



KEYSTONE CUISINE

By Zachary Falck

Mushrooms from Underground Farms

Throughout the early 20th century, Western Pennsylvanians who consumed fresh, locally grown produce during the warmer seasons turned during the winter to what they canned or preserved and to the roots stored in their cellars. However, by the 1940s they also enjoyed fresh mushrooms grown year-round in Butler and Armstrong counties, no matter how high the snow piled up.

In 1937, brothers Menno and Ira Yoder turned a limestone mine in West Winfield, Butler County, into 80 acres of tunnel-linked growing chambers. The cool, stable underground temperature and the development of systems to regulate humidity created excellent conditions for mushroom growing. At the time, about 90 percent of the nation's mushroom crop came from hundreds of cultivators in the Kennett Square area of southeastern Pennsylvania.

While the Kennett Square area remained the nation's leading mushroom producer, the Yoders were working "the Mother Lode of the American mushroom industry," as their promotional material claimed, and became the largest single grower. By 1962, headlamp-

wearing female mushroom pickers were harvesting 15 tons per day. By 1966, the farm had expanded operations into another 500 acres of former limestone mines in nearby Worthington, Armstrong County. The huge harvests permitted the farm to send four-ton shipments to commercial food manufacturers. Americans ate Moonlight® Mushrooms when they bought Ann Page meatless spaghetti sauce; Campbell's cream of mushroom and golden mushroom soups; Great American chicken, rice, and mushroom soup; Green Giant frozen whole mushrooms in butter sauce; Heinz barbeque sauce with onions and mushrooms; and Le Choy chop suey vegetables and chicken chow mein.

As the farm's annual production climbed beyond 35 million pounds in the early 1970s, the fungus was marketed as a regional cuisine but also celebrated for its culinary versatility and healthiness. In 1972, the Joseph Horne department store's miniature Lebanon Farmers' Market featured products that made Pennsylvania Dutch cooking "marvelous," including chow-chow, alfalfa honey, and Butler County mushrooms. The booklets *Moonlight®*



Beef Stroganoff

- 1 pound Moonlight Mushrooms, sliced
- 2 pounds beef filet, sirloin or round steak
- 5 tablespoons butter
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup onion, diced
- 1 clove garlic, crushed
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 1 can (10 oz.) condensed beef broth
- $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1 cup dairy sour cream
- 2 tablespoons dry white wine
- 2 tablespoons dill weed, chopped

Slice mushrooms and set aside. Trim fat from beef and cut crosswise into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch slices. In a large skillet heat 2 tablespoons of the butter, add beef and brown well on both sides. Remove beef and set aside. Add remaining butter, onion, garlic and saute for 2 minutes, add mushrooms and saute 5 minutes longer. Mix the flour with the broth, then add broth, salt and pepper to the skillet. Bring to the boiling point, stirring constantly. Reduce heat, continue to stir and simmer until thickened. Add sour cream, wine, dill and mix well. Add beef and continue to simmer until beef is hot. Do not boil. Serve over cooked noodles or rice.

Serves 4.

The company produced small recipe books that offered dozens of uses for its mushrooms.

HC L&A, Good Things to Eat with Moonlight Mushrooms, brochure, c. 1970.

UP FRONT

Mushroom Recipe Book and *Good Things to Eat with Moonlight Mushrooms* contained “dishes from afar” such as Chinese pork and mushrooms, shish kabobs, veal Marengo, Indian curried mushrooms, and Polish hunter’s stew. Low-calorie recipes for “Waist Watchers” included pickled mushrooms and mushroom seafarers’ casserole. Sliced mushrooms were ideal for adding into salads because “their calorie count is so dainty that it hardly needs to be considered at all.” However, most recipes were for chicken, ham, beef, and noodle dishes topped with sautéed mushrooms.

In the 1980s, the only underground mushroom farm in the United States helped

feed the unemployed and likely appeared on the plates of those who dined in the region’s popular restaurants. When job losses and layoffs pushed Butler County’s unemployment rate to 20 percent in 1983, one morale-boosting event was “Butler County Mushroom Soup Day” at the County Manor Restaurant, which served all-you-can-eat mushroom soup for 50 cents. Jardine’s, a restaurant in Sarver within a dozen miles of the farm, brought piles of deep-fried mushrooms to tables. A specialty at Green Tree’s Piccolo Mondo was Hunter-style veal medallions featuring mushrooms. Top of the Triangle chefs sautéed mushrooms in butter then added wine and parsley to prepare

Mushrooms Madeira. Hugo’s Rotisserie and Poli’s served spinach and mushroom salads with vinaigrette dressings.

