Zimbabwe’s mushroom growing industry flourished in the 1990s, when about a dozen large growers harvested around 300 tonnes of white mushrooms and 50 tonnes of oyster mushrooms annually, with a large proportion of the button mushrooms destined for export. Land reforms and redistribution signalled disaster for this sector and production levels have only started to recover in the last few years. There are currently around 50 serious, but small-scale, growers active and a large number of mushroom growing projects in rural regions, largely set up by women. Mushrooms are no longer exported as local production cannot meet the demanded levels. In fact, locally grown mushrooms in the supermarkets are supplemented by imported mushrooms from China and South Africa. The trade organisation for the sector, Mushroom Growers Association of Zimbabwe, established in sunnier times, is no longer active so precise statistic are unavailable.

Zimbabwe. Once known as the grain store of Africa, but today straggling behind in the list of producing and exporting nations. However, an ambitious and enterprising younger generation is seeing opportunities in agriculture, and many are opting for mushroom growing.

By Eva de Vries

Rumbi (left) and Kundai (right) Masarurwa in the shed where they grow oyster mushrooms.
Eva de Vries travelled through Zimbabwe on behalf of Mushroom Business and visited three mushroom farms. The growers are united by their passion for mushrooms and the desire to share and spread their knowledge.

The SOKO Mushrooms sisters in Ruwa

The vehicle bounces and bumps over the sandy track. The capital Harare is behind us and we are approaching our first port of call: the farm run by the ‘SOKO sisters’ just outside the town of Ruwa. The yard looks a little disorganised, but is buzzing with activity. Sitting in the shade of a tree are Rumbi (34) and Kundai (28) Musarurwa. They tell us the story of their enterprise SOKO Mushrooms, which the two sisters run with their older sister, Eleanor (36), who lives in America. The sisters were born and bred here on the family farm, where their mother used to grow mushrooms. In 2007, when Zimbabwe was driven into a deep economic depression following land reform (see box), they ceased growing mushrooms. “Our mother is our mentor”, says Rumbi. “She inspired us to start mushroom growing again, so we breathed new life into the business in 2012.” The sisters cultivate button and oyster mushrooms using Sylvan spawn from South Africa. Finding a source of funding was complicated, so they invested their savings in starting the company. It was also difficult to find spawn. “It was a challenging time, we make progress step-by-step.” The roles within the company were, however, soon defined. Kundai is responsible for production, Rumbi’s role, as a ‘good speaker’, is the relationship with customers, and from her base in the USA, Eleanor is in charge of marketing and communication. They named their company ‘SOKO’. “Soko means monkey is Shona, our local language, and the monkey is our family’s totem. It also means market in Swahili”, explains Rumbi.

No electricity

Kunda showed us around the four brick-built sheds, each measuring about 25 m². Only two are being used at the moment: one for button mushrooms and one for oyster mushrooms. “We often have power outages in the daytime, and to grow mushrooms we need climate control. This is our way of minimising the risk of losing the entire harvest.”

The dark and moist growing sheds feature shelving that holds wooden trays that are filled with a substrate made of wheat straw, calcium carbonate, urea, gypsum, horse manure and chicken litter. Kundai’s love of the cultivation and production process is reflected in her words. “The casing soil contains peat. We spray it with water by hand and then pasteurise the casing for six hours. After that I spread a layer of four centimetres on the surface of the trays.” Kundai examines the thousands of tiny pinheads that start to emerge. “It is now really important to keep the temperature low, so we can start harvesting in a couple of weeks.” According to Kundai, the yield is around 9 kg/m². The compost is replaced after five or six flushes. In the adjacent shed, ‘easy to grow’ oyster mushrooms are cultivated. The majority of growers in Zimbabwe choose this variety. There is no need for temperature control or compost, and oyster mushrooms can grow on practically any medium. The bags of substrate hang from metal shelving, and white oyster mushrooms can be seen poking out here and there. “We make the substrate ourselves using 25% wheat straw and 75% cottonseed hulls”, explains Kundai, “Harvesting the oyster mushrooms is done once a week.” Practically the entire cycle involved in producing both varieties of mushrooms takes place on their farm. “That’s the beauty of mushrooms, they grow on waste that would otherwise not be utilised to create something valuable.”

