

# Mushroom. magic

Oyster mushrooms are a delicious obsession for Havelock North grower Aiman Samy, as Amanda Sye finds out

Photographs by SIMON YOUNG



**M**ushrooms are magic for Aiman Samy, an Egyptian-born, Hawke's Bay-based fellow who is fascinated by fungi. It's a fascination that began when Aiman was a child and has since developed into a healthy obsession.

Oyster mushrooms, the flagship product of his mushroom business, Mytopia Exotic Mushrooms, are revered for their taste, texture and health-giving properties.

Aiman's love affair with them began when he and his family moved from Egypt to England. There, he discovered a verdant country filled with forests, squirrels and fungi.

"Egypt is mainly desert with few trees, except for date palms, not much wildlife, and, of course, no mushrooms. The whole idea of growing them fascinated me!"

Back in Egypt to attend university, Aiman signed up for a plant biology course on growing oyster mushrooms. But his first attempt to grow them was disastrous – his pasteurised straw and mushroom-spawn mixture yielded a meagre 150g instead of the expected 7-8kg.

"Influenced by my complete failure, I put mushrooms at the back of my mind and moved on."

And move on he did – literally.

"My brother and I had always talked about New Zealand – he had a teacher at his school in London who was from New Zealand and, in Egypt, my younger sister had Kiwi friends at her school and my mum had got to know her parents well. They talked about New Zealand with a passion that made it seem irresistible."

So Aiman sold his car, bought the plane tickets, packed a back-pack and travelled across the world. After the initial shock of arriving in Auckland – it was so quiet after Egypt's population of 60 million! – he set off to get himself a horticultural job in Hawke's Bay. Working in a Hastings fruit-tree nursery for three years while applying for residency, Aiman often talked about the mushrooms

**Opposite page:** The delicate fan-shaped fungi known as the oyster mushroom.

**This page, top:** Aiman Samy stands amid bags of pasteurised straw and mushroom spawn. **Right:** Shhhh... baby oyster mushrooms growing. **Far right:** And more – matured and ready for sale.





he had tried to grow back in Egypt.

"My workmates used to laugh at me and make jokes about my passion for oyster mushrooms. No one had ever heard of them in New Zealand at the time!"

But then Aiman met Alice Bennett, a local vet who shared his love of wildlife, enjoyed bush walks and could cope with his fungi fascination.

"We went out to the bush quite regularly and that's when I noticed all these amazing little mushrooms on the ground, in the trees, everywhere. I started gathering and trying to identify them – I bought a small field guide, and then many more, and I went out and spent too much money on camera equipment to photograph them."

A relationship with Alice and a website soon followed, complete with fungi photos and a mushroom-lovers' chat room.

"This put me in touch with others who were enchanted by fungi. Soon people started cutting mushroom articles out to show me and I bought myself some text books from overseas and read them from cover to cover. That's when they started calling me the mushroom man."

Native to Japan, but now popular worldwide, the delicate fan-shaped oyster mushroom is a relative newcomer to New

Zealand. It wasn't until the mid 1990s, after several strains were identified here, that MAF first allowed oyster mushroom spawn into the country. Species already in existence and posing no environmental hazard are the only ones permitted.

For Aiman – also a relative newcomer to the country – discovering his beloved oyster mushrooms on the menu at a dinner party propelled him from studying texts and internet sites to developing a labour-intensive, but exciting, business.

These days his mushrooms are in huge demand, couriered to discerning chefs around the country and sold to gourmards who frequent the weekly farmers markets.

Yet it's taken more than five years of hard work and occasional heartache to achieve success. Growing mushrooms requires a few basics besides enthusiasm – somewhere to build a grow room and cash to purchase mushroom spawn, for starters – so Aiman's dream remained just that until his parents moved to New Zealand and bought some land. With a house and outbuildings already on site, Aiman's business idea at last, well, mushroomed!

"We called the business Mytopia – a combination of the 'my' from mycology and utopia, the perfect place.

"I originally wanted to call the business Happy Mushrooms because that's what they make me, but everyone gave me such a hard time about that choice of name," Aiman recalls.

Initially, an old shed was commandeered and production got underway, but soon more space was needed so a kitset grow room was imported from California. Kiwi ingenuity was called upon to adapt the structure to suit the Hawke's Bay climate; Pink Batts fastened to shadecloth improved insulation considerably.

"It still gets too cold in winter and too hot in summer, but we get there in the end."

To grow mushrooms commercially, spawn is added to pasteurised straw then packed into huge, tree trunk-like bags that are hung from the grow-room ceiling and left to fruit in warm, moist conditions. While the first mushrooms will appear in less than three weeks, the spawn slowly spreads through its straw home, forming a network that will continue to produce for up to three months.

