

Where the Wild Shroom Grows

BY BETH ELLEN ROBERTS

Loudon's 75,000 pounds-a-week palate pipeline

Loudon County, known as the “Lakeway to the Smokies,” provides a scenic bypass for tourists who plan to breeze through on Highway 321 on the way to Gatlinburg. This area, however, is becoming known as much for its food ways as for its throughway.

“We eat very well here,” acknowledges Loudon County Visitors’ Bureau director Mary Bryant. Ice cream lovers drive in from Knoxville and Oak Ridge to chow down on hot fudge sundaes at the Tic-Toc Ice Cream Parlor in Loudon. Wampler’s Farm Sausage Co. is located in Lenoir City. And at the Sweetwater Valley Farms cheese factory in Philadelphia, visitors can check out the cows and milking machines before buying some “Volunteer jack” or “Tennessee aged” cheese.

October is a particularly busy time. The third annual Tennessee State Barbeque Championship and Fall Festival, a Kansas City Barbeque Society-sanctioned event, takes place in Lenoir City this month. In Loudon, the Tennessee Valley Winery will hold an OktoberFest featuring tastings of its award-winning wines, including muscadine, Cynthiana, and Honey Mead.

Visitors to Maple Lane Farms in Greenback can pick their own pumpkins and negotiate a corn maze, this year themed “It’s a Southern Thang” and featuring RC Cola and Moon Pies. During the full moon on the 20th of the month, the farm will throw a party featuring live entertainment and the “World’s Largest Moon Pie.”

Agritourism is a growing business in Loudon County. “I’m not sure how it happened,” Bryant says. “Obviously, our roots are agricultural, so maybe it was a natural transition. It’s defi-

nately one of the big draws.” Many visitors are looking to recapture those roots, Bryant suggests, since “it’s not uncommon for people of younger generations to never have stepped foot on a farm.”

Even old-timers are unlikely ever to have stepped foot on the kind of farm that has been operating for the last thirty years off Highway 72 in Loudon. One of the largest of eleven facilities owned by Monterey Mushrooms of Watsonville, Calif., the Loudon location produces 625,000 pounds of mushrooms per week.

Its access to I-75 and I-40 makes Loudon an excellent location for producing perishable food, according to Greg Sweet, the mushroom farm’s general manager. Proximity to the highways provides easy shipping to major markets like Atlanta and Nashville and access to the large quantities of raw materials required.

Mushroom production requires compost, and producing compost requires large quantities of what could be described politely as waste materials. Monterey imports truckloads of stable bedding from the Lexington, Ky., area that represents 60% of the compost. Mixed with wheat straw from Middle Tennessee, chicken litter, cotton seed hulls, nitrogen, and lots of water, the material fills up a five-acre “wharf area,” where it reaches 180 degrees Fahrenheit while decomposing.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MONTEREY MUSHROOMS

And yes, it smells, Sweet says, although they do what they can to control the odor. There are few residential buildings in the area; a landfill borders the mushroom facility, and an industrial park lies on the other side.


About 400 of the facility's 550 employees are involved with harvesting and packaging the mushrooms. The indoor growing facility is a pleasant place to work, Sweet says. In addition to comfortable conditions where temperatures are maintained at about 63 degrees with 85-90% humidity, Monterey offers steady employment. "The best thing about the mushroom business is that it is very consistent throughout the year; we stay at full production year round," Sweet says.

The mushroom industry is evolving, with consolidation in the grocery business and increasing demand for gourmet mushroom varieties like oyster mushrooms and portabellas. The Loudon farm now produces about 75,000 pounds per week of "brown" varieties, including the popular baby bellas.

A 2006 National Restaurant Association survey of "What's Hot and What's Not" found that exotic mushrooms rate high up on the Hot list. The Maryville-headquartered restaurant chain Ruby Tuesday agrees, and many of Monterey's mushrooms wind up in its peppercorn mushroom sirloin, chicken bella, and alpine Swiss burgers. "Baby bellas are a great way for us to offer a premium mushroom that is versatile enough for a variety of applications," Rick Johnson, senior vice president of Ruby Tuesday says.


Although Monterey Mushrooms is often approached about offering tours Sweet says, they are too busy now to accommodate most of those who want to visit. Participating in the county's agritourism boom is "something we might consider for the future," he allows. Who knows? Fifty years from now, tourists may bring their children to Loudon County to learn about traditional Tennessee farm activities like milking cows, making jelly, and growing baby bellas. **tn**

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