When all the rooms are productive, the sisters grow 1000 kg of mushrooms per month. This figure has hovered around just 500 kg in the past few months. SOKO serves the local market and delivers to the SPAR supermarkets in Harare with its own vehicle. “We are not very happy with the current prices ..”, says Rumbi, “...but the crisis means we get paid between just three and five dollars a kilo.” She glances at her phone before jumping up; there are still a couple of customers to visit. A while later, she reappears wearing a dress and high heels. “Many people in the city can’t believe I’m a farmer. Men here aren’t fond of strong, independent women”, she laughs. “In ten years we want to be the leading grower in the country and help others grow their own mushrooms. I sincerely hope that once again Zimbabwe can become the grain store of Africa.”

Rodney’s 5 Seasons in Mutare

The next mushroom grower on our list is located in the town of Mutare. Rodney Nyamutswa in the shed where his oyster mushrooms grow. “This is my best year to date.”

Mushrooms from Zimbabwe are no longer exported, as local production cannot meet the demanded levels.
in the Eastern Highlands, four hours’ drive south of Harare, close to the border with Mozambique. Rodney Nyamutswa (36) lives on the outskirts of the city of Mutare, together with his family. We enjoyed a cup of tea in the living room with his parents, grand-mother and sister. After working as a banker for a while, he decided to turn his hobby into a living. Since making that life switch, he has concentrated fulltime on his farm ‘5 Seasons’.

“I chose mushroom growing as it is a low-threshold activity that requires little space and low investment capital”, he says. He gathers most of his information, particularly about oyster mushrooms, from the internet. The theory didn’t appear to be all that complicated initially. “I knew that I needed substrate, spawn and space for a shed. But my first harvest failed”. The bags turned green instead of white, and any mushrooms were few and far between. “But, second time round was a success. It was truly a question of trial and error.” For the time being, he only cultivates grey (Pleurotus pulmonarius) and white oyster mushrooms (Pleurotus florida).

**Urban farming**

The patch of land owned by his parents in Mutare turned out to be a suitable spot to grow oyster mushrooms. “The consumers are mainly city dwellers anyway so I have hardly any transport costs. I didn’t need a lot of space either. I built three sheds of 20 m2 in our garden from wood and heavy-duty plastic”. Bags of substrate, made mainly using cottonseed hulls, are suspended or laid in the sheds. “With yields of about 600 kg per month, this is my best year to date”.

The kitchen is bursting with packaged oyster mushrooms: fresh, dried and powdered. Rodney currently supplies his produce to a number of supermarkets in Mutare. He thinks that Zimbabweans still have to get used to cultivated mushrooms. Mushrooms also grow in the wild, and some varieties are poisonous, so people are somewhat cautious. “But I hope to be able to persuade a lot more of the residents of Mutare to start eating mushrooms. They are so healthy and nutritious!”

Despite Rodney’s optimism, his path is not paved with roses. To source his spawn he has to travel all the way to Harare three times a year. “The plan is to make my own spawn eventually. That would save me time and money.” This is something he will have to finance himself, as banks rarely grant loans to small start-ups. This prevents many farmers from being able to rise above subsistence level. Rodney is convinced his plans will succeed as he has done plenty of research, is well-organised and determined to get ahead.

In a few years’ time, Rodney wants to move to a farm with more space where he hopes to take his activities to a higher level. He wants to build a spawn laboratory, maturing rooms, a sterilisation room, packaging zone, training facility and, last but not least, an office for his administrative

**Land reform in Zimbabwe**

In the 1990s, Zimbabwe was the grain store of Africa. Production was high, exports flourished and the economy boomed. That all changed in 2000. President Mugabe was set on doing something about the unfair division of agricultural land. At that time, 80% of the farms were owned by white farmers. Mugabe introduced a programme of land reform. White landowners and farmers were violently forced from their land. The farms were then redistributed among friends and family of Mugabe and members of his ZANU-PF party. The majority of these ‘new’ farmers were unable to sustain production, and as a result the agricultural section fell into complete disarray. The country is still suffering from a deep financial and political crisis – although there is light at the end of the tunnel. Many people are eagerly awaiting the moment when the 91-year old Mugabe hands over the reins of power.
tasks. But, just like the SOKO sisters, Rodney considers contributing something to the community as equally as important as earning a living. “It would make me really happy if I could help other people grow mushrooms, so they can provide an income for their own families.”

