A FEW WORDS ABOUT MARKETING
by Rick Kerrigan.

I began working in the exotic mushroom industry in 1979. Since that time, the companies I have been involved with have produced around a quarter of a million pounds of Shiitake and probably at least twice that amount of Tree-Oyster mushrooms. Why do I tell you this? Because after we grew them, which was plenty interesting, we had to sell them. That was often the most interesting part. Usually, with some diligent planning, they almost sold themselves... but not always!

The market for exotic mushrooms in North America is young and volatile, but growing steadily. I think some trends can be projected, and I would like to share a few past experiences and new predictions with you. Hopefully most up-and-coming Shiitake farmers will find something of value in what I have to say.

First we should note something of the history of Shiitake prices, currently running as high as $9.25/lb at the farm for top quality product. Some of the companies that did a great deal to create a growing market for Shiitake folded up their tents during the last 18 months. The result has been a boon for the rest of us: demand which usually far exceeds supply. Hence we are getting prices that three years ago, when I last made some forecasts about the economic future of Shiitake, I didn't dare to predict (I pegged the limit at $6.50/lb!)

The second fact to note probably signals the end of this lucrative state of affairs: each year there are more Shiitake growers, both large and small, than the year before. In 1983 a few new guys hit the markets with their first Shiitake crops. In '84 it was a few dozen, and this year I fully expect the number of new sources to be up in the hundreds, while the more established growers will be producing at much higher levels. That's the trend we see both in the produce markets, and in the orders for spawn that are coming in from first timers as well as expanding repeaters. Soon there will be thousands of us.

So, the considerable profit presently generated by each pound of Shiitake will probably diminish as the supply increases. Why? In my experience the number of people who will pay $15/lb, wholesale or $20/lb retail for their Shiitake is rather limited. Another problem with such high prices is that now growers in Asian countries can compete with us by air-shipping their fresh Shiitake to the US. Both Japan and Singapore did this in 1984. If the farm price stabilizes

Mushroom grading systems are an important next step in market standardization. [Photo by Mau Kuo.]

SHIITAKE MARKET AND GRADING OF SHIITAKE PRODUCTS
by Mau Kuo.

Shiitake, this flavorful and delicious mushroom grown in hardwood logs, has been produced as dry mushrooms for a long time in the Orient. Its history goes back to nearly 300 years ago. Availability of fresh Shiitake on the market occurred, only after World War II in Japan which has been the major producer of this mushroom. Traditionally, in the Orient, Shiitake is available as dry mushrooms which are soaked in water before use in cooking. This has been the most common way of using Shiitake in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and many of the Southeast Asian countries, as well as in the Chinese restaurants in the United States. In Japan, starting in the post-World War II period, Shiitake was marketed as fresh mushrooms and is currently available as vacuum-packed produce in groceries and supermarkets in the metropolitan areas.

In the United States, Shiitake markets are growing at a fast pace, mostly on the West coast and to a lesser extent in the East coast, especially in New York, New Jersey and Maryland. The current and traditional market has been and is the Chinese restaurant market which uses Shiitake as an ingredient in a variety of Oriental dishes. The dried Shiitake mushrooms used by these restaurants are known as the black Chinese mushroom and are currently grown in Japan, Taiwan,
lower, say at $6-$7.00/lb. in the next couple of years there will be a much larger market for this mushroom. Foreign competition may drop out. And, there will still be a healthy profit in the Shiitake farming business.

What concerns me is not that the price of Shiitake will be coming down, nor that the supply will be growing quite rapidly, perhaps faster than demand, but what does concern me is that virtually none of the new growers seem to know how to market their crop when it hits. This past year, more than ever before, we saw panic dumping of first-time crops on the open market. It is not a pretty sight, either, at least not when you have a half-ton of mushrooms in your cooler, ready to ship out at a decent price, and you learn that none of your regular customers are interested...because some grower wasn't expecting their first 350 lb. crop, so they called around and found some nice produce broker to take it off their hands for $2.00/lb., which knocked everybody else's price into the basement.

Question: is $700 better than nothing? That depends on your long-term outlook. If some produce buyer begins to think he can get your goods for $2.00 if he just leans on you enough, it won't be long before your lost margins and your image problem are a lot bigger that $700. And, of course, there are your cohorts with their Shiitake to sell. No, you can't place their well-being above your own, but you might give some thought to their well-being anyway, since you are certainly costing them a lot more than $700 in lost sales. And their financial health has everything to do with the health of the industry you are breaking into.

