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Mepkin monks go from chickens to mushrooms

Patrick O'Neill | Feb. 17, 2009

Mepkin Abbey Abbot Fr. Stan Gumula holds a sample of the monastery's oyster mushrooms. (The Post and Courier)

The Trappist monks of South Carolina?s Mepkin Abbey are out of the egg business and into the mushroom business.

The monks, who for more than half a century tended to a chicken operation that produced about 9 million eggs a year, generating about $140,000 annually, are now growing gourmet mushrooms, an operation that eventually could produce up to 1,000 pounds a week and even more revenue than egg production.

The change has its roots in a conflict that began two years ago, when People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, known as PETA, launched a campaign to force Mepkin?s monks to shut down their egg-production operation, claiming the abbey?s operation was ?hell for chickens.? In December 2007, tired of the battle with the Norfolk, Va.-based animal-rights group, Abbot Fr. Stan Gumula said Mepkin would phase out its egg-production business and look for alternative ways to raise revenue to support the abbey?s mission.

Chefs of restaurants in downtown Charleston, S.C., are already using Mepkin oyster mushrooms, and the supermarket chain Piggly Wiggly has been offered the exclusive rights to sell Mepkin mushrooms.

In December, Piggly Wiggly president David Schools told the local newspaper, *The Post and Courier*, that his company, which also sold Mepkin eggs, was happy about the mushroom deal, and that Piggly Wiggly would work to educate consumers about mushrooms. ?Our goal is to sell them,? Schools said. ?It?s a great partnership.?

In announcing the phaseout plan in late 2007, Gumula said the egg-production operation was ?honorable work of which they are proud,? and he did not acknowledge any wrongdoing on the part of the abbey. The monks employed industrywide standards in which laying hens are kept in groups in small cages and have their beaks trimmed, practices that have long been criticized by animal-protection and animal-rights groups. Gumula, who declined to speak with *NCR*, wrote last year that ?the pressure from PETA? had made it difficult for the monks ?to live their quiet life of prayer, work and sacred reading.?

PETA used an undercover infiltrator with a hidden camera to collect information on Mepkin?s egg operation, and was roundly criticized for the tactic. However, PETA vice president Bruce Friedrich, a Catholic who coordinated the undercover operation, said battery-cage egg production is immoral and goes against Catholic standards for the protection of God?s creation.

Christine Gutleben, director of the Animals and Religion program of the Humane Society of the United States, said she supports Mepkin?s decision to get out of the battery-cage egg business. On the Humane Society Web site, Gutleben also noted that the Philadelphia archdiocese?s school system recently stopped using eggs from caged hens.

?We are called to be stewards of the creatures of the earth, and stewardship calls us to be caretakers,? Gutleben told *NCR*. ?As Christians we are held to a higher moral standard in our dealings with all of the creatures of the earth. Battery-cage systems are not proper care of God?s creatures.?

Now battery-cage-free, the two dozen monks and scores of Mepkin volunteers are hard at work trying to make the mushroom business prosper. Mushroom production is an exact science, and the monks have relied on their many expert contacts in the agricultural world for advice.

Mushrooms don?t grow in manure, they must be protected from frost, and mold is always a threat. Still, Gumula told The Post and Courier that the December oyster mushrooms were ?fruiting? nicely.

Oyster mushrooms have three 21-day growth cycles, and the monks are also attempting to grow shiitake spores in sweetgum logs.

Said PETA?s Friedrich, ?It?s great. We can?t wait to try their mushrooms.?

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