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Caputo & Guest launches new exotic brand

By

Tim Linden

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No later than next month, the [Caputo & Guest](#) brand of exotic mushrooms will be featured in many retail produce departments for the first time, though neither the name nor the mushrooms are new to the industry.

Lou Caputo, who wears many hats for the company from owner to chief operations officer to proverbial bottle washer, is not fond of titles, but he is an aficionado of mushrooms with a pedigree dating back to the 1970s. “My father and uncle (Lou Caputo Sr. and Herb Guest) started our company back in 1977,” he said. “Like many other growers in Chester County, PA, they grew white button mushrooms.”

The company and its sales division have operated under several names over the years, including Kenneth Mushrooms, Kenneth Square Specialties and Caputo & Guest Mushrooms. The younger Caputo explained that in the 1980s, the introduction of imported canned mushrooms resulted in tighter profit margins on white mushrooms, which caused the original Caputo & Guest co-owners to branch out to other varieties. “They started transitioning away from white mushrooms towards Shiitakes,” said Caputo of his father and uncle. “By the late 1990s, the majority of Shiitakes produced in the United States came from Kenneth Mushrooms.”

The pair of specialty mushroom pioneers continued to add to their portfolio growing a handful of other varieties including Portabellas, Baby Bellas, Crimini and Oyster mushrooms. Their two sons — Lou Caputo and Jeff Guest — launched KSS Sales in 2010 to sell those specialty items.

Caputo said that a great deal of the sales of their exotic mushrooms have always been to the larger producers of white button mushroom, which allows those companies to offer their customers a full assortment of mushroom varieties. They also sold mushroom grow blocks to growers coast-to-coast. Grow blocks typically produce three to four pounds of mushrooms and are sold and shipped in quantities of 100 to 500 blocks. “We sell them to growers all over the country,” Caputo said. “They often grow the exotic mushrooms and sell them in farmers market or to local restaurants and retailers.”

He added that it is a great way to increase the company’s sales while also exposing more consumers to the wonderful world of exotic mushrooms.

Caputo is also excited to introduce customers to the new Caputo & Guest brand of exotic mushrooms. On Sept. 12, he said that several major retailers were finalizing their orders and the brand should launch within a couple of weeks and certainly no later than October. The company did a four-month trial launch with a Midwest retailer last year and is now ready to rollout the brand on a larger scale.

“We are going to start with 11 retail packs: six individual packs and five specialty mixes,” he said, adding that all of the packs will be certified organic. The Golden Oyster is the company’s top seller, with some of its other options being King Trumpet, Maitake, Hen of the Woods and Lion’s Mane.

[Tim Linden](#)

About Tim Linden | 

Tim Linden grew up in a produce family as both his father and grandfather spent their business careers on the wholesale terminal markets in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Tim graduated from San Diego State University in 1974 with a degree in journalism. Shortly thereafter he began his career at The Packer where he stayed for eight years, leaving in 1983 to join Western Growers as editor of its monthly magazine. In 1986, Tim launched Champ Publishing as an agricultural publishing specialty company.

Today he is a contract publisher for several trade associations and writes extensively on all aspects of the produce business. He began writing for The Produce News in 1997, and currently wears the title of Editor at Large.

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