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Mushroom industry mourns the legendary Mario Basciani

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Mario (Chuff) D. Basciani, a mushroom industry pioneer whose work ethic, tenacity and passion for mushrooms made him a role model to farmers throughout the country, died Sunday, Sept. 13, surrounded by his loving family. He was 91.

Mr. Basciani was a second-generation mushroom farmer, founder of Basciani Foods Inc., and patriarch of the Basciani family. He is survived by his wife of over 70 years, Anna, his five children, 18 grandchildren, and 40 great-grandchildren.

Mr. Basciani was born Jan. 20, 1929 in Toughkenamon, PA, to Italian immigrants Emedio and Anna Basciani. His father started harvesting mushrooms for the Pratt family in 1915, until he established his own farm in 1925. Mr. Basciani began working on the family farm at a young age and fell in love with all aspects of the business, especially the challenging physical work that comes with cultivating mushrooms.

Mr. Basciani played football in the Tuffy's Football League, and was quickly revered for his strength and toughness, a reputation he held throughout his life. He graduated from Kennett High School in 1947. Immediately after, Mr. Basciani, his older brother, Flavian, and younger brother, Emedio Jr., entered the business full-time. On May 13, 1950, Mr. Basciani married the love of his life, Anna Masciantonio. Long-time family friends, the two could trace their roots back to the same province of Abruzzo in central Italy. They drove to California for their honeymoon, and within one year they welcomed their first child. Over the next decade, Mr. Basciani and Anna welcomed four more children into their family. In 1963, the two built a ranch house overlooking the main farm where they raised their five children, Mario (Monnie), Joanne, Richard, Susanne and Michael.

In 1967, Mr. Basciani was involved in an auto accident which put him in a coma; it was a miracle that he survived. It is believed that Anna's love and persistent prayers brought him out of the coma. In 1969, Mr. Basciani founded a company of his own. The opportunity to build a business with his young, talented, and determined sons was too great to pass up. In 1970, Mr. Basciani became a partner in The Mushroom Company, which is now one of the largest mushroom-processing companies in North America.

During the 1970s, Mr. Basciani, Monnie, Richard and Michael continued to grow M.D. Basciani & Sons Inc. alongside Mr. Basciani's new son-in-law George. In addition to his personal success, he also sought to help other aspiring young farmers establish their own operations. He saw the potential in his nephews and helped steer them to success. This is where Mr. Basciani became known for his generous heart and helping hand. By 1979, Mr. Basciani and other neighboring farmers created Laurel Valley Farms to solidify a source for consistent, high-quality compost and raw materials. Today, Laurel Valley Farms is the largest commercial mushroom-composting facility in North America.

In the 1980s, Mr. Basciani's boys expressed their desire to take the family business to another level. They wanted to go beyond growing; their goal was to begin packaging, selling, and distributing fresh products. Mr. Basciani's youngest son Michael travelled the country, found the customers, and oversaw the packing facility, while Monnie and Richard mastered the art of mushroom growing and continued to expand the farm. Around the same time, Mr. Basciani was involved in a farm accident where he was struck by a dump-truck. Against all odds, Mr. Basciani's strength endured, and he made a full recovery.

As the 1990s came around, Mr. Basciani became more comfortable turning over the reins when his grandchildren showed interest in the business, and his daughter Joanne teamed up with Michael in the office. With the future of his family's enterprise secure, Mr. Basciani took a step back. In 1994, Basciani Foods Inc. was formed, and a state-of-the-art packing facility was constructed. During this time, Mr. Basciani's role was purely consulting; however, he was instrumental in the launch of Basciani Foods's first satellite locations in Chicago and Minneapolis. The highlight of Mr. Basciani's career was when he merged his father-in-law's farm and his father's original farm, where he first learned how to grow mushrooms. A goal he set in his youth, purchasing and uniting those farms with those built by him and his sons was his most rewarding achievement.

Toward the end of the century, Mr. Basciani learned to enjoy the fruits of his labor. He often travelled to Atlantic City, NJ, with Anna, and enjoyed spending time with his grandchildren and great-grandchildren. In the remaining twenty years of his life, Mr. Basciani's sons and grandsons enlarged the packing facility several times, even making it multi-level. They have never stopped expanding the production operations or advancing the agricultural process. He assisted in building two more satellite facilities, one in Orlando, FL, and one in Independence, LA.

Mr. Basciani instilled in his boys the importance of adapting to change and capitalizing on new technologies and innovations. He successfully ingrained his firm beliefs in the following generations: "keep pushing, build more, grow more, do not stop!" Until his death, his sons and grandsons updated him every day with progress reports and news on all fronts. He was involved to the end. His most warming comfort before his passing was to witness several of his great-grandsons take positions in the family companies, making the Basciani Farming family one of very few fifth-generation farms in America. Today, The Basciani Group of Cos. is one of North America's largest vertically integrated mushroom conglomerates, all because of one powerful and optimistic man whose legacy will motivate his descendants for generations to come.

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