

FOOD & DRINK

Page 5

March 24, 2023

Mushroom kingdom rising: Ribbon-cutting ceremony held for Setas Mushrooms

Aaron Dobler
Community News Editor

GREENCASTLE – The air was as festive as it was cold last Saturday when more than 600 people gathered at Setas Mushrooms' 15-acre farm (7189 Hege Road) to celebrate its grand opening. The mushrooms – appearing in the form of ingredients, jerky, powders, tinctures, packaging material and coffins – were the main attraction, but additional vendors supplied the coffee, beer and Wi-Fi while live music played in the barn.

According to CEO Kat Mackenzie, Setas grows about 20 different varieties of mushroom including oyster, lion's mane and shiitake using an indoor vertical farming method. Right now, she said they are only using one level, and they produce about 200 pounds of mushrooms each week. By building higher, they could potentially quadruple that amount.

In addition to selling at farmers markets, customers can purchase Setas' mushrooms from their website that will be shipped from "farm to table" on a subscription basis. They can also be found in the recipes

new life in agriculture." She added that she is looking forward to what Setas has to offer in the future.

"You can do anything you want!" said Mackenzie when asked what people can do with mushrooms. She recommends it as a meat substitute when cooking.

The grand opening festivities also included a "Top Chef"-style cooking contest in which chefs went head-to-head creating mushroom-based dishes. One of the competing teams was Dylan Bunker and Rachel Strickland of Backyard Boogie Garden and Grill.

Bunker started out working as a chef in kitchens before transitioning into farming. From there, he took a spot serving hot prepared foods at a farmers market. It was here that he discovered Setas Mushrooms.

"I've got my own produce, and we use all of the other vendors' meats, eggs and cheeses in the menu," said Bunker. "It's actually farm-to-table at the farmers market with the vendors' food. I use Setas mushrooms every single week."

For the competition, Backyard Boogie made a mushroom crostini dish. Other contenders included a mushroom tempura dish and a mushroom shawarma.

Mackenzie isn't just selling mushrooms, she's selling the mushroom lifestyle.

Setas Mushrooms – as the mycologists say – is pinning.

Kat Mackenzie owes her life – or at least the quality of it – to mushrooms. Five years ago, she had been a body builder and a personal trainer until a massive stroke affected her cognitive function and memory to the extent that she no longer recognized her husband.

"It destroyed the computer of my whole body," she said. Her doctors put her on medication, and she came to feel that her life became a cycle: wake up, take pill, take pill, go to sleep. "It was not a life. I got depressed because I went from body builder to now being in bed all day."

Her husband, Max Justice, who would become the chairman of Setas Mushrooms, started searching for an alternative medicine. During the grand opening celebration, he wore a white lab coat over a pair of overalls with a mushroom logo on his t-shirt peeking out. It was what you might expect if Willie Wonka had gotten into mycology instead of candy.

"I was just starting my PhD studies," Justice recalled, "and as a researcher, I knew to research."

His research led him to the work of Paul Stamets, who Justice described as an industry leader with decades of experience. Justice said that Stamets had conducted a five-year DARPA study on the affects of five types of mushrooms on soldiers, and they saw performance enhancements across the board including mental clarity.

It's hard to imagine now, but at this point in the story, Mackenzie didn't even like mushrooms, and she only took them in powdered form.

"So we're finding that mushrooms have a great deal of healing," said Justice. "Lion's mane in particular was a mushroom to help my wife. She equates much of her recovery to eating lion's mane mushrooms."

Eventually, she returns to her neurologist, and he is in shock. He asked if Mackenzie wanted more of the prescription pills, and she declined saying, "I'm good enough with mushrooms."

They purchased the farm in April of 2022 – the ribbon-cutting ceremony just a few weeks shy of the one-year anniversary – and started fixing it up with new flooring and interior walls.

"We are in the middle of what we call a mushroom boom because so many people are finding out what we can do with mushrooms," said Justice. "Here we do alternatives to concrete, plastic, insulation and coffins."

He added that in 2024, BMW and



Photo by Aaron Dobler

Chairman Max Justice, left, and CEO Kat Mackenzie, right, celebrated the grand opening of Setas Mushrooms with a ribbon-cutting ceremony.

Mercedes Benz are going to use Reishi leather in the interiors of their electric vehicles, and Adidas has a mushroom leather shoe on the market today.

"The amount of innovation that is coming through mushrooms is just incredible," said Justice of the unexpected places where mushrooms are popping up these days.

One such place is Setas Mushrooms' "living coffins," one of which was on display during the grand opening. It's a novel concept, as it allows the mushrooms to do what they do best: break things down.

"It's 100% sustainable, biodegradable material," said Justice. "It's designed to biodegrade my body – and anyone else's – including teeth – in two years."

He said that there will be multiple size options available and even coffins for pets. They will be available for purchase through their website. The most expensive option will be \$1500.

Another unlikely place where mushrooms are thriving is popular culture, particularly HBO's "The Last of Us," which is based on the videogame by the same name. The primary antagonist of the show is a very real genus of mushrooms called cordyceps. In real life they are considered endoparasitoids because of their ability to infect and control – and ultimately kill – insects (and sometimes other mushrooms). In the show, they evolve to be able to infect humans, which creates a dramatic post-

degrees. The reason why people don't have fungal infections inside of their body is because the body temperature kills it."

He did concede, however, that if a mutation like the one in the show happened, it would be pretty much unstoppable.

"It's true," he said. "That's true."

His words were reassuring, but as the attendees shuffled around inside the warm barn eating savory mushroom dishes, a living coffin was waiting patiently in the corner for its chance to eat them.

It was possible – for a moment – to forget who was farming who.



Photo by Aaron Dobler
Setas Mushrooms produces about 200 pounds of mushrooms each week. They hope to quadruple their capacity using indoor vertical farming techniques.



Photo by Aaron Dobler

Dylan Bunker and Rachel Strickland of Backyard Boogie made mushroom crostinis in a "Top Chef"-style cooking contest.

of restaurants like The Historic McFarland House, Final Cut Steakhouse and the Tasting Room.

Setas offers a variety of tour packages of their facilities for people who want to see how it all works, and they sell kits for people who want to grow their own.

During the ribbon-cutting ceremony, Debby Cunningham, executive director of the Greencastle-Antrim Chamber of Commerce and Cumberland Valley Business Alliance board member, congratulated them on "giving this farm

"I tried to bring together an unlikely union," said Bunker of his savory and sweet mushroom and blueberry dish. "We have some fresh mascarpone cheese underneath of that. We're topping that with a fig glaze, fresh organic honey and fresh thyme."

"We are here to help the community," said Mackenzie. "I just want to spread the word and show people how they can be healthy with something so small."

She added: "That's why we call mushrooms 'magic food.'"