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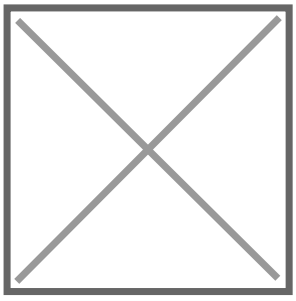
Reishi, Cordyceps, and future of Mycology: Exclusive with Oli Genn-Bash on smallholder innovation and global mushroom markets

23 September 2025 | News

In an exclusive Agrospectrum interview, Oli Genn-Bash, Founder of The Fungi Consultant and co-founder of the UKC Psychedelics Society, explored the rising wave of functional mushrooms as a high-value agricultural and wellness opportunity. He highlighted the potential for smallholder cultivation models, noting that with training, local spawn, and market access, species like Reishi and Cordyceps could thrive in Europe and Africa, particularly through circular substrate systems using agro-waste. Genn-Bash emphasized that quality control, traceability, and provenance labeling are becoming critical in premium European markets, while technology innovations such as solar-powered polyhouses could democratize cultivation in climate-stressed regions.



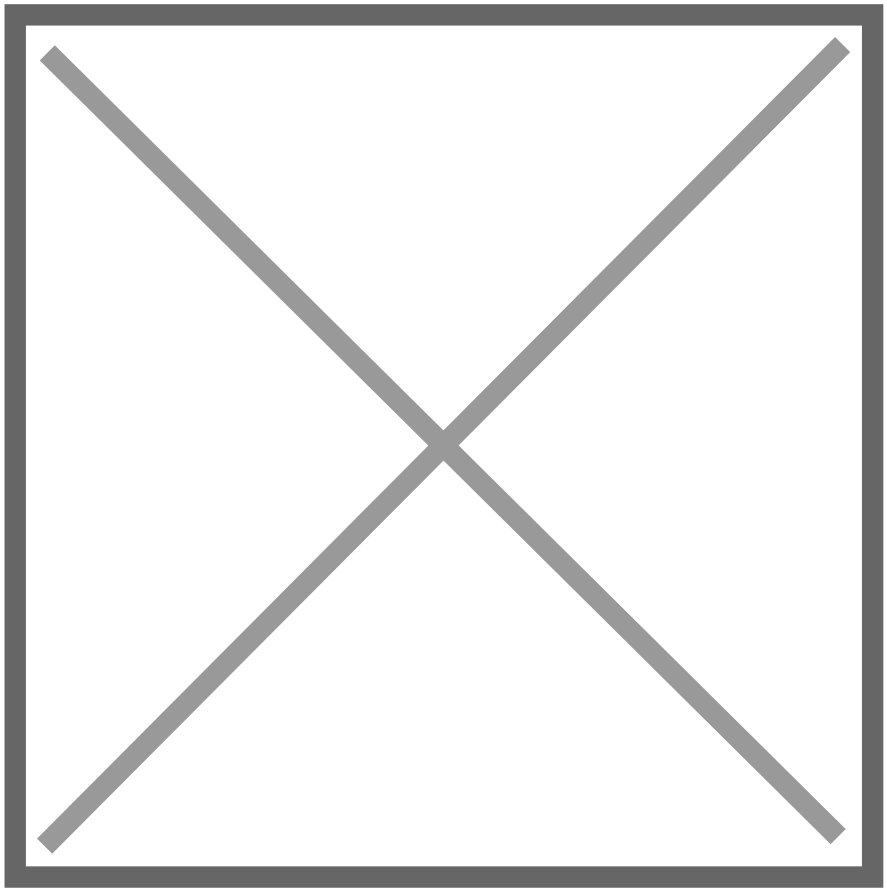
In an exclusive *Agrospectrum interview, Oli Genn-Bash, Founder of The Fungi Consultant and co-founder of the UKC Psychedelics Society*, explored the rising wave of functional mushrooms as a high-value agricultural and wellness opportunity. He highlighted the potential for smallholder cultivation models, noting that with training, local spawn, and market access, species like Reishi and Cordyceps could thrive in Europe and Africa, particularly through circular substrate systems using agro-waste. Genn-Bash emphasized that quality control, traceability, and provenance labeling are becoming critical in premium European markets, while technology innovations such as

solar-powered polyhouses could democratize cultivation in climate-stressed regions.

On the consumer side, he traced the mushroom coffee phenomenon to post-pandemic health awareness, influencer culture, and functional beverage trends, forecasting consolidation by major FMCG players and growth in extracts, personalized supplements, and functional food products. Beyond consumption, he sees mushrooms as a bridge between cultural re-enchantment with nature and future innovations in myco-materials, adaptogen blends, and clinical applications, signaling a transformative horizon for fungal science.

