

Champignons de Paris' mushrooms finally return to French capital after more than a century

The French call them “champignons de Paris” yet the farming of button mushrooms, the world’s most cultivated, had totally died out in the French capital - until now.

After an absence of almost a century, a pair of green-fingered “urban farmers” in their 30s have just reintroduced the famed fungi, growing *Agaricus bisporus* in a dark converted underground car park deep beneath the City of Light.

French farmers revolutionised mushroom production two centuries ago by introducing in limestone quarries underneath Paris a "royal" mushroom variety that the Sun King, Louis XIV, had made popular by having it grown at Versailles.

They found out that the mushrooms would grow year-round if placed in a manure-based substrate deep underground, where constant dark, temperature and humidity offered perfect conditions for their growth. Even the ghoulish tunnels of the Paris catacombs, now a top tourist attraction, were once filled with mushroom beds.

However, urban expansion and above all the construction of the Paris metro pushed growers out of the capital in the early 1900s with some moving into quarries in the suburbs and most decamping to the winegrowing Pays de la Loire area.

Unfettered by any geographical denomination that meant that none of the 100,000 tons of button mushrooms sold in France per year were farmed under Paris itself.

However, for the past two months, they have once again been growing beneath the city centre - not in a quarry but a 2,500 square-metre former car park in the eastern 19th arrondissement, just a quarter of an hour’s bike ride from Montmartre.

“This is the first time since around the 1930s that champignons de Paris have been farmed inside the city walls,” said Jean-Noël Gertz, an agricultural engineer who runs the organic “urban farm” company Cycloponics. When at full capacity, they aim to produce 2.5 tons per day.

With car use falling fast in Paris, the pair have taken advantage of a municipal drive to make more productive and sustainable use of the capital’s increasingly disused underground car parks.

In 2017, they open their first organic urban farm in a carpark under a housing state at La Chapelle in Paris' nearby 18th arrondissement, previously a no-go zone and den of drug dealers and prostitutes.

The Cavern, as that farm is called, has gone from strength to strength, selling chicory, micro greens like cress and rocket and two types of mushroom - shiitake and oyster - to organic grocers and restaurants across the capital delivered mainly by bike.

"Our success is linked to the very high demand for organic, local products, a sector that is experiencing double-digit growth. We are riding that wave," he said.

However, champignons de Paris proved a trickier challenge, said Mr Gertz. "They are fragile and harder to grow and you have to respect much stricter hygiene conditions to make it work," including air filtration, sliding doors and footpaths before entry, he told the Telegraph.

"We only grow the brown cap variety, because it's much richer taste-wise and the white button mushroom has been genetically modified beyond recognition in the past 30 years," he said. The farm uses compost imported from Belgium. The pair are due to open two more such underground farms in Paris and three in Lyon, southeastern France.

They also have an underground farm in Bordeaux growing button mushrooms and another in a former German bunker dating back to 1876, in eastern Strasbourg, where they work with blind and partially-sighted pickers for whom low light is not an issue.

Ironically, however, despite the button mushroom renaissance in Paris, the fate of the five remaining traditional champignon de Paris producers just outside the capital in abandoned quarries has never looked so bleak and one major site has just closed.

"It's not a question of finding clients, I sell everything I can produce," said Shoua-moua Vang at Les Alouettes in Carrieres-sur-Seine, a short drive from the La Defence business district west of the capital. The problem was more prosaic, he said, namely a dearth of willing employees. "People these days don't want to work all day in the dark like vampires."