You aren't convinced? Well, please be aware that there are even a few people out there willing to send their Shiitake to market for nothing, with an "if you can sell any of it, please send me something" arrangement. If you have never sold a mushroom in your life, this may seem like a reasonable deal... but I don't think you'll be in Shiitake farming long unless you learn how to sell those mushrooms.

On the assumption that I have your attention now, I would like to offer some positive, constructive suggestions that I feel will improve your position when the fateful harvest is at hand. Several ideas come under the heading of Planning Ahead:

**Get to Know Your Crop:** In most parts of the country, most strains of Shiitake will tend to fruit in late spring and early fall. Seek out other growers in your area and pin those likely dates down. Write them on your calendar. Don't wait till your kids ask why the logs are all knobby to lay your plans.

**Learn About Marketing:** Ask your state or county Ag agents whether there are any produce marketing seminars in your area. If not, get to know other farmers who market other kinds of produce. Find a "nice" produce dealer who doesn't sell Shiitake, give him some as a sample and ask him to tell you how the game is played. He (she) may even give you some leads to other dealers who will buy Shiitake. In short, learn about the structure and strategies within the produce industry, and how to work successfully within that structure.

**Know Your Local Market:** This could also be called "Create Your Local Market." If you think that with a few phone calls to some big cities you can easily unload your crop, you will sometimes be right... but you will usually just be dumping your crop on a market that already has enough, and you will get a dumpy price. What you need is your own, private, protected market. Only you can create that, and your best bets are all local ones. Our experience is that a small area, say a county, with around 100,000 people, can absorb 100-200 lbs. of Shiitake per week even at very high prices. Knock on doors; the better restaurants, the better markets, the health food outlets. Show them your (best) stuff, or if your crop is still incubating, raise a few lbs. from "instant kits," or buy somebody else's Shiitake, and show them that. Give samples. Do this shortly before you expect the bulk of your crop, and be able to give potential customers a good idea of when you will be supplying them with mushrooms.

**Cold Storage:** This will give you some flexibility as regards the timing of your sales. You can keep prime Shiitake cold for several days without much loss of quality, and for up to a week if necessary, though it won't be top notch at that point. You'll find that the market is better on certain days of the week. The big dealers like their orders early in the week, while the small accounts may prefer theirs late. Cooling the product after picking also keeps the quality high and facilitates the successful shipping of the mushrooms, which are quite perishable if warm. If you don't want to build a cold room, snipe around town until you find someone with cooler space to share.

**Know Your Competition:** You will probably find...
that the family down the road with 3,000 Shiitake logs is not your adversary; rather, you each can share useful information. This is particularly true of marketing. How do you know that Broker X hasn't driven your price way down below everybody else's? Your fellow growers should know. Your local markets can be coordinated. When there are enough growers in an area, a coop marketing association could give you more leverage and save you lots of time in making sales. The worst situation is for each grower to remain isolated, and try to survive by "competing" -- that is, by cutting prices and threats, including his/her own.

OK, lets say that you have done all of the above, late summer rolls around, prices are down, the markets have plenty of Shiitake, and through perseverance and skill you have managed to bring in the biggest Shiitake crop anybody has ever seen, right on schedule... What do you do?

Don't panic. Pride and depression are acceptable, but not panic. Be creative, be resourceful, be clever, be philosophical. There are constructive steps that you can take. I'll give you a few ideas.

** Publicity: This is a great time to ring bells. Your local newspaper and the six- o'clock news would love to feature something as weird as an acre of logs covered with brown Japanese "toadstools." Play with the unusualness of it all while making your point: "Great new mushrooms are available from..." Put a small ad in the local paper with your phone number/address and sales hours. Better yet, put up a few "Pick-your-exotic-mushrooms" signs along local roads. People are fascinated by mushrooms, not to speak of Shiitake. You will get traffic, and some will buy, while more will look and listen. If there is a Farmer's Market in your area, go there and show and sell.

** Sample: As above, you have the opportunity to get attention. This is the perfect time to provide generous samples to potential new accounts. One trick that helps to launch sales at a grocery is to arrange with the management for a demonstration. Show up in the morning with a white hat and apron, an electric skillet, butter, wine, herbs, toothpicks, napkins, literature, and lots of beautiful mushrooms. Bring a few logs! Talk to people, feed them Shiitake. Some will buy then, some will buy tomorrow, some will wait till the price is down (which is when you need them), and many will tell someone else about the unusual mushrooms they saw at the store the other day.

