

Mushrooming demand for fungus

Gourmands from across China flock to restaurants, and some journey to harvest zones, to savor matsutake from Yunnan

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This summer's unusual rain pattern in South-west China's Yunnan province has been bad news for mushroom gatherers.

The region, which is home to more than 250 types of mushrooms, saw its average rainfall between May and early June dip by 50 percent. What followed was 40 consecutive days of rain that resulted in floods and mudslides that have severely affected mushroom production.

Matsutake yield has dropped by a staggering 90 percent this year. Farmers said they only managed to gather about 10 metric tons of the mushroom daily during late August, which is usually the peak harvest period.

But mushroom traders have actually benefited from the dismal harvest. Because of the low yield and high demand, the retail price of matsutake in Yunnan peaked at 3,000 yuan (\$455) per kilogram this season.

According to the Yunnan Matsutake Association, domestic consumption of this particular mushroom was 1,000 tons last year. Demand for the mushroom is also high in Japan, especially during this time of the year when it is widely consumed during the Obon Festival, also commonly referred to as the Ghost Festival.

"We would usually wrap up our business this time of the year as export to Japan, our main customer, nears its end," said Yan Ji, a 32-year-old mushroom trader from Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan.

"This year, however, business has not even started to wane."

Yan, who works for his family business which sells premium mushrooms and vegetables to Japan and South Korea, noted that exports used to account for 90 percent of the company's earnings.

His company, Xintian Fungus, has been in the business for more than two decades and is among the top exporters in Yunnan province.

The company sells a wide variety of *gu*, cultivated mushrooms that are available all year around, and *jun*, wild edible fungus that grow in forests and are harvested only between July and early September every year. The price of the latter is typically five to 10 times higher than the former.

He explained that while Chinese consumers are no strangers to savor-



Chef Otto Goh from the Kerry Hotel Pudong selects wild mushrooms in Yunnan province. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



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ing mushrooms, it was not until about three years ago that demand picked up in major cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou of South China's Guangdong province.

Today, most of the customers that buy matsutake from his online retail store on Taobao.com, the country's largest online retail platform, come from China's Yangtze River Delta region, especially Shanghai.

"If matsutake is available all year round and Shanghaiese consumers continue buying them from me at this price, I could soon be a billionaire and buy myself an apartment in Shanghai," he laughed.

According to the Yunnan Fungus Association, mushroom consumption has been growing about 10 percent annually over the past few years. In 2015, around 80,000 tons of mushrooms worth 6.8 billion yuan

were produced by the province.

Tang Xijin, chief of the matsutake association, said the growing demand for the mushroom was due to three key factors: An 8-minute feature on the matsutake in the popular food documentary *A Bite of China* in 2012, the expansive and fast-developing logistics network in the country, and the perceived health benefits, including possible cancer prevention, that mushrooms have.

To cater to the growing mushroom market, SF Express, China's largest private express logistics firm, announced in July that it would launch a dedicated freight airline to ensure that consumers in 76 major cities in the country could receive fresh matsutake within 48 hours of harvest.

The soaring demand from coastal and other large cities in China has

also led to a deluge of individual mushroom dealers entering the lucrative scene.

Matsutake, which can be distinguished by its brownish cap and a plump white stem, grows at the roots of red pine trees. The best time to consume the mushroom is within three days of its harvest.

One of the notable matsutake harvest zones in Yunnan is in Shangri-La, Diqing Tibetan autonomous prefecture, where SF Express has established a logistics hub to deliver the mushrooms across the country. Gourmands have been known to travel all the way to this remote region to savor the matsutake.

"Mushroom tourism is still at its infancy but there is keen interest," said Eddie Zhu, general manager of Hylandia, a luxury hotel by hospitality group Shangri-La.

"It's just like a wine tour. Coming here to eat the mushroom doesn't necessarily make it taste better, but people just like to see where they grow and how they are harvested," said Zhu.

While there is no record of the number of guests who traveled to the region specifically to savor the matsutake, Zhu said that the hotel managed to sell 270 kg of the mushroom to its customers last year.

He expects mushroom tourism to extend the peak tourism season in the area by up to two months till mid-autumn. Tourist numbers are typically the highest from July to August and the lowest from December to April.

"The best matsutake mushrooms are not the longest ones but those that measure about 6 inches and have caps yet to open up like umbrellas — people believe these have the most intense aroma. I think Shangri-La tourism, or mushroom tourism, is also at a similar stage of opening-up now," said Zhu.

In Shanghai, matsutake mushrooms used to be sold only in Yunnan restaurants and Japanese teppanyaki joints. Over the past two years, however, a variety of restaurants, ranging from Shanghaiese to Cantonese and even Western-style establishments, have started offering the premium produce to their diners.

Chef Lu Yiming, one of Shanghai's most renowned chefs who runs two Michelin-starred restaurants — Yong Yi Ting and Fu He Hui — explained that offering the matsutake to customers falls in line with the current food trend of experiencing seasonal tastes.

At Yong Yi Ting, a restaurant within Mandarin Oriental Pudong that serves Huaiyang cuisine, Lu presents special menus featuring premium mushrooms from Yunnan and hairy crabs every year.

On the mushroom-themed menu at Yong Yi Ting this year, diners get to choose from a dozen dishes ranging from appetizers to soups and dim sum. Lu has also adopted the Shanghaiese cooking style, such as red braising, to prepare some of the dishes.

Malaysian chef Otto Goh, who runs The Cook at Kerry Hotel Pudong, is one of the latest fans of the matsutake.

Business at the restaurant during summer is usually slow as the main bulk of its customers — top executives from multinational companies — go on vacation. As such, Goh often makes trips to other Chinese cities in search of unique ingredients.

After visiting Yunnan three times since last year and learning how to prepare a variety of mushroom dishes, the 44-year-old decided to introduce a matsutake buffet priced at 298 yuan. He said that the mushroom has the potential to achieve greater popularity among Westerners because of its unique earthy aroma and fleshy texture.

"The rationale is simple: We offer the best at the lowest price possible during the worst season, so that we could drive business," said Goh.

"There is a Chinese saying that good wine can be found even if it is hidden deep in an alley, because it is just so fragrant. I believe this is the case with mushrooms."