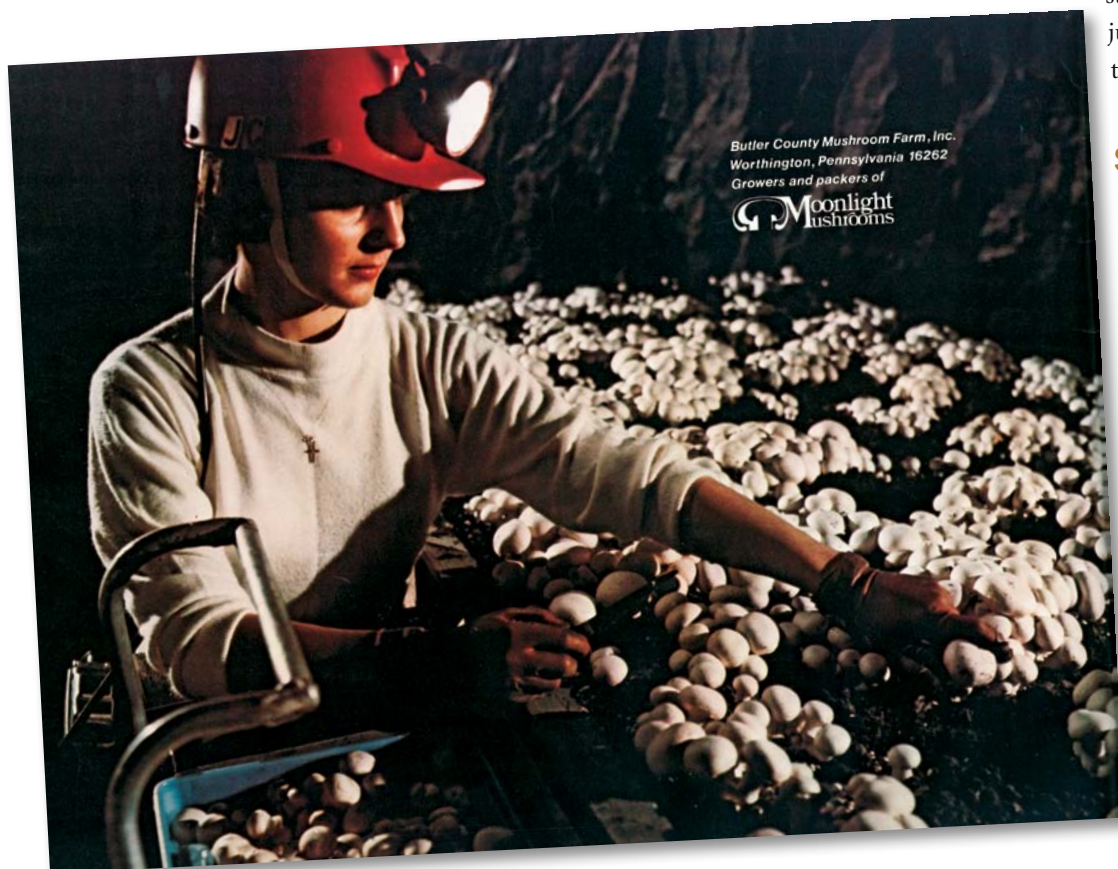
After a series of ownership changes in the 1980s and 1990s, Creekside Mushrooms acquired the Moonlight® Mushrooms brand and shifted all production to Worthington. The fungus continued to appear on local menus: as late as 2009, Eat’n Park was using Creekside’s white mushrooms in its Stuffed Mushroom Appetizer and Creekside’s portabella mushrooms in other dishes. However, tumbling demand and increased imports led Creekside to lay off its workers and suspend operations at the end of 2009 and early 2010. Western Pennsylvanians will still enjoy fresh mushrooms year round, just not necessarily ones grown so close to home.

Sources

Moonlight Mushrooms Inc.: 50 Years ... and Still Growing, s.p., 1987.

The Farms Beneath the Hills: The story of Moonlight Mushrooms, brochure, 1970.

Note: Moonlight® Mushrooms is a registered trademark.



Judy Costa harvesting in 1970, when production was increasing.

HC L&A, Farms brochure.



Workers on one of the trucks that transported them into the mushroom mines, 1938.
HC L&A, 50 Years book.