"They're extraordinary things. They grow so fast and from virtually nothing. In the wild they're nature's biggest recyclers, using fallen logs to thrive on. In

## MUSHROOM TIPS

- Oyster mushrooms are vigorous growers and will continue to grow after they have been harvested.
- Oyster mushrooms can be stored in their original packaging in the fridge for up to two weeks.
- If oyster mushrooms are allowed to get warm, they will start to sweat. If this happens the best way to store them is to remove them from their packet and refrigerate in a paper bag or uncovered.
- Avoid washing the mushrooms. Instead, scrape them with a knife blade or brush them off. The caps can also be wiped clean using a damp cloth. Remove the stem before cooking.

## DID YOU KNOW...

- Oyster mushrooms are the second most consumed fungi in the world after button mushrooms.
- Oyster mushrooms can grow as big as 12cm in diameter.
- In the wild, oyster mushrooms grow on dead wood or on the trunks of deciduous trees.
- The shell-shaped, or oyster-shaped, varieties of the oyster mushroom have white flesh, but their caps may be white, pink, yellow, grey or dark brown. None of the coloured varieties are allowed into New Zealand.
- Oyster mushrooms are a good source of niacin, riboflavin and iron.

## “I LOVE THE WAY I GET TO SEE A PRODUCT I’VE GROWN, PICKED AND PACKED MYSELF”

a commercial sense they grow from straw – I’m simply selling straw in another form!”

Recreating the perfect ‘natural’ environment indoors has its challenges, of course. There have been bouts of stunted growth from a too-small grow room and stints where the mushrooms stopped sprouting altogether.

“One hot week last summer I had to get in Hawke’s Bay Refrigeration to help cool things down. They came even when they knew I couldn’t afford to pay them straight away, and within a week the mushrooms were fruiting again. That’s the kind of amazing support I’ve had.”

With production in full swing again, Aiman went in search of customers. Phone calls and samples supplied to local restaurants soon led to his very first order from Mission Estate Winery restaurant. Stalls at the Hastings Farmers Market and food shows in Auckland and Wellington have also helped secure new customers.

Mytopia’s range now extends to other mushroom products, from mushroom-infused olive oil to dried mushrooms and ground mushroom powder. Other possibilities are being explored all the time – if it works with mushrooms, it’s likely Aiman’s thinking about it!

While growing exotic mushrooms can

be lucrative, Aiman’s not in the fungi business for big money – cash simply means he can keep doing what he loves. He hopes to experiment with other varieties in the future, like shiitake, golden needle mushrooms and King Stropharia, a large mushroom with a thick stem and brown top that grows as big as a dinner plate.

“Mushrooms give me meaning – I love the way I get to see a product that I’ve grown, picked and packed myself.”

Aiman says two top Hawke’s Bay chefs feature Mytopia Mushrooms on their menus. Steve Beer, from Mission Estate in Taradale, serves poached oyster mushroom clusters, served on mesclun salad mix and an aged balsamic dressing and Kent Baddeley, from Diva in Havelock North, serves a lamb and mushroom dish.

Aiman and Alice’s favourite way of eating oyster mushrooms, however, is simply sliced and sautéed in butter, with an added splash of a Japanese soy sauce.

Another favourite is oyster mushroom tempura, which make great finger food when entertaining. It features here for **Taste** readers to try for themselves.

*Mytopia Exotic Mushrooms, Havelock North. Ph: (06) 876 7244 or visit: [www.mytopia-mushrooms.com](http://www.mytopia-mushrooms.com)*



## Oyster mushroom tempura

READY IN: 25 MINUTES

SERVES: 4

- ⅓ cup cream
- 1 egg
- ½ cup plain flour
- ½ tsp salt
- ¼ tsp chilli powder
- 1 tsp sesame oil
- 1 Tbsp Japanese soy sauce
- 200g fresh oyster mushrooms
- canola oil, for deep-frying

**1** Mix cream, egg, flour, salt, chilli powder, sesame oil, soy sauce and a pinch of freshly ground black pepper together. Whisk until smooth.

**2** Heat canola oil in a deep saucepan until a drop of water sizzles in it. Dip whole mushrooms (stems and caps) in the mixture and deep-fry for 30-40 seconds or until they turn golden. Remove from the oil and drain on a paper towel.

**3** Garnish with sliced spring onions or fresh coriander and serve with your favourite mustard or mayonnaise. **T**

**Opposite page:** Aiman shares his knowledge of mushrooms with a couple of customers.