

Business

Deep underground, Paris mushroom growers struggle to preserve heritage

Farmers revolutionize mushroom production

CARRIERES-SUR-SEINE: Two centuries ago, French farmers revolutionized mushroom production by moving into the maze of limestone quarries underneath Paris, but today only a handful still cultivate a heritage at risk of fading away for good. The bitter irony is that demand for traditionally grown white button mushrooms, and their more flavourful brown-capped cousins, is as high as ever.

"It's not a question of finding clients, I sell everything I can produce," said Shoua-moua Vang at Les Alouettes in Carrieres-sur-Seine, a short drive from the bustling La Defense business district west of the capital. Vang runs the largest underground mushroom cave in the Paris region, spread across one and a half hectares (3.7 acres) of tunnels in a hill overlooking the Seine river.

He counts Michelin-starred chefs as well as supermarket chains and local markets among his customers, even though he deems his mushrooms "expensive" at 3.20 euros a kilo wholesale (\$1.65 a pound). But dank trays loaded with hundreds of kilograms of fungi were going to waste during a recent visit, because Vang lacked enough hands to pick them all. Just five of his 11 workers were on the job after the others called in sick - and Vang was doubtful that all of them would actually return.

"People these days don't want to work all day in the dark like vampires," he said, estimating that this day's production would top out at 1.5 tons instead of his usual 2.5 or even three tons. He

is one of just five traditional producers of what the French call "champignons de Paris" located around the capital, along with an even smaller number in abandoned quarries north of the capital. That's down from around 250 in the late 19th century, when farmers flocked to a "royal" mushroom variety that the Sun King, Louis XIV, had made popular by having it grown at Versailles.

They had discovered that *Agaricus bisporus* would grow year-round if placed in a manure-based substrate deep underground, where temperatures and humidity could be controlled and the dark would encourage growth. It also turned out that the caves' earthy atmosphere, reinforced by covering the compost with ground-up limestone, imparted a nutty, almost mineral taste while preventing the mushrooms from becoming over-saturated with water. Even the macabre tunnels of the Paris catacombs, now a top tourist attraction, were once filled with mushroom beds.

Revival in view?

Rapid urbanization and in particular the construction of the Paris metro began pushing growers out of the capital in the early 1900s, though around 50 were still in quarries under Paris suburbs in the 1970s, often run by new generations of the same family. The arrival of cheaper imports from industrial hangars in the Netherlands, Poland and later China, which use peat instead of limestone to boost production rates, proved too much for most.

"It's hard to find people who want to take over because there's no mushroom cultivation programs in agriculture schools," said Muriel Le Loarer, who is working to revive the Paris mushroom tradition at the SAFER rural development agency.

Vang, for example, had worked 11 years at the quarry owned by Jean-Louis Spinelli, whose children declined to follow in their father's footsteps, before taking over in September 2020. "Finding people to pick the mushrooms is complicated, it's hard to find good compost, and people don't want to invest when you don't know if producers are going to make it," Spinelli said. "We're promoting the sector, helping to find financing and working with local authorities to open quarries back up," said Le Loarer, noting the growing interest in local produce and the farm-to-table trend.

For now, though, Paris mushrooms are just a tiny fraction of the 90,000 tons produced in France each year, according to figures from the Rungis wholesale market south of the capital. Officials say it's too late to create a distinctive "Paris mushroom" certification under France's AOP food appellation rules, since the name has been used generically for decades. That means producers face a marketing challenge to ensure people realize when they're buying the authentic, quarry-farmed fungi. "Here our mushrooms grow naturally, I don't boost them by spraying water because that fills them with water," Vang said. "These mushrooms from the huge hangars are basically grown by computers." — AFP

France slams Jersey as Channel fishing tensions rise again

SAINT-POL-DE-LEON: The French government accused the Channel island of Jersey yesterday of being unwilling to cooperate on fishing licences, raising tensions again just weeks after Paris threatened to impose sanctions. The island, a British protectorate just off the coast of northern France, is at the centre of a row about the granting of licences to French fisherman following the UK's departure from the European Union. "It is obvious beyond doubt that Jersey is not respecting the Brexit deal. Worse, it is showing an unwillingness to cooperate with us," French Fisheries Minister Annick Girardin said yesterday during a trip to northwest France.

She said that 46 requests for licences from French fisherman had received no reply from the Jersey authorities, while another 52 licences had expired at the end of October "denying these fishermen access to Jersey waters." At the end of October, France threatened to ban British boats from unloading their catches at French ports and to subject all British imports to inspections, raising the prospect of a trade war between the neighbors.

Girardin has previously raised the possibility of restricting electricity exports to Jersey, which depends on the French mainland for its power. Several rounds of talks



SAINT HELIER, Jersey: French fishing boats return home following their protest in front of the port of Saint Helier off the British island of Jersey to draw attention to what they see as unfair restrictions on their ability to fish in UK waters after Brexit. —AFP

between the British and French governments this month had soothed tensions and staved off the threat of sanctions, but without finding a durable solution. France views Britain and Jersey as unfairly targeting French boats by either denying them licences or failing to respond to requests, undermining the deal between Britain and the UK which guaranteed EU fishermen continuing access to British waters.

Britain and Jersey deny the accusations and say that the rejected French boats have

been unable to prove that they previously fished in UK waters, a condition for obtaining a license. In a sign that the French government anticipated some losses, Girardin also said yesterday that she was preparing a rescue plan of 40-60 million euros (\$45-70 million) for French boat owners who had been rejected. Analysts say relations between Britain and France are at their lowest in decades due to tensions over Brexit, migration and a submarine contract with Australia. —AFP

In UK, fears grow over spiking winter fuel bills

LONDON: British pensioner Doreen Thompson wears extra layers of clothes in her two-bedroom apartment outside London to avoid turning the heat on since her utility bills have jumped. The 70-year-old usually entertains guests in her kitchen because it's warmer than the living room - where walls have mould - in her government-subsidized flat in Brixton. Domestic electricity and gas prices have soared worldwide this year, driven by spiking wholesale energy costs, stoking fears over the peak-demand cold winter in Britain. As the weather turns cold, "I can't have the heating on all day because I just cannot afford to," Thompson told AFP.

Winter 'might be nasty'

Global inflation has shot higher largely on surging energy prices, eating into household budgets in Britain and abroad, particularly for those on low incomes. UK annual inflation rocketed to a near-decade high at 4.2 percent in October, official data showed Wednesday. And the rate is forecast to peak around 5.0 percent in April, compounded by soaring food prices and a supply-chain crunch as economies reopen from pandemic lockdowns.

"I'm worried about this winter because I've got a feeling that it might be quite nasty," said Thompson, whose rent accounts for almost half her monthly pension totalling £1,200 (\$1,630, 1,400 euros). Energy bills and other expenses gobble up her remaining money, while her bank account fell into the red this month. "I got a text from the bank to say that I was overdrawn," said retired social worker Thompson, who now relies on help from voluntary organizations that she used to assist. "So I checked and yes, I am in overdraft, but thank God it's only by £35 this month." —AFP