** Drying: This won't bring the top fresh price, but there is a market for dried Shiitake in the $16-24/lb. range. If 8 lbs. of fresh Shiitake make 1 lb. of dried, this means that you can get the equivalent of $2-3 per pound for your product in times of trouble. I wouldn't rave about that price, but when the market is really tight that may actually be the price of fresh Shiitake, so in that case you have nothing to lose. Meanwhile you gain flexibility. You can dry your lesser-quality product, keep it off the market, and sell your best stuff for a better price. It can allow you to say "No, thanks" to the crummy prices some guy may try to stick you with. It tightens up a flabby market. It's a safety valve.

** Delay the Crop: This should be more of a long-term strategy, as you must plan in advance and support some environmental manipulation. If you keep the logs warm and dry, they shouldn't fruit. After the market glut subsides, soak them and cool them. You should have a crop in a week. I think we'll see more and more of this "managed cropping" in the future.

** Sell Something Else: Something more, actually. Produce the very best Shiitake around and sell Quality. Give your best accounts priority, if they deserve it, and sell Dependability. Manage your accounts deftly, with the right balance of firmness and humor, and sell Flexibility. All of these can give you a edge while protecting your price. Learn to tell jokes and you may get at least one buyer who will order just to hear your new one. That's the produce biz for you.

To summarize, the Shiitake market is subject to seasonal perturbations that can have a severe negative impact on price, and therefore on the financial success of the Shiitake grower. Careful planning can minimize these problems for the individual grower, and adverse situations of oversupply provide the perfect opportunity to promote Shiitake and lay the groundwork for larger markets in the future. Panic is the foe; know him and overcome him. During times of low prices make choices that enhance your long-term prospects for success. The market for Shiitake must be cultivated, just as you take care in the raising of the mushrooms. Bringing in the crop is just the beginning of your task.

Copyright 1985 by Rick Kerrigan, who together with his wife Hope, owns and operates Far West Fungi, a mushroom supply company. He is also the author of the booklet Is Shiitake Farming For You? Rick is currently working on his Ph.D. in mushroom genetics.

---

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Korea, and Hong Kong. Dried Shiitake is soaked in water for about half an hour to one hour which restores the original form of the mushroom. The soft mushrooms are then cut into quarters or sliced into thin slices and used in a variety of dishes. Shiitake mushrooms in the Orient, where they render their flavor, aroma and good taste. Another advantage of Shiitake mushrooms in the United States is the fast produce market, which is the fastest growing market for Shiitake in the West coast. Fresh Shiitake mushrooms from the grocery or supermarket can be used in a variety of French, Eastern European, and Oriental dishes. For example, typical Japanese Sukiyaki uses 4 - 5 pieces of Shiitake mushrooms. Some of the French dishes may use up to 3 mushrooms. What I can foresee as perhaps the most important future marketable form of Shiitake is the use of fresh Shiitake in salads. If this market develops, it is expected to be an explosive one. With assistance from the salad bar industry and the use in a variety of ethnic dishes, Shiitake mushrooms as fresh produce should be a growth industry.

With the potential market for Shiitake mushrooms as it is, the quality of the mushroom and its standardization is still in a state of confusion, perhaps due to a lack of organized effort to grade Shiitake on the basis of its own merit. It is known that the quality of the mushroom may differ with the time of its harvest, moisture and temperature conditions at the time of harvest, method of preservation, shipping condition and type of packages. These aspects will not be discussed here in detail because they are related to the technology of cultivation of Shiitake. However, at the wholesaler's level or even at the consumer's level, certainly there is going to be a concern about how to evaluate the quality of the produce. For this matter, setting a grading standard for Shiitake mushrooms has a dual purpose. One is to set the price based on the quality of the mushroom. The second, is to grade the mushrooms to stimulate an effort to improve the quality of the mushroom which the grower produces.

Unfortunately, there is currently no credible grading system available for Shiitake mushrooms in the United States, particularly for the fresh mushrooms. There is an Oriental way of grading Shiitake for the dried mushroom only, which however is based on instinct rather than on science. Earlier, I proposed a grading system in my book to promote the idea of grading this mushroom based on the size and its quality. This grading system is reproduced in the following Tables.

**ANNOUNCING SHI-GAW**

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- independent, nonprofit, unincorporated
- purpose of education, purchasing, growing, marketing.

