



STORY **NICKY BEARDMORE** PHOTOGRAPHY **NICKY GORDON**

Beautiful exotic mushrooms

PINK, BROWN, GREY, MEATY, FRAGRANT, PUNGENT, CRUNCHY – EXOTIC MUSHROOMS COME IN A TANTALISING VARIETY OF COLOURS, FLAVOURS AND TEXTURES AND THEY'RE GROWN IN A TUNNEL NEAR YOU.



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: One of the many spectacular escarpments in the valley. Homewares at one of the boutique retail shops. Jing Jo Cafe overlooks the historic Hampton Bridge. Kangaroo Valley Pioneer Farm Museum takes visitors back to the pioneer days. For sale; trinkets, old and new. Fresh organic produce is available at the local store.

Deep in the Southern Highlands, the conditions are perfect for growing exotic mushrooms. An abandoned railway tunnel running beneath Mount Gibraltar consistently offers the cool temperatures and high humidity needed to grow Asian mushrooms. shiitake, shimeji, wood ear and oyster mushrooms (originally found in the mountainous regions of Japan, Korea and China) are now happily growing in a tunnel which replicates their homeland conditions.

But it's clear from Dr Noel Arroll, microbiologist and owner of Li-Sun Exotic Mushrooms, that there's a lot more to growing mushrooms than just simulating environmental conditions – their diet must be replicated. "Mushrooms are the forest's natural clean-up service. When a tree dies, they grow on the trunk and branches, gradually decomposing the wood into organic matter. It took us two years to develop a mixture of Australian sawdust that could support these exotic mushrooms."

Recently Dr Arroll introduced nameko mushrooms into his range. "Everyone thought they couldn't be grown outside of Japan because of their dependency on a certain Japanese tree." Dr Arroll laughs, "But you can't beat Australians. We've got these mushrooms growing on a steady diet of eucalyptus sawdust!"





Li-Sun Exotic Mushrooms was started in 1987 by Dr Arrol when a friend offered him the use of the Mittagong to Bowral tunnel. The first mushroom developed at Li-Sun was the Swiss brown – so named by Dr Arrol as the original mushroom spore was imported from Switzerland. Considered merely a ‘dirty mushroom’, sales were initially disappointing. Fortunately taste is everything and soon people stopped comparing its appearance with the traditional white mushroom and started appreciating its robust flavour. Asian mushrooms were also slow to take off but as restaurants started using them, people at home became more confident about including them in their stir fries, Asian soups and rice dishes. (Recipes and uses can be found on the Li-Sun website www.lisunexoticmushrooms.com)

Australian tastes have come a long way since then and Li-Sun now supplies both European and Asian mushrooms to restaurants and mainstream grocery stores from Sydney to Canberra.

To see crops of exotic mushrooms growing in the dusky light of an historic railway tunnel come to the Southern Highland Flavours Festival held the long weekend in June when the Li-Sun tunnel will be open to the public. ■

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