

Industry mushrooms with quality product

By JULIE PAUL

ANYONE in search of the best quality mushrooms need look no further than South Australia.

Phil Rogers, of P&L Rogers Pty Ltd, Woodcroft, was delighted to hear those words from a Sydney-based marketer recently.

Not that he was surprised. "Our State produces superb mushrooms," Phil said. "We are renowned for it."

Phil and his wife Linda took over the property at Woodcroft in 2006 when the previous operator, Linda's father Geoff Izard, decided to concentrate his business efforts on the mushroom compost production side of the industry at his Victorian site.

P&L Mushrooms continues to flourish.

"We have a cropping area of about 1000-1200 square metres per week," Phil said. "That means we can provide about 35 tonnes to 40t of fresh cultivated mushrooms to the market each week, which puts us into the 'medium size producer' category."

The Rogers grow mostly white button mushrooms, with about 20 per cent of their pro-

Smart facts

- ▶ Third largest 'fruit and vegetable' seller
- ▶ Huge set-up, production costs
- ▶ Extensive national, local marketing

duction made up of Swiss Browns. "Mushrooms are the third largest seller in the 'fruit and vegetable' market although, of course, they are not actually fruit or vegetables," Phil said. "However we label them, they come in third, selling just behind potatoes and tomatoes."

Setting up in production, however, is a massive operation.

"We are talking about several million dollars just to get started."

"Quite a bit of the equipment is imported from Holland – a hub of mushroom growing technology. Then it's a matter of developing technique – growing to maximise quality right through all stages of production," he said.

As a high-tech, labour intensive industry, setting-up costs are huge – this is not an industry for the 'backyard' producer. Initial expenses begin with growing sheds – purpose-built rooms or existing structures modified for suitability,

insulation to prevent fluctuations in temperature, heating and humidity control, air filtering to keep out insects and air-borne spores, ventilation to ensure uninhibited growth, and concrete flooring with suitable drainage for hygiene management – all this without taking into account trays for growing, packing room fittings, pumps, trolleys, protective clothing and, above all, labour costs.

"Picking costs are high – we employ about 85 people here, and most of them are pickers," Phil said.

"We have an excellent team. The working hours suit people with children at school and we're very flexible with hours anyway."

"We try to maintain a permanent group and offer full training in picking, grading and cutting to maximise their skills. The pickers work on piece rates – some can pick 35-40 kilograms per hour and they earn really excellent money."

"We have some pickers who have been here for 16-20 years."

Marketing is handled through The Food Studio, under the enthusiastic guidance of Pam Tobin via a range of promotional and educational campaigns, which have the growers' total support.



Phil Rogers checks the progress of the 'first flush', as the mushroom just begin to appear.

In addition, there is a big increase in consumer awareness of the nutritional value of mushrooms, and Pam is working with growers to promote this aspect of the industry.

Phil and Linda also choose to market direct to the consumer through the weekly Farmers' Market at the Adelaide Showground.

"Our aim is not necessarily to sell more mushrooms," Phil said. "But we like to provide tastings, give out recipes and show different dishes to prepare and different cooking methods."

"It's also a great way to get customer feedback."

"Our son Jaylon and daughter Janelle take turns to look after the stand, and we usually sell out well

before the market closes."

Phil has a few concerns about the possibility of competition from producers in other countries.

"Australia being isolated has been a benefit over the years, but with the increase in global interaction that may soon be challenged," he said.

"But we have every reason for optimism."

"We have quality second to none, and we are the envy of producers all over the world because of our industry organisation."

"I'm very proud to be a part of that. It's a privilege to be involved with the operation – working to keep it sound for the next generation."



Marketers, growers combine for 'family' excellence

THE Australian Mushroom Growers' Association represents 95 per cent of Australian mushroom farms, with a strong and pro-active involvement with growers.

In South Australia, the AMGA's promotions coordinator is Pam Tobin (pictured) who has been involved with the industry for 18 years.

"We are part of a huge family," Pam said. "Each state has its own body, but we meet regularly on a national basis to decide on marketing strategies and to promote special events and the industry as a whole."

Events include the annual 'Mushroom Mania' promotion, in which chefs take part to produce their own individual mushroom dishes.

More than 1600 restaurants, cafes, bistros, pubs and clubs around Australia take part in the promotion during July.

There was also the inaugural 'pink' promotion last year, raising awareness of the health-giving aspects of mushrooms at the same time as giving financial support to the Breast Cancer Network.

Various other campaigns make use of a broad range of media and social networking.

Pam's enthusiasm is legendary.

"I still love it, even after all these years," she said.

"It's a great industry to work in and I seem to be a part of the scenery now – so much so that I'm usually referred to as 'Madam Mushroom'!"

For those who are considering a move to the industry, or who have made the initial investment and are working on a positive plan for the future, the AMGA offers the following advice:

- Develop a business plan to ensure growth is sus-

tainable and achievable.

- Work with industry leaders and innovators to identify promotional opportunities.

- Seek external expert advice to assist development.

- Develop strong communication skills.
- Work with consumers, retailers, wholesalers and marketers to determine what the consumer wants.

- Build relationships with government to assist with research and development, grants and export links.
- Industry representatives are always ready to assist with advice regarding setting up, production and long-term prospects.

- Need to know more?

Pam Tobin - AMGA
08 8234 8601
Email: thefoodstudio@ozemail.com.au
www.cookingwithmushrooms.com