*Organization Meeting - Sept. 14, 1985
For information contact:
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(715) 834-9672

**TABLE 1 Proposed Grading Standard for Fresh Forest Mushroom [Shiitake]**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Diameter of cap (inches)</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>&gt; 21</td>
<td>Caps no more than 75% open. Shape perfect. Relatively dry, clean, and without insect bite. Cap is thick.</td>
<td>Lack any one of the features indicated in A. Caps fully open.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>11 - 21</td>
<td>Caps no more than 75% open, and thick. Shape perfect.</td>
<td>Caps fully open, and thin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>&lt; 11</td>
<td>Donko</td>
<td>(Koshin)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 2 Proposed Grading Standard for Dry Forest Mushroom [Shiitake]**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Diameter of cap (inches)</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>&gt; 2</td>
<td>Caps no more than 75% open, and thick. Shape perfect.</td>
<td>Caps fully open, and thin.</td>
<td>Flower-like pattern on the cap, which is more than 75% open and thick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>1 - 2</td>
<td>Donko</td>
<td>(Koshin)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

High quality Shiitake mushrooms obviously have a marketing and pricing advantage when it comes to competition. A Shiitake grower should make an effort to produce high quality mushrooms in order to have a profitable product as well as a competitive edge in the market place.

Mau Kuo operates Mushroom Technology Corp. in Naperville, Illinois.

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SHIITAKE: A NEW ASSOCIATION

by Robert J. Feldt, River Country RC&D

People in western Wisconsin are working together to organize a growing and marketing organization for shiitake mushrooms. This group of volunteers have named the new organization SHIITAKE GROWERS ASSOCIATION OF WISCONSIN (SHII-GAW).

People from all over Wisconsin and adjoining states who desire to strengthen their individual and combined efforts of growing and marketing of shiitake mushrooms are invited to become members of this association. The organizational meeting is scheduled for Saturday, September 14, 1985, Eau Claire, Wisconsin. At this meeting the constitution and bylaws will be reviewed, revised and amended and presented for adoption. Additional business to be conducted includes securing charter members and election of officers.

A draft constitution and bylaws have been prepared. If you desire to review these materials prior to the September 14th meeting (location not announced as yet), please send a self-addressed, stamped (39¢) envelope. (A stamped envelope is necessary as no funds for the association are presently available.) Membership dues will be $8 annually.

For more information, contact the River Country RC&D office, 3120 E. Clairemont Avenue, Eau Claire, WI 54701, or by calling (715) 834-9672.

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Figured, cracked caps [Flowered donko] are highly prized mushrooms. [Photo by Mau Kuo.]

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Two silvicultural methods can be used to regenerate your oak forest: 1) clearcutting, and 2) shelterwood cutting. The clearcut method is the easiest and least costly of the two. Using this method requires adequate advance reproduction. This is defined as a minimum of 430 well-distributed oaks per acre (1,663/ha) at least 4.5 ft (1.4 m) tall. Oak stump sprouts that will develop after clearcutting can compensate for shortages in advance reproduction. If the stump is cut low enough to the ground, chances of decay in the new tree can be minimized. One nicely formed stump sprout should be selected and the others removed by age 15 to promote growth and quality.

The number of stumps that can be expected to sprout can be estimated using the advance reproduction guide (Fig. 1) and a tally of the diameter distribution of oaks in the parent stand.

The shelterwood method can be used in an oak stand if advance reproduction is inadequate. Trials indicate that stand basal area should be reduced to around 60 square feet per acre in one or two preparatory cuts to promote growth of advance reproduction. The final cut should usually be accomplished 3 to 5 years after the preparatory cut. Dense understories of shrubs and undesirable tree species are usually present beneath oak stands and should be eliminated before the shelterwood cut. Reducing the understory and herbaceous layers with herbicides just prior to a large acorn crop may increase your chances of success.

If desirable seed sources are not present in your stand, understory control with herbicides, followed by underplanting may be the best solution. The largest oak seedlings available (at least 3/8 inch in diameter at the root collar) should be used. The size of the root system is critical in determining oak survival among the competition after a harvest cut. Stocking rates should be between 500 to 600 seedlings per acre. Avoid planting under large trees. The overstory should be at approximately 60% stocking to allow the seedlings to develop into adequate advance reproduction. The overstory should be removed within 3 years after planting.

Planting after clearcutting can be successful. It should be done during the first year following clearcutting and competition should be controlled.

Many variables are involved in regenerating an oak stand, so the wise landowner should obtain advice from a professional forester. There are many sources of assistance available to the woodland owner. We encourage you to take advantage of these whenever possible. An experienced, trained professional will be able to tell you the best way to manage oaks on your
Figure 1.—Relation between percent of northern red oak stumps with living sprouts and d.b.h. of the parent tree [ages 85 to 115] in southern Wisconsin.

land. Hopefully, your woodlot is getting the treatment it needs and you are getting the returns from your land that you deserve.


