

# Forest's BOUNTY

*Sheltowee Farm Produces Fungi  
for the Food Lover*

By Wendy Miller | Photos courtesy of Sheltowee Farm

**M**any Bluegrass restaurants, proud of Kentucky's agricultural bounty, credit regional farms for their roles in fine dining. And when it comes to succulent oyster and shiitake mushrooms, just one word is synonymous with local top quality: Sheltowee.

Sheltowee Farm, located on 211 verdant acres in the Daniel Boone National Forest, is less than a decade old, but in that short time owners Billy and Becky Webb not only have established their mycological Eden as the supplier to local upscale dining establishments but have done so while being good stewards of the land and passionate proponents of the many uses of fungi.

Gray dove oyster mushrooms



This quintessential family business began at an auction in 2000. Billy Webb's father, motivated by the desire to have the whole family closer together, had his eye on farmland equidistant between his home in Pike County and his son's Lexington base. Although outbid at first, he contacted the high bidder who, it happened, could not afford the land after all and, in the end, sold it to the senior Webb.

In honor of its location near Sheltoewe Trace Trail, and with a bit of whimsy, Becky and Billy Webb named the property Sheltoewe, the Shawnee word for turtle and the Indian Chief Blackfish's nickname for Daniel Boone, whose belly-down backwoods backpacking made him look like a slow-moving amphibian. After a glass of wine one evening, the Webbs found that a shiitake mushroom on a log took on a similar appearance.

"And if you look hard at our logo," said Becky Webb, "you will also see the shape of Kentucky. We have tried hard to tie the

a full-time job, plus more. Mushrooms fail to recognize the different days of the week or holidays or that you may just want a day off. It is 24/7/365," Billy Webb said.

So, when the grant funding for Becky Webb's job was not renewed, the couple decided to commit completely to the farm.

The next hurdle was financing.

Shiitake mushrooms need 12 to 18 months between planting and the first harvest. That delay, in addition to layout for tools of the trade, such as inoculating equipment for spawn, other equipment, and packing materials, drained the family capital rather quickly. The Webbs had to seek other sources of funding. They were met with all sorts of surprises from well-known agencies: Mushrooms were not considered a valuable crop by the USDA Farm Service Agency, and the Small Business Administration did not recognize farming as a business at all. Even the Kentucky Governor's Office of Agricultural Policy at first re-



*"We quickly realized this was a full-time job, plus more. Mushrooms fail to recognize the different days of the week or holidays or that you may just want a day off. It is 24/7/365." — Billy Webb*

Left, Billy Webb checks the oak logs used for growing shiitake mushrooms. Right, shiitakes grow individually from spawn injected into holes drilled in the logs.

roots of Kentucky into our business."

The Webbs have a history with the crop. Both have done their share of mushroom hunting: he while stationed in Indiana with the military and she with her family when she was growing up.

Although Sheltoewe Farm's 10-acre lake and tall hardwood trees create an idyllic and ideal setting in which to grow mushrooms, getting things up and running with this virtually unknown crop was not that easy. It has taken flexibility, tenacity, and risk tolerance.

The first lesson was that mushroom farming could not, as the Webbs had planned, be a part-time complement to their weekday work. (Billy Webb was an economic development coordinator for the state, and Becky Webb was a research associate at the University of Kentucky.) "We quickly realized this was

fused to risk backing a mushroom farm.

Real help finally came from the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development (MACED), an organization with offices in Berea and Paintsville, whose stated mission is to help "create economic alternatives that make a difference to people and places in eastern Kentucky and Central Appalachia."

"We contacted MACED after the USDA meeting," Billy Webb recalled. "They were at the farm the next day. We had money the day after that, and our full loan was secured in two weeks. We have since paid off that loan and are now in the process of securing another loan with them." Not long thereafter, more dollars came through Farm Credit Services.

Since the initial infusion of outside cash, the Webbs have gone back and received a USDA Rural Development Grant and



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a forgivable loan from the Kentucky Governor's Office of Agricultural Policy and the Agricultural Development Fund. These moneys, a growing clientele, and a two-time refinancing of their home have kept the farm afloat and eventually allowed the business to grow. In 2004 a second, climate-controlled building went into the planning stages so that the seasonal business could further diversify and operate year-round. While the space has been functional enough to produce mushrooms all year, the project itself is just nearing completion now.