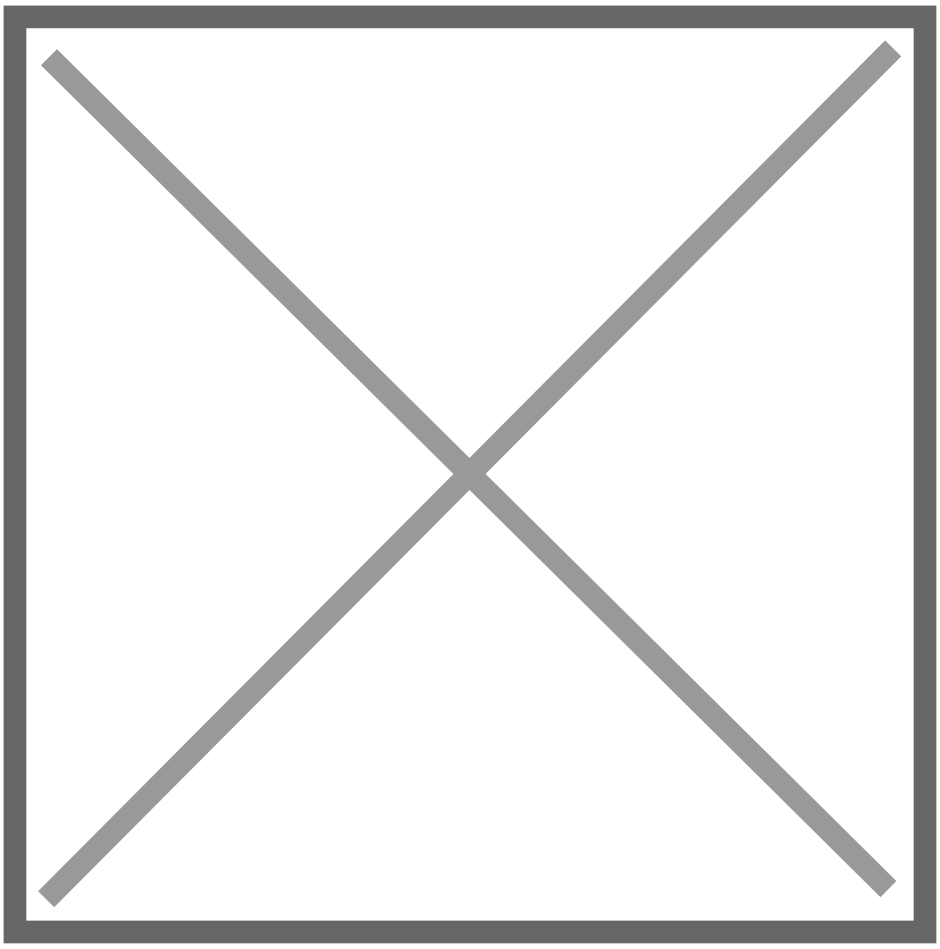
Medicinal Mushrooms from an Agricultural Point of View

Mini Case Study Prompt: In India, several farmer cooperatives in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh are piloting Reishi and Cordyceps cultivation as a high-value crop, with margins reported at 2â??3x those of traditional horticulture. How do you see this kind of smallholder model evolving in Europe or Africa?



There's an opportunity for smallholder mushroom cultivation projects to scale where thereâ??s a balance between suitable microclimates, reliable substrates, and access to training & markets, as well as furthering education to help prospective customers understand the benefits of these mushrooms. The key enablers would be low-cost spawn and training, potential for cooperatives to be set up, simple quality-control protocols, and tailored strains for local conditions
In Europe the model would likely focus on supply chains and the quality of the final product (e.g. organic, dual extraction depending on the type of mushroom, lab testing to show bioactive compounds) sold to premium wellness and herbal markets.
In Africa, the biggest upside is circularity and diversification: mushrooms can become an income layer on top of other commodities such as coffee, cocoa, or fruit and reduce seasonality risk.

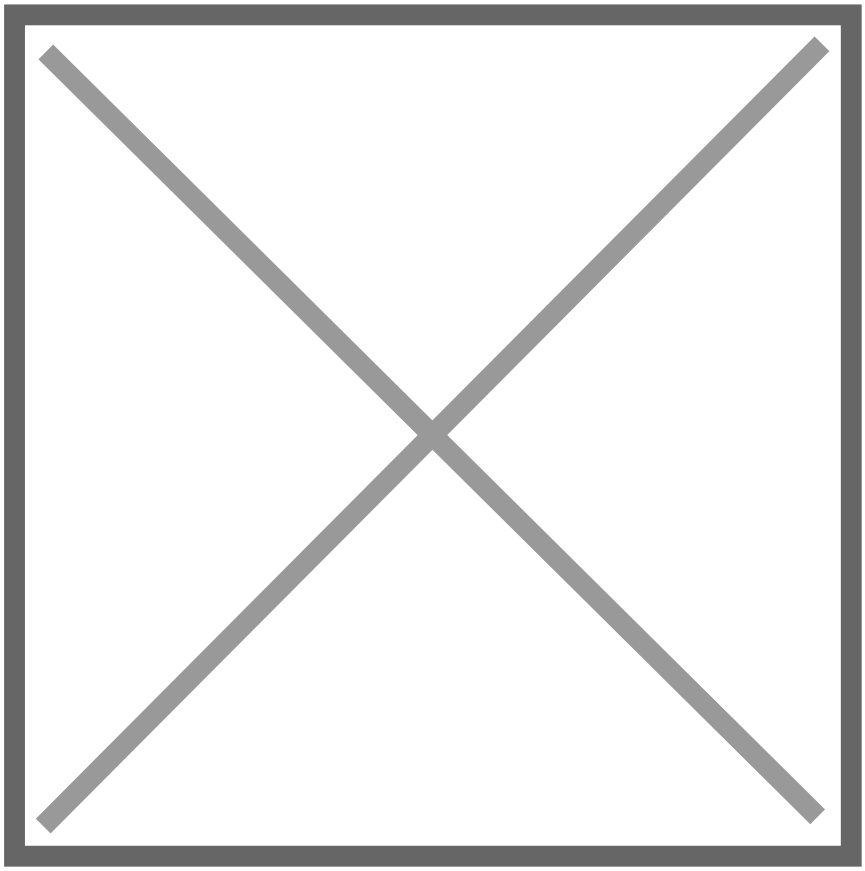
Mini Case Study Prompt: In Kenya, a social enterprise has partnered with coffee growers to use spent coffee grounds as substrate for Oyster and Reishi mushrooms, creating additional income for farmers and reducing waste. Could similar circular models be scaled globally?



