



Mighty Mushrooms

How the Hawkesbury found itself at the centre of Australia's sixth most valuable fresh food crop

The history of the Hawkesbury has been tied up with agriculture from its earliest years, when Indigenous people tended the yams that grew along the riverbank, harvesting the roots and leaving enough behind to produce next year's crop.

After European colonisation, it was the Hawkesbury that provided food to feed the struggling colony, and the tradition continued through the 19th and 20th centuries.

But it is the mushroom industry – a relative newcomer – that is the Hawkesbury's main crop today. In 2011, Hawkesbury Regional Museum mounted an exhibition in association with the Australian Mushroom Growers Association, which celebrated its Golden Anniversary in that year.

Australia's first commercial mushroom farm was located in a disused railway tunnel at Circular Quay in Sydney. It was established in 1933 by Raymond Mas, a Spanish migrant, who grew his crop directly on the floor of the tunnel, and used raised timber planks to gain access for picking.

Assisted by biologists Dr R J Noble from the Department of Agriculture, and Dr G P Darnell-Smith, Director of the Sydney Botanic Gardens, Mas's enterprise thrived, creating a surge of interest in locally grown mushrooms, and inspiring other farmers to follow his example.

One of those was Roy Sanders of Oakville, the first commercial grower



Brothers George and Norm Johnson, McGrath's Hill 1957

"The mushroom crop was to be our salvation."

in the Hawkesbury (1936). With his employee Fred Hession, Roy did well in the market place, and a year later, his brother-in-law Eric Hanckel and family started farms nearby. By 1956, Roy had three farms growing 90,000 pounds [40,823 kg] of mushrooms annually and employing 10 workers. Another Hawkesbury farmer who was quick to see the advantages of mushrooms over other crops, and whose name has become synonymous with the mushroom

industry, is John Miller, who turned to mushroom farming after the devastating floods of 1956.

John Miller remembers:

'Our farm...was flooded seven times in that year. Every crop we planted was washed away. This event was to change the direction of our lives. It also influenced a lot of other farmers to move to higher ground and try to grow mushrooms. They were sick of being flooded out! The mushroom crop was to be our salvation.'

MIGRANT WORKERS

In the 1950s large numbers of people fled war-torn Europe, and some of them found their way to Scheyville Migrant Hostel*, where they provided a valuable casual labour force for the mushroom growers.

In turn, the work gave them a good living, and for some, the opportunity to buy land and grow mushrooms themselves, adding to the prosperity of their new community.

The work gave them a good living and the opportunity to buy land

*See the separate fact sheet titled Scheyville Migrant Hostel.

GROWING METHODS

The first Hawkesbury mushroom farms used the open-air 'ridge-bed system', which in due course gave way to the less labour intensive and higher yield systems associated with indoor mushroom farming. Technological advancements progressively gave farmers more and more control over their crops, from developing spawn in their own laboratories to weighing, sorting and packing crops on site in indoor climate-controlled facilities. Thus mushrooms become a year round commodity, and growers were no longer dependant upon the weather and the seasons.

THE AUSTRALIAN MUSHROOM GROWERS ASSOCIATION

The Australian Mushroom Growers Association (AMGA) was established in 1961. At first it was run on a voluntary basis, operating out of people's lounge rooms and backyard sheds, but eventually it grew into a full-time operation. John Miller (see above) was employed as its first Secretary and Promotions Officer, and later as its first General Manager.

In 1990 the AMGA found a permanent home for itself on the corner of Macquarie and Forbes Streets, Windsor.

A LOCAL CANNERY

In the 1970s the industry faced a major challenge in the form of canned mushrooms imported from Asia. In response, growers set up their own cannery, first at Vineyard and later in the former Rosella factory in Mileham Street, South Windsor. The products were branded Windsor Farm Foods.

MARKETING

Another challenge came when the market for canned foods declined, and it was decided to revive interest in the fresh product by undertaking an aggressive marketing campaign. Who better to spearhead the campaign than John Miller – a mushroom grower himself with a formidable personality and a passion for promotion? Miller led a concerted effort to promote 'Fresh Australian Mushrooms' via shopping mall demonstrations, home growing kits, street parades and agricultural shows, backed up by a media campaign targeted at women's magazines, newspaper cookery columns, TV cooking shows and the use of celebrity chefs like Bernard King, Margaret Fulton and Rosemary Stanton. A Mr Mushroom costume was created, and, as John Miller found out, it made many friends (but was hot, heavy and not very comfortable for the wearer).

COMPOST – A POINT OF CONTENTION

An essential component in the growing of mushrooms is compost, in the preparation of which aerobic fermentation occurs and ammonia and carbon dioxide are released. Until the 1970s, most Hawkesbury growers made their own compost, on farms removed from residential areas. But automatic turning machines brought economies of scale, and with them, an increase in the impact of powerful and pervasive odours on the community. Graham Price was one of the first to produce compost in this way at his McGraths Hill plant, but proximity to schools and housing estates caused an irreconcilable conflict and the plant closed. Attempts during the 1980s to find more suitable sites were unsuccessful, and today only one such plant remains.

FAST FUNGI FACTS

- Since 1975, consumption of fresh Australian mushrooms has grown from 0.6kg per person to 3.2 kg.
- Mushrooms are now the sixth most valuable horticultural crop in Australia after grapes, potatoes, apples, tomatoes and bananas.
- The Hawkesbury Valley is the centre of the NSW mushroom industry. At the time of printing, there were 24 growers in the Hawkesbury, employing 1000 workers and producing 17,000 tonnes of mushrooms every year.



Mr Mushroom made many friends