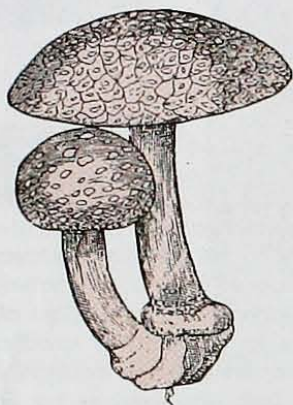


# Business is Mushrooming



Jason, Ruth, David, Julie and Shawn Reimer are pictured above, from left to right, preparing the shiitakes for packing and drying.

Photo courtesy of Chris Thomas, The Simcoe Reformer.

Port Rowan, Ontario - Brothers Dave and Gord Reimer harvested their first crop of shiitake mushrooms in 1991, and now, only four growing seasons later, they find themselves on the verge of international distribution and hard put to keep up with the demand. The meaty Japanese fungus, sought after by gourmet chefs for its unique flavour and versatility, has turned their farm, Seldom Rest Ranch, from a struggling corn and soybean operation to a state-of-the-art business that's skyrocketing to success.

The special market niche for shiitakes and Dave's flair for promotion have contributed greatly to their achievement; so has a more old-fashioned ingredient - hard work. Dave and his wife Ruth, Gord and his wife Rita, and their respective three children have become Ontario's largest producers of shiitake mushrooms without any extra help. This is the story of a family that works together in every sense of the word.

Reimers have been farmers for more generations than one can remember. Dave and Ruth still grow corn and soybeans on their 100 acres near Long Point on Lake Erie, the same farm where Dave and Gord grew up; Gord and Rita still grow corn and cucumbers on their neighbouring 80 acres. It's only on the 20-acre woodlot separating their homes where the mushrooms happen.

Shiitake mushrooms grow so well in Norfolk County's ideal climate, with its humid summers and mild winters, that the cluster of 15 or so growers here have banded together to form the Oak Forest Mushroom Association. These growers are dedicated to growing

high-quality mushrooms the traditional way, on oak logs, rather than in sawdust blocks in greenhouses. Their dedication has paid off. Oak Forest shiitakes have impressed potential buyers from Germany to Hawaii.

The mushrooms grow by an unusual process the Reimers learned from a Korean farmer. They inoculate four-foot-long oak logs with shiitake spawn, then let them lie in the woods for a year while a root system, called mycelium permeates the sap lines. When the ends of the log turn white, it's time to start producing. This involves irrigating the logs for 24 hours, then whacking them with a hammer. Wherever the mycelium breaks, it pushes up a mushroom - anywhere from 30 to 100 per log. The logs in the woodlot will produce up to four times a year, and a couple of greenhouses keep the process going year-round.

The Reimers started out with 600 logs, which they painstakingly drilled, inoculated and sealed by hand. Now they have 35,000 logs, and the inoculation process is entirely mechanized. In order to rotate harvesting, they prepare only 1,000 logs at a time.

Things don't always work out according to plan, though. One week this summer, when

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*"[Ruth] speaks for the whole clan when she [says], 'I love it here at the farm, working together as a family.'"*

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violent thunderstorms shook the ground, growth was stimulated and suddenly 35,000 logs were producing at once. One area shiitake farmer picked 4,000 pounds in a single day - an astonishing figure, when you consider that 300 pounds is a typical per-day harvest.

Picking, grading and sorting jobs keep all the kids in the two Reimer families busy after school and on Saturdays, plus all summer long. Dave and Ruth's offspring include Julie, 20, who gets paid to run the house, make meals and deliver coffee-break treats to the barn; her brother Shawn, 19, is "the main man," as adept at procedures as his dad; Jason, 16, is the chief slicer operator in the barn. Gord and Rita's daughter Jenny, 17, helps with picking and packing; Heidi, 16, fit and outdoorsy, does everything the guys do, from setting up logs to irrigating; and, Vicki, 13, is the family's sociable "sunshine girl," who boosts spirits while she picks and packs mushrooms.

Because of the market that's also booming for shiitakes in dried form (whole, sliced or powdered, for use in soups and gravies), the Reimers imported a mushroom dryer from Korea, and have become a processing centre for many area growers. At the peak of season, the Reimers fill the dryer to capacity (600 to 800 pounds) and ship 750 pounds of fresh shiitake mushrooms, packed into specially made three-pound boxes, to Toronto every day. While the drying is mechanized, it's still demanding.

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