Circular substrate models create more sustainability and affordability for cultivation. Spent coffee has good nutrients and is often free; pairing it with agricultural waste (straw, sawdust) improves yields. Globally, scale depends on logistics: Collection systems, local inoculation units (so spawn doesnâ??t travel far), and end-market demand. Social enterprises can add community benefit layers (waste reduction, new income). Using spent coffee alone can be difficult due to how long it keeps for, so itâ??s ideal to combine with agricultural waste for prolonged use.

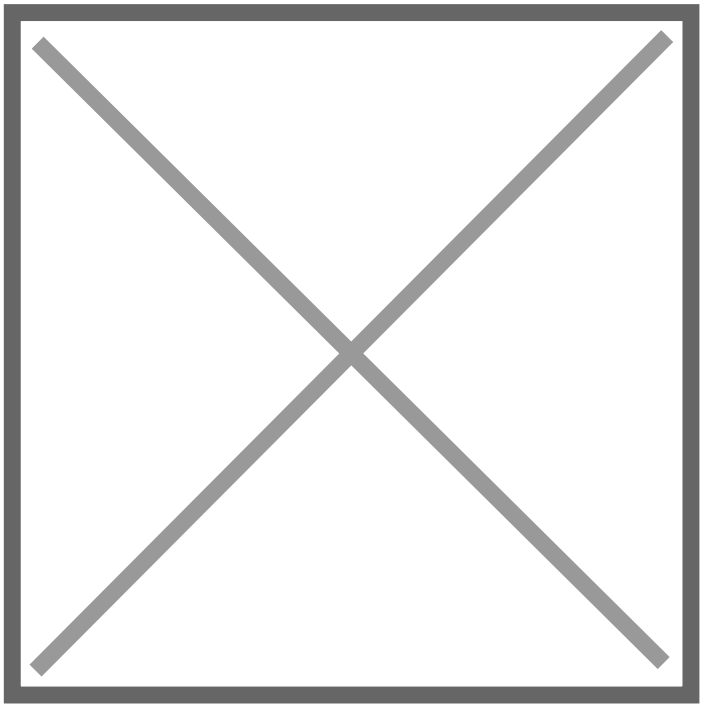
This could be scaled strategically with local cultivation hubs and partnerships with hospitality/coffee chains for regular supply. Certification for food safety might be required to scale this on a global level

Mini Case Study Prompt: Chinaâ??s Fujian province has government-backed spawn labs that provide training, low-cost inoculum, and buyback guarantees to farmers. Could this â??extension plus guaranteed marketâ?• model work in the UK or EU ?



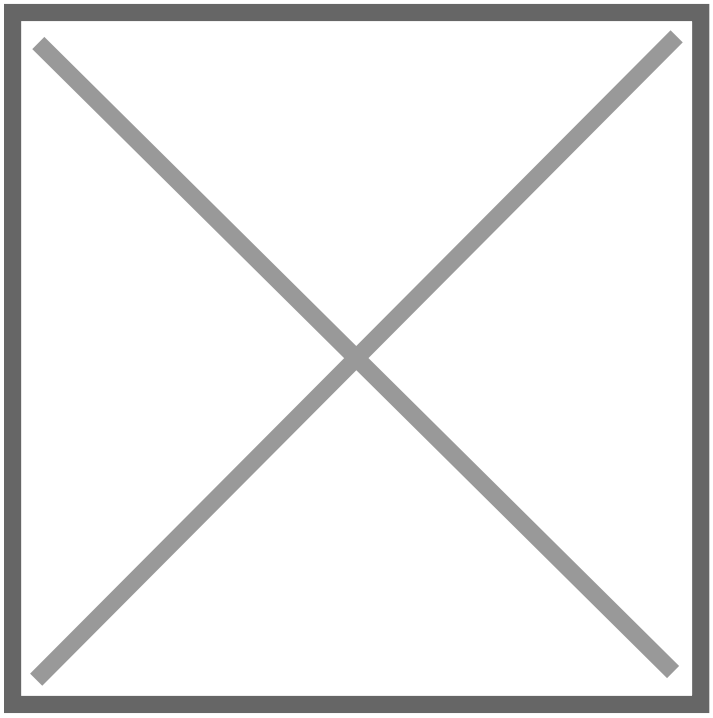
This could work but with some adaptation. The â??extension + guaranteed marketâ?• model addresses two huge blockers: technical capacity and market risk. In the UK/EU, the model could be run by regional agricultural colleges, social enterprises, or cooperatives with public or philanthropic seed funding. The differences in the UK or EU would be that labour costs are higher, with stricter regulations on food safety and medical claims, as well as more restrictions regarding use of land in places like the UK. You would need to implement transparent quality standards, commercial-scale processing or extract partners to absorb volumes, and a hybrid funding model (public grants + small price differential for technical services). A buyback guarantee could focus initially on processed goods (dried mushrooms or extracts) where there is more scope to understand traceability and certify the quality standard.

