

Farms and suburbs
meet underground
on Big Beaver Rd.
Coexistence may
be tenuous, but
for now:



Vero Elisei prepares the beds for spawn. (Photographed by Leilani Hu)

Elisei: His business is mushrooming

By JOAN S. WEAVER

Vero (Vic) Elisei steers his tractor over to the 50 foot long mound of steaming, sweet-smelling compost. He picks up a load and returns to dump it in the waiting wheelbarrows on top of the scaffolding in back of the mushroom house.

Elisei has six mushroom houses on ten acres of choice land in Troy where he operates a mushroom farm. The houses are tall and narrow, sharing a single exterior with six foot roof peaks distinguishing the separate houses.

Ten weeks from now, Elisei's plump, clean "whites" and "creams" (table mushrooms of the group called the agarics — the Latin word for field) may turn up on a table at Beauchamps or the Roma Cafe, two of the restaurants which Elisei services.

Or at the Eastern Market where he sells them for 15 to 20 cents less per pound than the going rate at local supermarkets.

Now they are "loading a house," getting the compost from the big mounds out back via tractor, wheelbarrows and workers, on to the eight tiers of movable boards inside the mushroom house.

They load from the top because the workers roll back the top seven layers of boards and dump the wheelbarrows full of compost down to the first tier, roll out the second layer and repeat the process, smoothing as they go, until all eight tiers are filled with compost.

"THE COMPOST doesn't always smell this pleasant," Elisei says, "but that's how we test when it's ready and know it's time to load the house — it has to be sweet. We add gypsum (a yellowish-white mineral that loses its water when it's heated) to the manure for moisture, brewer's grain for food value and keep moving the compost with the tractor so air can circulate through it while it cooks. It reaches a temperature of about 140°."

Since mushrooms are fungi, they have none of the green plant material, chlorophyll, and cannot use sunlight for the nourishment they need to grow. They grow in the dark, Elisei says. Because there is no leaf green, mushrooms must have food that has already been prepared.

In nature, mushrooms are found growing in decaying twigs, leaves, old logs or rich soil. When grown commercially, these conditions must be duplicated by using a well-fermented stable manure. Hence, the importance of compost to the mushroom growing business.

"I get my compost from Hazel Park (the race track) and sometimes from the police stables at Rouge Park," Elisei says, "when the compost is sweet enough — I can tell by the smell — the house is loaded and it's time for the final cook-out."

For the final cook-out inside the house, the temperature of the compost is maintained at 130° for a week to ten days, using a steam boiler if necessary, while the ammonia inherent in compost

changes to nitrogen. The temperature of the compost automatically drops to 80° and it's time to put in the spawn.

Nothing is wasted in the mushroom business. When it's time to "clean house," all the compost is moved back outside, the boards and floors are scrubbed and everything must dry thoroughly. Elisei then sells the used compost to landscapers and individuals who see his sign out front and drive in.

"We don't drain out all the nutrients," he says, "it's called mushroom compost and it makes great fertilizer."

A SHORTAGE of labor has curtailed this year's crop.

He expects to harvest about half of his usual 100,000 pounds, he said. In full production, the houses are turned over three times a year, but this year he expects a single harvest.

Elisei is surrounded now by civilization, a suburb has sprung up in back of his property and soon they will be complaining about the compost, which isn't always so pleasant.

There is a big farmhouse directly behind his home that changes tenants often, and always, he says, there is the fight about the compost with new tenants. So far he has always won.

"One of these days," Elisei says, "I'll lose, then I'll be forced out."



Ready for market.

Lost time, lives reclaimed

An industry tackles the drinking problem

By ALICE COLLINS

Jim's wife has been threatening to divorce him for, he can't remember how many months. He doesn't think she'll ever go through with it. But now there's a new "threat." One that has precipitated a real crisis for him.

He's got to make a decision.

His job supervisor at the General Motors Truck and Coach Division plant informed him this morning that he's been absent too often and that his job performance is down to an unacceptable level.

The supervisor's message was clear. "Get some help with your drinking problem now . . . or . . ."

WHAT THE supervisor suggests and hopes Jim will do is to go over and see Jonathan Uren, new coordinator of the alcohol and drug abuse recovery program at the GMC division plant in Pontiac.

Uren will talk things over with Jim, and refer him to one of 20 private or public agencies in Oakland County, the one best equipped to treat him.

It's the same for anyone with a drug or alcohol problem — for every man or woman, full-time or part-time, laborer, white collar worker or top level executive at GMC.

"The whole process is confidential," said Uren, "and while he's receiving treatment, the employee can go on sick leave, without losing his seniority, the same as if he had an ulcer operation or any other illness."

"When the employee comes back to work, we keep everything as normal as possible . . . he or she isn't singled out in any way. There are no special privileges," said Uren.

If a person refuses to follow his supervisor's advice, and his job performance is still off, he's approached by a committee made up of his supervisor, a representative of his union, the United Auto Workers, and Uren. "As a group we try to steer him to the proper agency," Uren said.

"IF HE DOESN'T take the advice, he's informed — there's no harassment — that normal procedure will be followed and he'll be out pounding the bricks."

"The person is the loser when this happens," said Uren, "but the company is also a big loser."

"Everytime we lose an employee, it costs at least \$3,000 to get a new one in and trained. And there's no way to estimate the value of an employee with 10 years on the job," Uren said.

The cost of alcohol misuse alone has escalated to \$25 billion annually, according to Caspar W. Weinberger, U.S. secretary of health, education and welfare. That means one out of every 20 employees in factories and offices are on alcohol and receiving an additional \$2,500 a year for absenteeism, accidents, disease and poor performance.

"Our plant is about average," said Uren. "We don't see anything like one out of 20 though . . . only a percentage reach the crisis point."

"There's no way to estimate the value of an employee with 10 years on the job." — alcohol abuse coordinator, Jonathan Uren.

"We deal with all substance abuse, not just alcohol," said Uren. "The drugs appear to be more prevalent among the younger men."

UREN SAYS he can't exactly put his finger on the amount of success of the recovery program. "It all depends on what you call success."

"If you're talking about complete cures, there's no such thing for alcoholics. But I've seen many accept total abstinence and come back to work after treatment to produce better than they ever had before."

"I've also seen some, who can't seem to handle total abstinence, but who have been helped to the point of being able to support their families and handle themselves on the job. That's certainly a degree of success."

Two years ago, because of increasing losses due to alcoholism and drug abuse, General Motors, in cooperation with the United Auto Workers, set up rehabilitation programs in all of its divisions.

It's really a joint program," said Uren.

Truck and coach division personnel director Earl A. Maxwell said it was recently decided "because of increasing emphasis being given to problems of alcoholism and drug usage within industry," to appoint a full-time coordinator for the program.

Uren, who lives in Rochester, was a logical choice for the new post. With a civil engineering degree and 23 years of production engineering at the GMC plant behind him, his personal involvement with alcohol had made him deeply concerned about the rehabilitation of others with similar problems.

In fact, Uren, at 56, was already studying for a degree in social work at the University of Detroit, preparing himself for a second career after retirement.

"THEN I HEARD about this job opening up, and I decided to make a major career switch right away," Uren took over the program in September.

He said working on a volunteer basis at Providence Hospital in its alcoholic recovery program was instrumental in helping him make up his mind.

"Our aim is to reach the employee before he's physically ill, in a financial crisis and lost his family . . . before he's hit the bottom . . . helping him and helping the company."

