

# Visit to Meadow Mushrooms

At the 17th ISMS congress in Cape Town last spring, we met New Zealanders Gill Hoglund and her right hand Kiri from Meadow Mushrooms. Fascinating people, who were very charmed by our Microsacs. A joint evaluation of the samples they tested of our products seemed reason enough to cross the ocean. And for me personally, it was an ideal chance to exchange ideas with a fellow spawn producer.



Jos gave Gill and Kiri the instructions for use for the Microsac.

If I am ever exiled from Belgium, then my first choice of an alternative residence would be New Zealand. The landscape is breathtaking, and the Kiwis have a spontaneous friendly nature, that is foreign to many of my compatriots. With just 4 million souls in a country stretching over 268 000 km<sup>2</sup>, you can hardly talk of over population. In fact, sheep outnumber people by 10 to 1!

They may be charming, but don't mess with the New Zealanders. In their earnest efforts to exclude pathogens and other threats from entering their territory, even a box of Belgian chocolates with nuts is seen as a serious threat, as we discovered ourselves. Fresh imported food is a scarcity on the shop shelves, not to mention mushrooms. And that is a natural link to Meadow Mushrooms, as the company account for nearly 50% of the total production of mushrooms in New Zealand.

## Miranda Laboratories

Meadow Mushrooms' own spawn laboratory, with the lovely sounding name Miranda Laboratories, is located on an estate for light industry just outside

Christchurch. On a surface of 200 m<sup>2</sup>, average weekly production is achieved of 5000 litres of first class grain spawn and 1000 litres of equally good CACing. Although this makes Meadow fully self sufficient, for reference purposes 10% of the spawn required is purchased from elsewhere. No mycelium is sold to third parties.

The trouble free spawn production is all entirely due to Gill Hoglund and her skilled staff. Gill has been the technical manager of the laboratory and the farms since 1990. Prior to the 1990's the laboratory had experienced some production issues. Gill, a biologist enticed away from the food industry, screened and rigorously improved the complete production process, and did not rest until rejections were brought down to their current level of less than 2 percent. And in connection with further improvements, she has now arrived at the packaging stage. Years ago the glass bottles were replaced with HDPE bags with a foam stopper, and the time is now ripe to switch to a packaging with superior breathability.

During a tour of the laboratory it is evident that Gill already has a scenario for improvement in mind at each step of the process.

The lab crew consists of five people, who

are fully trained so that the tasks are rotated. This includes substrate preparation, inoculation and preparation for dispatch. It is amazing that in such a limited space, with a much simplified system relative to commercial spawn laboratories, they still manage to produce such huge amounts of a top quality product.

Miranda Laboratories is bursting at the seams, as it was never intended to cope with such high production volumes. Gill is getting on slightly in years, but has promised herself to relocate the laboratory to new premises before retiring! A huge job, but she can rely on the enthusiastic assistance of Kiri, also a biologist with Maori roots, who is earmarked as Gill's successor in time.

## Mushroom production

We were also curious about the rest of the production chain. Gill was kind enough to give us a guided tour of the farm in Prebleton, where Meadow is also headquartered. Meadow Mushrooms has become the largest mushroom producer in the country, and the second largest in Australasia. It employs around 500 people.

It is the only NZ grower with full vertical integration from the production of spawn through to the dispatch to market and has a diverse range of products all with the

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common theme of a mushroom base.

Meadow Mushrooms has invested significantly in its development particularly in recent years, and substantial investment was made in the upgrading and expansion of facilities. This involved the introduction of the latest technology and computerised growing systems, and the building and utilisation of new state of the art aerated compost yards for the provision of compost to the farms.

Meadows now produce on average 125 tons a week. There has been an expansion of the product range and many developments in packaging. The product mix is dominated by the market favourite, the white button mushroom. In addition to this are the more exotic varieties - Portabellos (Breakfast and BBQ Flats) and Swiss Browns (brown buttons). The product range under the brand "Meadow Mushrooms" extends beyond the fresh category into prepared frozen foods such as golden and garlic crumbed mushrooms.

#### Caution

Visiting the Prebbleton farm was quite an undertaking. Meadow Mushrooms is HACCP certified, and before we could even set foot on the farm, we had to be registered, labelled and clothed in safetywear. We walked obediently inside the indicator marks on the floor, keeping to the left of the path in British fashion. The growing rooms were bursting with activity. Tens of pickers were sitting at every height imaginable harvesting the mushrooms. Only common mushrooms are cultivated, but in a varied range: large and small, white and brown, closed cap and open. Gill explained that oyster mushrooms and other parasites that weaken trees are banned from being cultivated in New Zealand, because of the risk to New Zealand's unique forest. This may seem an exaggerated fear, but the Kiwis have plenty of first hand experience with imported problems and they are justified in wanting to protect their indigenous flora.

The general impression we took home of Meadow Mushrooms was of a dynamic and well organised company, that makes the maximum effort to bring a premium quality product onto the market.



A lorry being loaded in the central corridor.

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