

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Foraging New Paths

Anne-Marie Hardie



Located in the Humboldt Park neighborhood of downtown Chicago, Windy City Mushroom has converted a two-story building into a gourmet mushroom facility, including a laboratory, grow rooms and retail storefront. This urban presence has enabled them to foster strong connections with both the local restaurants and foodie community.

Clockwise from far left: Guy Furman, owner of Windy City Mushroom in Chicago. Blue Oyster mushrooms. The undersides of Oyster mushrooms. Chestnut mushrooms..

Co-founder and president Guy Furman has always been intrigued by the niche areas of agriculture and the potential they hold for the commercial market.

"I started my educational background as a bioengineer at Cornell University, where they are known for their agriculture engineering program and their extensive history of working with emerging areas in horticulture," he said.

His first venture after graduating was launching an aquaculture farm where he grew shrimp for the restaurant industry. Although it wasn't horticulture, the venture exposed him to the vast world of local, organic farming.

When the aquaculture business didn't work out, Guy and co-founder of Windy City Mushroom Eric Moens decided to explore the potential in gourmet mushrooms. They were excited about the non-traditional mushroom sector—in particular, the species that were commonly foraged, but not frequently cultivated.

"There were strong parallels between the infrastructure that was needed to support the shrimp farm and what was being done with gourmet mushrooms," said Guy.

The mushrooms are grown in a mixture of soy hull and hardwood, both of which are considered waste by-products, providing a sustainable solution to agriculture.

Their research process revealed an extremely supportive industry, including access to several online growers who willingly shared their techniques online. Before launching their own business, Windy City Mushroom reached out to

industry expert Michael Hatfield, owner of Flyway Family Farm in Makanda, Illinois, who provided them with a list of equipment and existing suppliers.

“We were already in a temperature-controlled building with floor drainage, so our main focus for the 16 by 20-ft. grow room was on humidity controls and ventilation,” said Guy. “Mushrooms are extremely sensitive to carbon dioxide, which makes proper ventilation critical.”

They knew that the key to their success was ensuring that they had a consistent market to purchase their premium products. This process needed to begin in the grow room, ensuring that the varieties they grew responded to the needs of the gourmet market. To help determine which varieties they would specialize in, Windy City Mushroom purchased a wide range to experiment with.

“It turns out that not everything that looks great is going to be a viable product to market,” said Guy. “We also made the decision not to grow species that were extremely similar to each other, and so we focused on the texture and flavors that we liked the most.”

They then approached restaurants that would be likely adopters, including vegan restaurants, farm-to-table and upscale locations whose chefs may be seeking premium gourmet mushrooms. The reception was extremely positive, so they decided to expand their operation to respond to the growing demand.

One of the biggest shifts in operation was making the decision to inoculate the bags in which the mushrooms are packaged in-house.

“The cost of bringing in the inoculated bags is quite expensive, but it’s viable if you’re selling at a premium price point and are fairly small scale,” said Guy. “We knew we needed to have a competitive price to have a more substantial space in the market, so we had to cut down on our costs.”

This change required learning about the inoculation process, including the infrastructure needed to support growing these cultures. The active online community has been a vital resource during these transition periods, providing access to several videos and techniques that growers have trialed and adopted for their own business. However, there’s still a large do-it-yourself component to this budding agriculture sector.

“Most of the solutions are borrowed from other industries, which means the grower needs to be comfortable with adapting the solution to fit the growing needs of mushrooms,” said Guy. “One thing that we try to do is take what’s out there that works, try it and then discover ways to improve on it.”

Windy City Mushroom is continually looking at ways to adapt their business so they can respond to the evolving need of their Chicago community. This included developing ways to connect with the retail consumer so they could consume these gourmet mushrooms in their own home. Over the past year, they’ve packaged their product for retail, developed partnerships with companies that are delivering home produce and opened their doors to the public.

“It’s great you get to engage with the customer a bit and hear what they are cooking,” said Guy. “We are reaching a whole new audience besides just professional chefs.”

The company is slowly building up its regular customer base and discovering new ways that it can offer its products to the local community. This includes looking into the potential in farmers markets and continually learning more about how to adapt their product packaging to address the needs of the retail market. Social media also has become a vital tool for Windy City Mushroom, providing them with a forum where they can share their product and upcoming sales.

For those that are considering venturing into mushroom growing, Guy highly advises following the path that Windy

City Mushroom took. This includes using what already exists in the industry, inoculated products and starting small. Overall, they're very excited about the potential in this burgeoning market and continually looking at ways to increase the accessibility of these premium products, continually evaluating their framework to determine areas where they can improve production and overall efficiency.

"Fundamentally, moving towards larger commercialization will be good for both the product itself and the industry. This includes finding the commercial equipment that will increase the overall efficiencies of the operation," said Guy.

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Anne-Marie Hardie is a freelance writer/speaker from Barrie, Ontario, and part of the third generation of the family-owned garden center/wholesale business Bradford Greenhouses in Barrie/Bradford, Ontario.