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Demand for mushrooms on the rise during pandemic

By

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Since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, IRI data has consistently shown weekly mushroom sales up by 20 percent or more compared to the same week in 2019. Mushroom demand is high, and a recent survey of mushroom consumers suggests it will continue at this pace after this crisis.

The Fresh Mushroom Attitudes & Behaviors During COVID-19 survey of 750 shoppers conducted in April revealed that 25 percent of consumers are planning to cook more with fresh mushrooms “after things get back to normal.” An additional 63 percent plan to cook “about the same.” The survey was developed and conducted by Mark Lang of the University of Tampa and was commissioned by the Mushroom Council.

“While grocers are currently experiencing this increased demand, it’s probable these new consumer preferences will also carry over to foodservice as restaurants reopen,” Lang said. “We also explored the many reasons why consumers are purchasing more mushrooms and what they are doing with them. Mushrooms’ adaptability and health benefits lead the way.”

As consumers increased their mushroom purchases since the health crisis began, they are including them in an array of mealtimes and dishes, such as pasta (46 percent), pizzas (44 percent), salads (34 percent), omelets (33 percent) and with chicken (32 percent).

When given the question about why they are utilizing more fresh mushrooms, versatility is king: with 38 percent of respondents noting they feel mushrooms “can be used in many ways” and 47 percent answering that mushrooms “go with what I’m cooking.”

Preferred varieties have remained consistent prior to March, with new data showing white button (57 percent), portabella (36 percent), baby bella (26 percent), brown button (21 percent) and shiitake (17 percent) as the most prominent.

“Overall, this survey finds that mushrooms meet consumers where they are as they find themselves cooking at home more,” Lang concluded. “Whether it’s extending meals, boosting vitamin intake, or because a recipe calls for them, mushrooms are certainly the answer for many consumers.”

He believes this increased interest and experiences with mushrooms from home cooking should also translate into increased preferences and orders for mushrooms in foodservice and restaurants as these come back online.

“While overall retail sales are realizing double-digit increases, they are down in other channels due to the pandemic,” said Eric Davis, a spokesperson for the Mushroom Council. “As a result, sales in May are at 94.7 percent of 2019, which is very strong all factors considered.”

Fresh cultivated mushrooms are grown indoors, year-round, in climate-controlled buildings. As a result, mushroom production is typically consistent and rarely impacted by external factors like weather.

With consumer demand for mushrooms high at grocery stores throughout the year, the Mushroom Council has been encouraging consumers to celebrate mushrooms every day of September, the 30th anniversary of National Mushroom Month, by enjoying a #MushroomADay.

“At the beginning of each week in September, the Mushroom Council has been spotlighting select varieties, encouraging consumers to grab two packages at the grocery store,” Davis said. “Then, throughout the week, the Mushroom Council’s Facebook, Instagram and Twitter pages are sharing how consumers can make the most of their purchases with recipes and other inspiration from culinary influencers.”

In addition, as cold and flu season approaches — and the pandemic continues — the council also encourages supermarket dietitians to share with their customers that mushrooms can play a positive role in supporting a healthy immune system.

“There are a variety of micronutrients important for supporting a healthy immune system — including Selenium, vitamin D and vitamin B, all of which are found in mushrooms,” Davis said. “We work to help ensure supermarket RDs have these and other facts in hand when communicating with their customers during Mushroom Month and year-round by offering a variety of resources.”

Promoting The Blend, which is the culinary practice of blending meat with fresh mushrooms, is one way that Davis feels retailers could add to sales.

“This continues to be the Mushroom Council’s primary promotional focus, and we have expanded our promotional footprint, marketing to new audiences in new places, earning increased blend adoption and sales,” he said. “Over the past two years, we’ve seen broad expansion of The Blend at retail, with multiple brands — including Applegate — introducing pre-made and typically frozen blended patties.”

The Mushroom Council has also placed a great emphasis on blending at home and has significantly prioritized home cooks in its promotional investments. These have come to life with digital ads targeting consumers, plus a two-year collaboration with Bon Appétit magazine for the Blended Burger Project: Home Edition competition, which featured 500 home cooks nationwide developing their own creative take on a blended burger.

“Mushrooms have realized tremendous momentum at retail this year, and we think it is a variety of factors converging at the same time,” Davis said. “Consumers are more interested than ever in plant-forward and plant-based dishes, and mushrooms are a meaty, crave-able ingredient that adds a tremendous amount of flavor.”

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