 - 2 Tbsp. extra virgin olive oil
 - 1-1/2 lbs. mixed fresh Urban Gourmet Mushroom Farm mushrooms, sliced
 - 1/2 cup finely chopped local leek
 - 2 Tbsp. butter
 - 1/2 cup finely chopped local parsley
 - 2 large garlic cloves, minced
 - 2 cups local heavy cream or whole milk
 - 4 large local farm eggs
 - 1/2 cup grated Parmigiano-Reggiano
- Toss cubed bread in olive oil and fresh minced or dried herbs and saute until golden brown and fragrant. Remove from heat and reserve.

Tear or cut mushrooms (I preferred mine thinly sliced, but I was also making mini mushroom puddings).

Cook shallots in butter, stirring occasionally, until softened. Add mushrooms, *optional: add salt (I personally don’t use any because I feel that the cheese brings it), add pepper. Once the liquid has evaporated add the parsley and shallots. Remove from heat.

Whilst waiting, whisk together the cream, eggs and cheese (salt) and pepper. Stir in mushroom mix and breadcrumbs until coated well and allow to stand for 10 minutes to absorb the egg mixture.

Butter the ramekins or cupcake trays (I just used the spray canola and they fell out perfectly).

Spoon mixture into choice of pan. Bake at 350 degrees for 30 - 35 minutes, and you’re good to go!