The routine of a successful organic mushroom farm is made up of tasks requiring the farmer's daily involvement. Oysters and shiitakes have very different growing habits; the former appearing in a matter of weeks, the latter taking up to 18 months. Shiitakes grow individually from spawn injected into holes drilled in oak logs;



Billy and Becky Webb flank Nat Tate, executive chef of Portofino and Summit; right, Hunter Webb, age 6, lends a hand.

colorful oyster mushrooms, ranging from husky brown to golden yellow to dove gray to pure white, are grown in large clusters in plastic bags filled with straw and mushroom spawn. In both cases, however, the mushrooms taste best harvested when they appear and eaten quickly thereafter.

It is only logical that the most consistent customers would be chefs. The Webbs began approaching restaurants in 2002, first with an introductory letter, followed by mailings. When neither strategy worked, it became clear that a more assertive tack was in order. "You have to be tough-skinned," said Becky Webb. "We started walking in back doors, no knocks." She paused and smiled. "We got really good at finding back doors."

"We" means not only Becky and Billy Webb, but Billy's father and Becky's parents. The Webbs' four sons — Harrison, Hyatt, Hunter, and Hayden — make it a complete family affair. Each boy assists with some aspect of the work, be it making the shiitake blocks,



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picking the mushrooms, carrying boxes, assisting with deliveries, talking to customers, or handling sales.

Last summer Harrison, Hyatt, and Becky Webb ran a Farmer's Market booth at the Hyde Park Farmer's Market in Cincinnati. Hunter, who turned 6 in May, is the "poster child" on Sheltowee's brochure. Even the youngest, Hayden, has a niche, helping pick mushrooms and deliver invoices.

All this manpower, coupled with organization and the deep commitment to excellence, makes Sheltowee mushrooms the mushroom among the area's best chefs.

Dudley's executive chef, Jonathan Gossett, uses them in the restaurant's chicken fricassee, calamari, and vegetable tempura. "Other purveyors can't even stand up to the freshness and quality," Gossett praised. "And they (the Webbs) can produce year round."

"They bring several varieties of oysters in clumps as big as two of my hands, and in a box they remind you of a bunch of people standing on a knoll with umbrellas," Gossett said.

Portofino sous chef Rob Nathanson is another fan. Both the shiitakes and oysters appear caramelized in the wilted spinach salad, sautéed in a vegetable gnocchi dish, and stuffed into ravioli paired with grouper. He compli-



Golden oyster mushrooms growing in plastic bags



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ments the business on its reliability as well as its product. "The Webbs are a pleasure to work with. They always make deliveries when they say they will. They say restaurateurs have helped them, but they have also helped us a lot. It's a two-way street."

Between 25 and 40 restaurants buy from Sheltowee Farm at any given time. Some customers are as far away as Louisville and Cincinnati. Last year the Webbs put a total of more than 96,000 miles on both their vehicles, leading them to consider finding a reliable distributor. The time and energy saved in not driving would free the business up for the next steps.

One plan is to add new varieties, such as fluffy, silky-stranded lion's manes, king mushrooms that resemble fat trumpets, and frilly maitakes. A longer-term goal is a cookbook.

"We would like to gather a collection of a recipe or two from each chef, along with their bios and information about their restaurants. We could sell (the cookbook) at the farmer's market or on our Web site," Becky Webb said.

Although esoteric and much further down the road, at some point the Webbs would like the world to understand the medicinal and environmental value of mushrooms. Inspired by pioneers such as Paul Stamets, the Washington state-based mycologist, they are passionate about the homeopathic potential of various fungi, as well as the promise of coming "mycosciences" that will put mushrooms on the cutting edge of repairing various forms of environmental damage.

For example, a few years ago, Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest, a pristine eco-center in Clermont, Ky. (approximately 90 minutes from Lexington), contacted the Webbs to install a mycolfiltration berm from the spent substrate of their oyster mushrooms to catch any runoff from the parking lot that might pollute the adjacent lake.

In short, mushrooms are more than just food.

Whatever the future holds, for now the Bluegrass is fortunate to have so many small farms respectful of the planet, and in particular Sheltowee, whose appearance on any menu adds a delicious touch of class. 🍄



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