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Production value reaches all-time high for mushrooms

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The value of mushrooms produced in the United States hit an all-time high last year of \$1.22 billion, riding on the recognition of mushrooms as a major food trend combined with the increasing popularity of The Blend, according to a report released Aug. 21 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Additionally, production dropped 2 percent to 929 million pounds, due in large part to the ongoing challenge of an inadequate agriculture workforce.

The value of the Agaricus crop was estimated at \$1.13 billion for the more than 903 million pounds grown. Pennsylvania accounted for 64 percent of the total volume of sales and second-ranked California contributed 11 percent.

Brown mushrooms, including Portabella and Crimini varieties, accounted for 167 million pounds, up 1 percent from last season. Brown mushrooms accounted for 18 percent of the total Agaricus volume sold and 23 percent of the total Agaricus value. Ninety percent of Agaricus mushrooms were sold into the fresh market.

Production of specialty mushrooms, including varieties such as shiitake and oyster mushrooms, grew by 4 percent to 25.4 million pounds with a sales value of \$96.2 million, which is also a 4 percent increase from last year.

Sales of organic mushrooms continued to rise as consumer interest in organic produce grows. While certified organic mushrooms represent only 8 percent of total mushroom sales, a record 109 million pounds of certified organic mushrooms were produced last year, a 20 percent increase from the

previous year. This past year, 67 percent of all mushrooms produced organically were sold under the organic label, which means suppliers are prepared for continued growth in the category as demand increases. There are 73 certified organic mushroom growers, up five growers from the previous season.

The 2 percent decrease in mushroom production was consistent across the United States. Growers in all regions say it is becoming more and more difficult to find and retain labor. This outlook resonates with other agricultural sectors that are also forced to leave crops unharvested due to labor shortages.

“The implications of both rising wages and labor scarcity have hindered production,” according to Daniel Rahn of the American Mushroom Institute. “The structural shortage of agricultural labor across all operations from the farm to the packinghouse is a critical barrier to increased production for U.S. mushroom growers and will likely result in price increases in line with growing labor costs.”

Mushrooms have remained in the spotlight in the past year thanks to robust media coverage of The Blend, the culinary trend that encourages blending finely chopped mushrooms with meat for more flavor, nutrition and sustainability.

Blended burgers have been touted as the “burger of the future” and “top food buzzword” by The TODAY Show, Forbes, Food Network, National Public Radio, Food & Wine and Fast Company. Last month, a blended burger made the cover of Weight Watcher’s magazine, with a headline teasing mushrooms as “the SECRET INGREDIENT that makes this burger healthier.”

Steady demand due to initiatives like The Blend is lifting mushroom market share and further stimulating product development. This fall, consumers will have access to the blended burger at Sonic Drive-In, the first large restaurant chain to offer a beef burger made partly with mushrooms. The Blend will continue to present a growth opportunity as more restaurants become interested in using fresh mushrooms in their recipes.

Following media coverage and restaurant menu options, the trickle-down effect of consumers making The Blend at home will also increase demand for mushrooms at the retail level.

“The Blend is creating interest in mushrooms, which has inspired more home cooks to explore mushrooms,” according to Bart Minor, president and chief executive officer of the Mushroom Council. “The council will continue to promote and partner with strategic organizations to grow awareness and acceptance of The Blend, and we will continue to expand it into retail.”

Mushroom retail sales were strong in the most recent four-week period, with total mushroom retail dollar sales up 4.5 percent, which is 3.8 percentage points ahead of total produce. For the recent 13-week period, total mushroom retail dollar sales were up 3.4 percent, which is 1.1 percentage points ahead of total produce sales.

“Customers are learning more about the health and taste benefits of The Blend in the media and enjoying blended burgers at schools and restaurants,” according to Minor. “Soon, they will be coming into the grocery store more interested in adding mushrooms to their weekly meal plans.”

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