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THOMAS KELSEY / Los Angeles Times

Victor DiStefano, shown in his indoor mushroom farm, has been growing mushrooms for 62 years.

Compost Keeps Mushroom Crop Heaping

By STEVE TRIPOLI, *Times Staff Writer*

The smell hits you even before you turn off Golden West Street and into the parking lot of Ocean View Mushroom Growers in Huntington Beach.

It's strong and not pleasant, but then again, it's nothing that would ruin the day of anyone who's grown up on a farm.

The only catch is that the smell is not the manure that many would mistake it for. Victor DiStefano, who has been growing mushrooms for 62 of his 67 years, says that growing them in a mixture packed with manure is a thing of the past.

In his early days in Kennett Square, Pa., an area he says is still the mushroom-growing capital of the world, growers would ship manure in by the carload from Baltimore, Philadelphia and Washington to keep the mushrooms growing.

Bypassing the Horse

Then researchers discovered that it wasn't the manure, but what the animals had eaten prior to producing it, that provided the crucial nutrients.

"So we just decided to bypass the horse," says DiStefano with a grin.

DiStefano says manure is now only a tiny—and coincidental—part of the compost in which he and his 82 full-time employees grow about 4 million pounds of mushrooms a year. The compost—and the smell—now is straw, into which is mixed any number of farm products, such as soybean, peanut, cocoa or cottonseed meal, or even the crushed grape hulks left over from juice making.

Those products supply the nutrients in which the mushrooms grow, even as they did in past days when they were used after being eaten by animals, DiStefano says. The only manure that enters the process now is the small amount that comes with straw that DiStefano buys from other farmers' stables and barns, he said.

When the straw arrives, it is wet down and left in piles, the interiors of which spontaneously heat to as much as 175 degrees.

Wall-to-Wall Mushrooms

The heat drives out insects and creates a good environment into which the other ingredients—DiStefano calls them "the goodies"—can be added. The goal is to produce nitrogen, a fertilizer that is excellent for mushroom growth.

When the compost is ready, it is spread into layers in wooden boxes in one of the farm's 36 growing houses where DiStefano says 220,000 square feet of space is devoted to mushroom growing. The doors are shut, and in the darkness the compost heats again, until it is ready

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to receive the microscopic mushroom seeds, so small that they must ride on a speck of feed grain to be handled.

The houses are then air-conditioned to produce a moist coolness ideal for growing. The result, anywhere from 40 to 80 days later, is clusters of mushrooms of all sizes almost wall to wall. It's a sight to make a mushroom lover swoon.

DiStefano says the straw-based growing process has resulted in yields up to five times that of the manure days. A good yield, he says, is five pounds of mushrooms per square foot of compost surface.

DiStefano's farm supplies several supermarket chains, but he says most of his business is with small retailers and restaurants. That's good, he says, because it insulates him from severe impact if one of the chains experiences a strike or other slowdown.

The farm may not last much longer, in any event. Surrounded by city land and coveted by the city as part of a hoped-for, 300-acre park, DiStefano says he is only waiting for the right offer to sell out.

"Mushrooms have been good to me, but if I get it (the right offer), I'd get the hell out tomorrow," he said. "I've been around mushrooms too long."