Mini Case Study Prompt: Researchers in Thailand have developed low-cost, solar-powered polyhouses for Cordyceps militaris cultivation, making it a viable option even in hotter climates. Could similar tech democratize medicinal mushroom farming in climate-stressed regions?



Yes this could democratise it, as it opens the door to cultivating species which might otherwise be restricted by the local climate. The important thing to note is that conditions must be repeatable and consistent training should be implemented to maintain the quality of the end product.

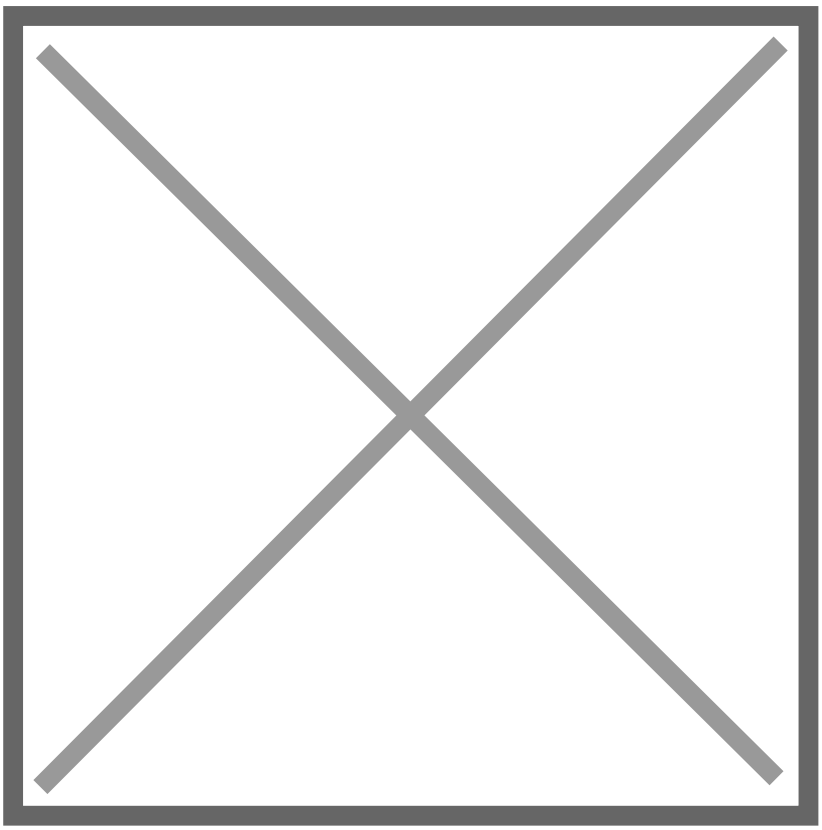
Mini Case Study Prompt: Vietnam has started branding its lingzhi (reishi) exports with provincial origin labels and blockchain traceability. Could Europe do something similar for small-scale growers?



The consumers in Europe are increasingly paying more attention to traceability to know where the product has originated, and the level of quality. Provincial branding combined with simple digital traceability (QR codes showing grower, substrate, harvest date, lab test results) would allow cultivators to build trust and open themselves up to wider markets. Blockchain might be overcomplicating things when you can implement traceability into existing systems. The challenge might be how much this costs for small-scale cultivators to adopt.

The Mushroom Coffee Phenomenon

Beyond the Buzzword: Mushroom coffee has moved from hipster cafÃ©s to mainstream supermarket shelves. What, in your view, has driven its adoption â?? health science, influencer culture, or pandemic-era biohacking trends?