**Chido’s Future of Hope in Harare**

Back in Harare, we paid a visit to Chido Govera (29). Her farm lies in the rocky hillsides of rural Christon Bank. The city feels a world away. The surroundings look barren and dry, but Chido’s farm is a sea of greenery and blooms. This self-styled ‘social entrepreneur’, has lived here since 2015, together with seven orphans. Mushrooms are her core business. Under the name ‘Future of Hope’, which is also the name of her foundation, she supplies the upper market segment supermarket chain Food Lovers Market with organically grown white, grey and yellow oyster mushrooms (*Pleurotus ostreatus*, *Pleurotus pulmonarius* and *Pleurotus cinereus*).

Chido was orphaned at the age of seven. She was sent to live with family, where she suffered abuse at the hands of her uncle. “It was the most demanding time of my life, but it also taught me to care for myself.” Aged eleven, she took part in training on how to grow oyster mushrooms. She returned home with a bag of substrate and some spawn, and after a while the mushrooms emerged. “That process inspired me. I realised I could produce my own food from natural waste materials!” Chido chose that as her path ahead. Firstly for her family, and then for sale. She soon earned her first dollars. Aged twelve she left her uncle’s home armed with a clear plan for the future: to help other orphans.

Behind the abundantly flourishing vegetable garden, is Chido’s pride and joy, her kingdom, the tunnel where the oyster mushrooms are grown. “A place like this had been on my wish-list for ages. It went on the market in February, including an orphanage where seven young girls lived. I didn’t hesitate for a second, just said ‘yes’ straight away”. All of a sudden, Chido found herself mother to seven children at such a young age; but she has enough hands eager to help on the farm.

**Oyster mushrooms in abundance**

In the large tunnel, a construction of hoops covered by transparent plastic, bags weighing 10 to 15 kilos are placed on wooden shelving. Chido’s face lights up. “Harvest time again!” She takes a large bowl and carefully removes the mushrooms from the bags. “I could cheerfully do this all day. It makes me so proud to see how much we produce. And, they are the tastiest mushrooms in the world!” Chido uses straw, maize, cottonseed hulls and other waste left behind on the fields after harvest to make her substrate. Each square metre contains about 100 kg of substrate. Within the three-month production cycle, 50 kg of mushrooms can be harvested: a yield of 50 percent. At this moment, the volume is around 1200 kg per month. The revenue is invested in her foundation. Chido teaches disadvantaged women and orphans how to grow and sell mushrooms in their own local community. As soon as the mushrooms start growing, the local chiefs come and take a look. When they see how well it works, they are often prepared to support the project. “This is our way of uniting a community, generating an income and creating a safe environment for the orphans.”

**Opportunities and ambitions**

As oyster mushroom growing is gaining in popularity in Zimbabwe, Chido expects the market in Harare to become saturated in a while. So she is already thinking ahead. “I am going to focus on medicinal mushrooms and varieties such as shiitake and maitake. And maybe I will start exporting. Wait and see – this is just the beginning!” Chido hopes that consumers are willing to pay fair prices for mushrooms, as the current prices are too low. Chido’s completely organically grown grey and white oyster mushrooms cost seven dollars/kg, and yellow ones fetch 15 dollars/kg. Smaller growers earn much less. “It is important that growers realise how much their produce is worth, and stick to that price”. Mushrooms. The ideal choice for young Zimbabweans ambitious to become farmers? Mushrooms seem to score high in the success ratings. That is, if partnered with a healthy dose of passion, perseverance and idealism. These characteristics have taken the SOKO sisters, Rodney Nyamutswa and Chido Govera a long way in achieving their ideals. Who knows, maybe they, and the growers of the future they are training, can help Zimbabwe climb out of the valley it has been stuck in for years.

‘At age eleven, I realised I could produce my own food from natural waste!’

Photos: Eva de Vries.

▼ The oyster mushroom substrate mainly comprises cottonseed hulls.