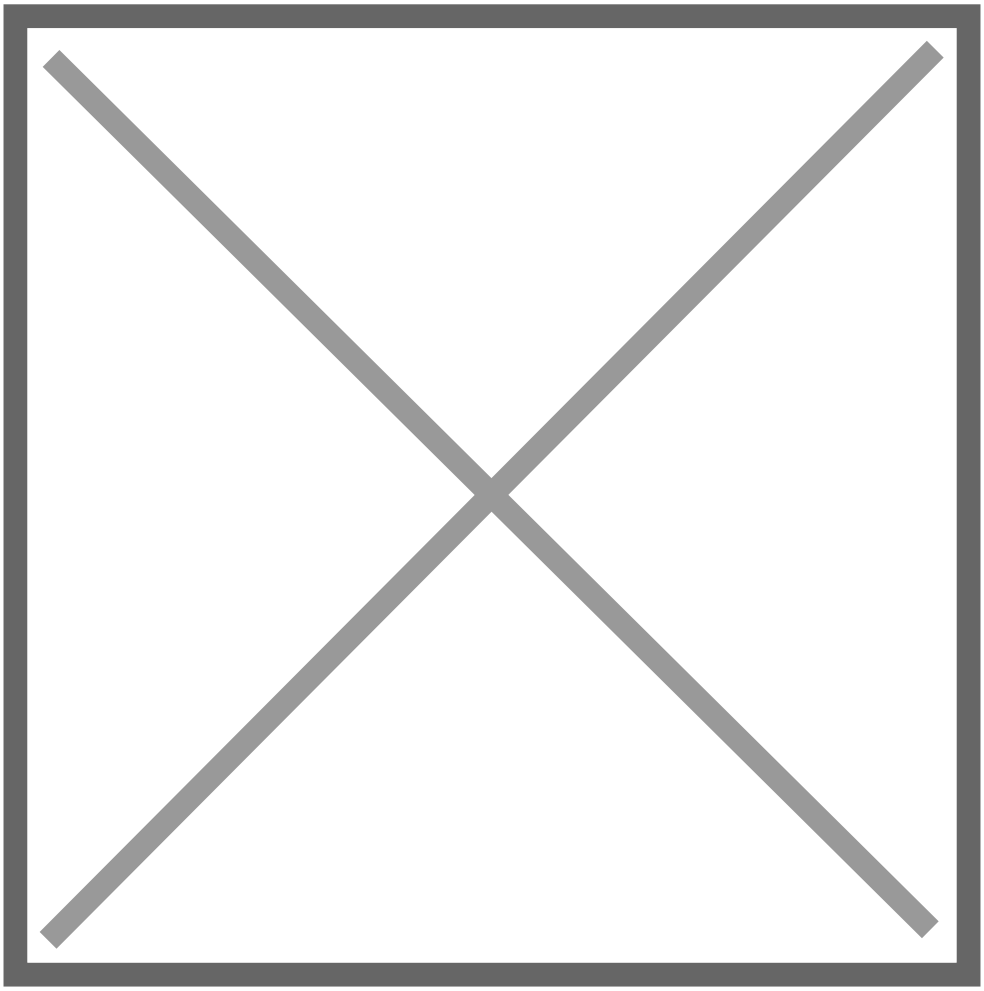


People have been more concerned with their health since the Covid pandemic, and our lives have become more busy and possibly more stressful during this time. Mushroom coffee has provided an opportunity for people to engage with fungi in a familiar morning routine, whilst being a convenient way to obtain the benefits of the mushrooms. Certain health narratives such as the need to improve cognitive performance, reduce stress levels, or increase energy are just a few examples of what has been driving the trend, as well as the ritual of coffee and the rise of influencers and wider distribution markets opening up.

Cultivation & Supply Chain Insights

From Forest to Farm: Cultivating medicinal mushrooms is notoriously tricky â?? requiring sterile environments, controlled substrates, and patient timing. Can you walk us through what â??good cultivation practiceâ? looks like in this space?

Successful cultivation of medicinal mushrooms begins with selecting good genetics and establishing clean, scalable spawn production. Maintaining sterility, implementing basic quality control, and ensuring that batches are fully traceable are essential steps in this phase. The next critical focus is on the substrate. Each mushroom species requires a specific substrate, and careful attention must be paid to moisture levels as well as proper pasteurization or sterilization techniques to optimize growth.

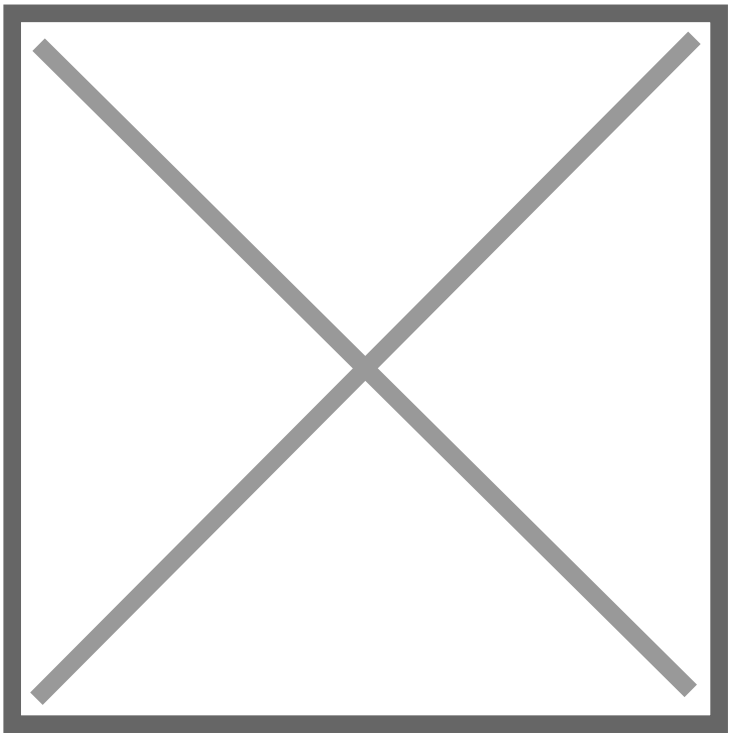


Creating a controlled environment for fruiting is equally important. Consistency in humidity, temperature, air exchange, and lighting ensures predictable and high-quality yields. Alongside this, strict pest control and staff hygiene must be enforced, with daily logging of waste disposal to maintain cleanliness and prevent contamination.

Post-harvest handling is another crucial step. Mushrooms must be dried properly, moisture content checked, and packaging completed quickly to preserve bioactive compounds. Regular testing and traceability are also vital, including lab analyses for identity, heavy metals, and microbes, and maintaining batch IDs from spawn through to harvest. Where feasible, lab testing of bioactive compounds adds an extra layer of quality assurance.

Finally, keeping simple yet thorough recordsâ??tracking yields, failure modes, and environmental conditionsâ??supports continuous improvement, scalability, and compliance with quality standards.
Global Sourcing: China remains a dominant supplier for many medicinal mushroom ingredients.

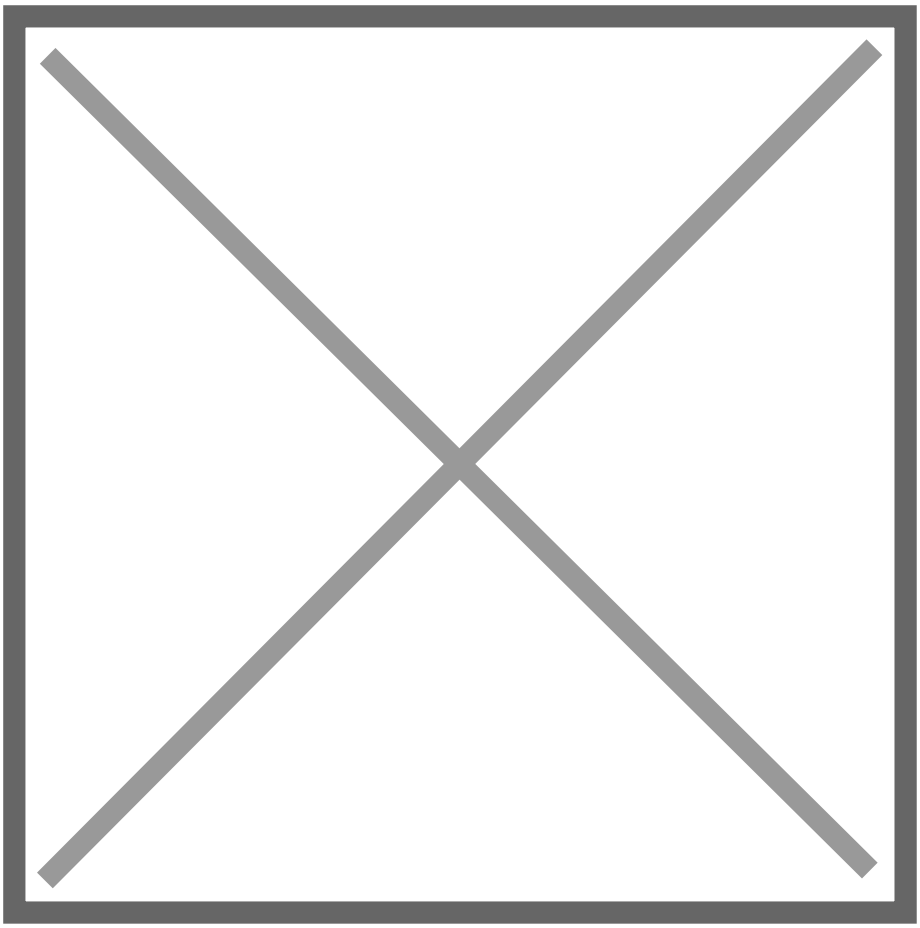
How do you see Europe and the UK building resilient, traceable, and possibly regenerative mushroom cultivation systems locally?



We need to invest in more education in places like the UK where we can open up training for early career mycologists. We might see the creation of regional spawn hubs, the introduction of training programmes at agricultural colleges, incentives for regenerative substrate sourcing (using agro-waste), and a marketplace that rewards traceability and high quality products It would be great to see public funding or a combination of public/private funding in places like the UK or EU to limit the risk for early career cultivators.

Market & Investment Outlook

Functional Beverages 2.0: Kombucha and matcha once had their heyday â?? now mushroom coffee is on the rise. Where do you see this category going in the next 5â??10 years? Could we see major FMCG players acquiring or building mushroom coffee brands?

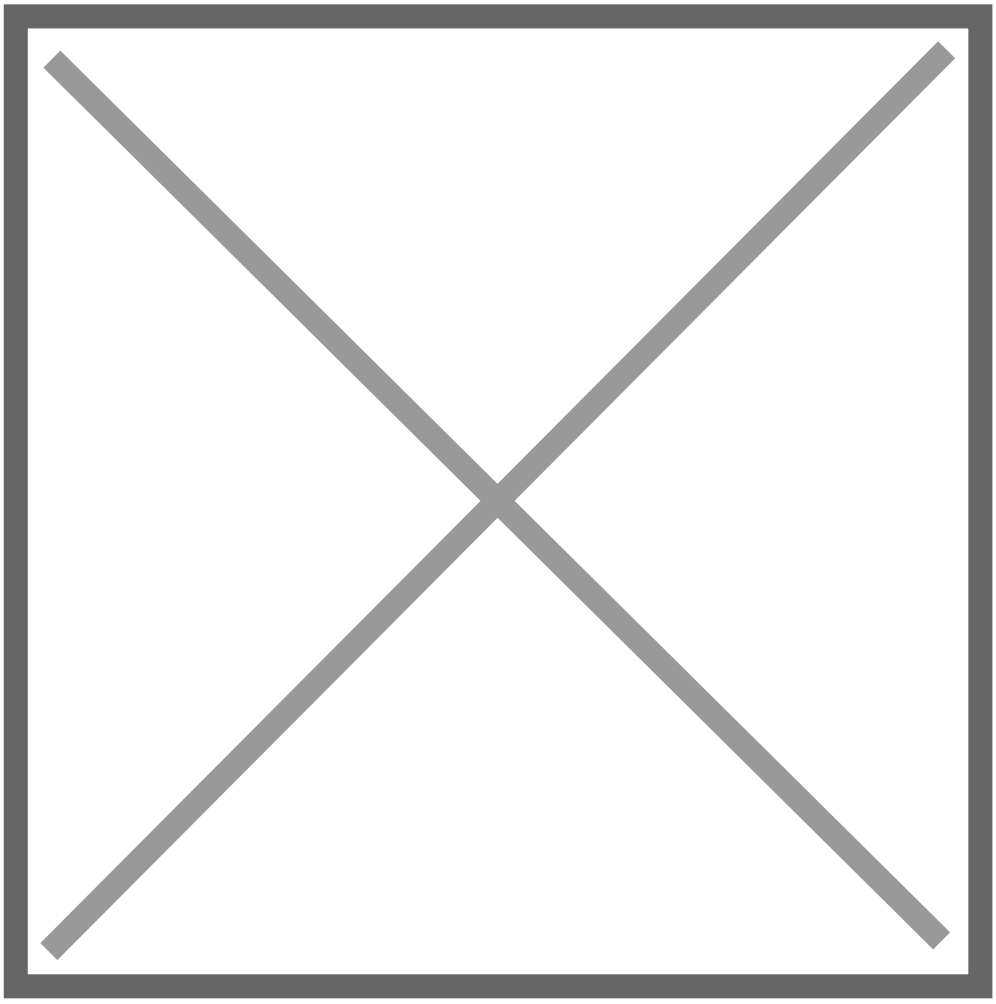


It seems like we might be seeing market consolidation, where big FMCG players could either acquire successful independent brands or build in-house product lines because the category fits into mainstream tea/coffee/functional beverage portfolios. Weâ??ll also see more of a focus on the creation of premium products, and more focus on the functional sub-categories such as sleep, focus, or relaxation. Regulation plays a big role in how these products can be marketed, so we should expect to see more neutral language talking about â??supportâ?? rather than making any kind of health claims.

Investment appetite will favor vertically integrated players who control spawn â?? processing â?? branded distribution, where products such as extracts provide more value than just dried fungi.

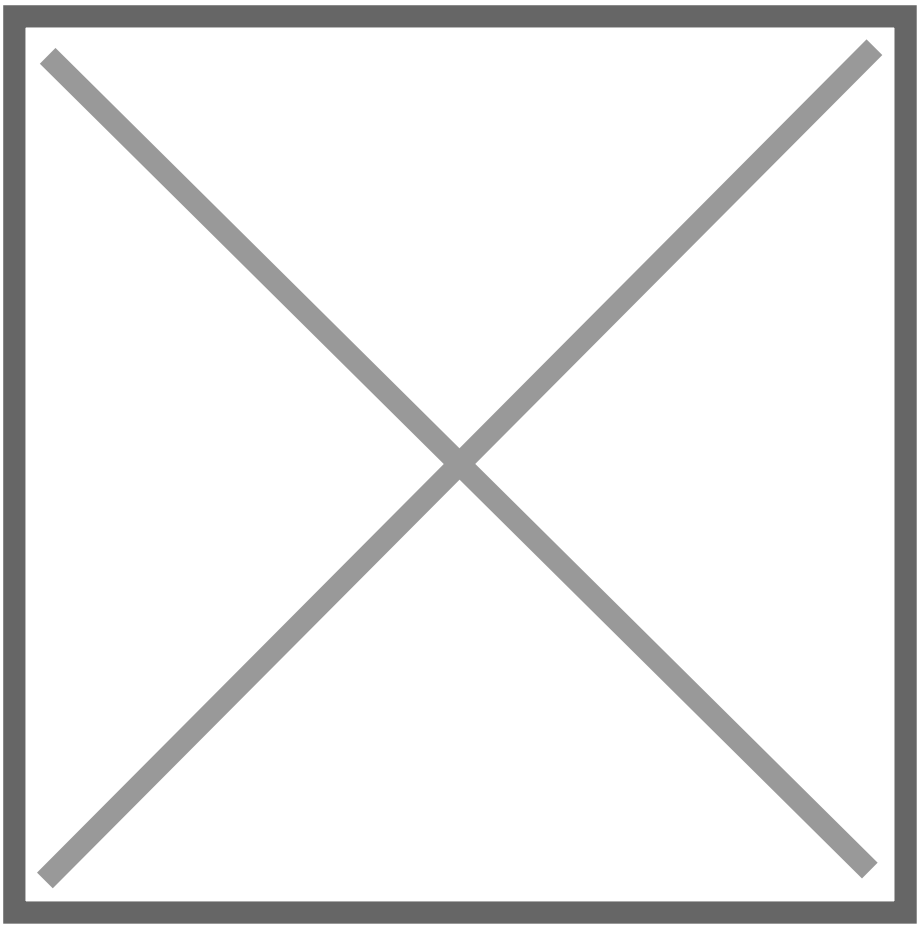
Intersection with Psychedelics & Culture

Mindful Consumption: Youâ??ve been involved in the psychedelic education space. Do you think the functional mushroom boom is quietly priming the public for a broader conversation about psychoactive fungi and mental health therapies?



I actually think in places like the UK or USA, the opposite is occurring - people have been consuming magic mushrooms for many decades, but the functional mushroom boom is quite new. I think that psychoactive fungi have opened up people to the potential for many different types of fungi to heal us on the functional level. The use of psychoactive fungi in therapeutic settings precedes the rise in popularity of functional mushroom supplements, however it certainly makes it easier to talk about the benefit of psychoactive fungi now that everyone is talking about mushrooms such as Lionâ??s Mane, Reishi, or Cordyceps. The issue is how the conversation surrounding these therapies relates to the mushrooms themselves, and whether or not weâ??ll see a dominance in synthetic compounds to achieve specific aims, rather than utilising the power of the whole organism.

Cultural Capital: Mushrooms have been spiritual symbols for centuries â?? from Siberian shamans to Mesoamerican rituals. Are we seeing a modern re-enchantment of fungi as part of a cultural shift toward reconnecting with nature?



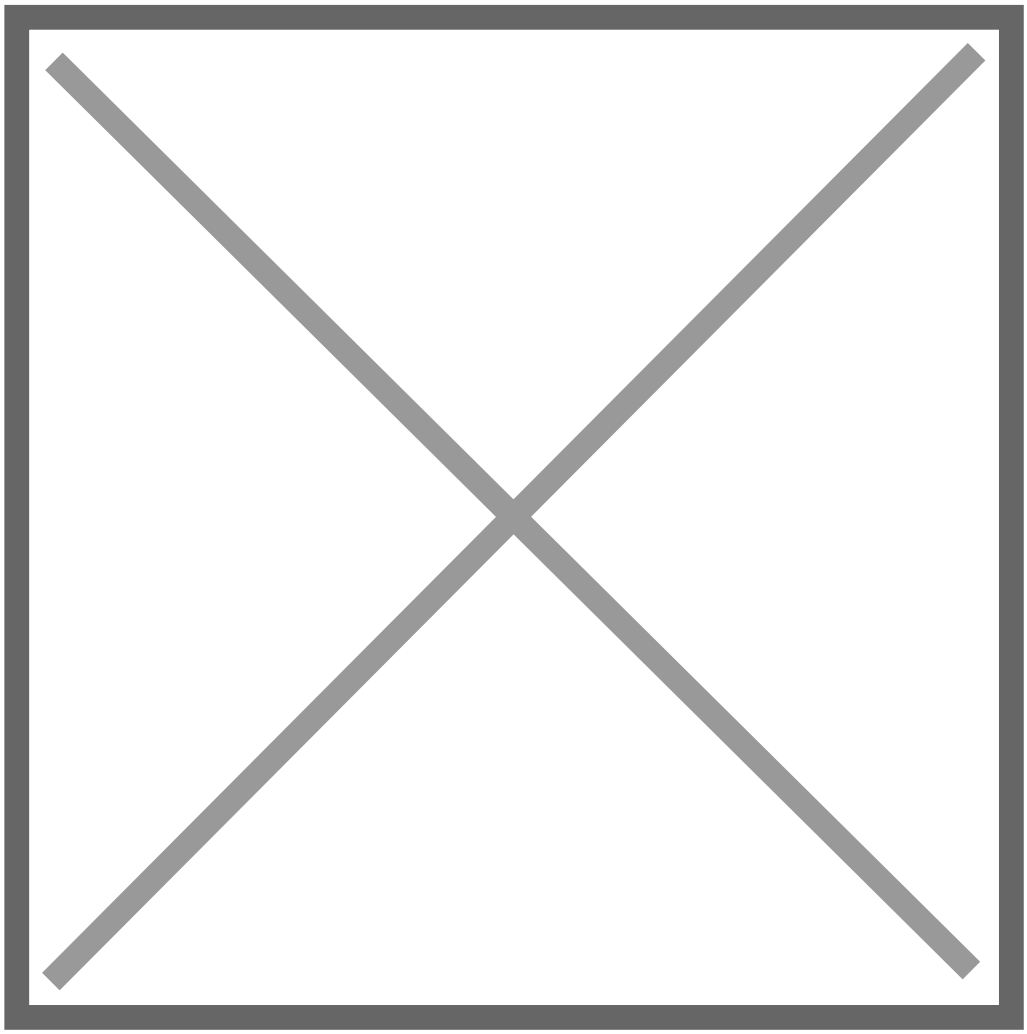
Yes, I believe that consumption of mushrooms allows us to relate more to Animist worldviews, where we can exist with nature in an interrelationship, rather than viewing fungi as simple commodities for our benefit. We can ascribe some sense of agency to the mushrooms, where they are assisting us with their energy and wisdom to exist more comfortably with the natural world. I donâ??t think itâ??s a coincidence that mushrooms are becoming more popular as we cause more destruction to the natural environment - they are clearly showing up at a time when we need them the most!

Future of Mycology & Fungal Innovation

Beyond Coffee: If mushroom coffee is the gateway, whatâ??s the next frontier for medicinal mushrooms â?? mycelium-based supplements, adaptogen blends, or even functional food tech innovations like mycoprotein ?

The next frontier for medicinal mushrooms is expected to see a rise in high-bioavailability extracts. Advanced techniques such as liposomal technology and ultrasound-assisted extraction, combined with carriers like vegetable glycerin, will allow better delivery of key compounds. There will likely be a shift in focus from traditional beta-glucans toward terpenes and other bioactive molecules, alongside the development of clinically-backed blends.

Personalized fungal supplements are also emerging, with small-batch, carefully analyzed formulations targeting specific needs such as sleep, cognition, and inflammation. This tailored approach enables consumers to select products that align closely with their health goals.



Functional food technologies represent another growth avenue. Mycoprotein and hybrid foods are expanding beyond meat substitutes into functional snacks and cognitive bars, integrating mushrooms into everyday diets in innovative ways.

Beyond nutrition, myco-materials are gaining traction in industrial applications, including packaging and leather alternatives. These cross-industry uses are attracting investment and advancing fungal science in sustainability-focused sectors.

Finally, clinical translation remains a key opportunity. Research on functional mushrooms is increasingly being integrated into treatment plans, providing a pathway for evidence-based health interventions and bridging the gap between wellness products and medical applications.

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