Tom Hovey is an Assistant Extension Forester for the Minnesota Agricultural Extension Service.

SHIITAKE GROWERS MEETING

The second annual Shiitake Growers Meeting will be held on Saturday, October 12th. The Growers Meeting provides an excellent chance to get together and exchange ideas. Last year over 50 growers from six different states got together for an all too short afternoon. This year the meeting will begin with a potluck dinner starting at 12:00 noon. An educational seminar will begin at 2 PM and include the following:

** Marketing Shiitake Mushrooms - Governor's Council on Rural Development
** General Mushroom Identification - Field and Forest Products
** 1985 Shiitake Farm Tour in Japan - Forest Resource Center
** Growers Comments

A tour of the controlled environment chamber at the Forest Resource Center will follow the seminar. There will be a $10 fee for all non-subscribers of Shiitake News. Overnight accommodations are available at Mrs. B’s Historic Lanesboro Inn (507) 467-2154. Call or write the Forest Resource Center by October 1st for more information including the meeting location.

SEE US AT THE MINNESOTA STATE FAIR!

Stop by and visit our educational Shiitake display in the North Hall of the Horticultural Building at the Minnesota State Fair. The booth is designed to create an awareness in the general Minnesota public of the financial and biological potentials offered through the cultivation of Shiitake mushrooms. Funds for establishing the educational Shiitake display were provided through a Governor’s Council on Rural Development Marketing Grant.

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John Deere to feature Forest Resource Center in film shown in dealerships across the nation

By Kathy Buzza

This winter farm families across the United States and Canada will have the opportunity to see a film at their local John Deere dealership during John Deere Days that will feature potential new alternative crops that farmers can grow in addition to their other crops. One of the alternative crops featured in the film is shiitake mushrooms, and the film crew and producer were in Lanesboro last Tuesday and Wednesday at the Forest Resource Center and at Mrs. B’s Historic Lanesboro Inn to film the entire shiitake segment.

The film segment will be approximately 11½ minutes of a six minute film dealing with potential new crops of the future. Producer Ken Boltz commented that the film’s opening sequence will show the preparation of shiitake mushrooms in the kitchen at Mrs. B’s and feature Lanesboro farmer Richard Horihan and his wife, Linda, enjoying them as part of their meal in the inn’s dining room. “We wanted to give people a tantalize their taste buds a little,” he laughed.

The rest of the shiitake segment was filmed Wednesday morning at the shiitake log laying yard at the Forest Resource Center. It features Joe Deden, director of the Center, being interviewed on camera regarding shiitake production and shiitake expert Mitch Gilbert of the Forest Resource Center sprinkling inoculated shiitake logs to maintain a 30 percent moisture content. Boltz commented that the shiitake segment of the film is the only portion filmed in the Midwest. Another alternative crop segment filmed in California features the felipe fruit tree, a derivative of the kiwi which originated in New Zealand and produces a fruit that tastes like a cross between a lime and a kiwi fruit. It is relatively easy to grow in a wide variety of soils in the Sun Belt states, he remarked.

A segment filmed in Canada features a dwarf short-season variety of corn, and a section filmed in Oregon is on Meadow foam, a promising oilseed plant similar to the sunbears of the Midwest. The fifth alternative crop included in the John Deere film is crambe, a type of oilseed plant used for industrial purposes, and the segment was filmed in Kentucky.

“What’s nice about shiitake production is that we think a farmer can do this by himself without much expense, using the facilities and equipment he probably already has available to do it...Plus shiitake mushrooms can be grown in a variety of climates, which is not true of many of the other crops featured in the film,” Boltz remarked.

The John Deere Company’s motion picture program became aware of the research being done by the Forest Resource Center on shiitake mushrooms as an alternative crop through a research consultant writing for the John Deere Furrow Magazine. The consultant recently completed an article on the research.

As the research is published in an upcoming issue of the Furrow Magazine, “although the entire film is only six minutes long, its impact is no less important than a feature-length film,” Boltz emphasized. “The film will reach out to a top farmer audience throughout the country, and they retain everything we say.”

“There is a definite interest in alternative crops, especially now with the lower returns in farming. We’ll be doing more of these ‘idea films’ for farmers, so they can look at a film and get new ideas, and perhaps say, ‘I can do that!’ along with their other farming enterprises,” he commented. “We’re looking at this as an ongoing program, featuring different alternative crops next year,” he added.

John Deere and Company began an annual motion picture program in 1934 presented by the company’s U.S. and Canadian farm equipment dealers. The films, shown during the winter months, are of two types. Some are sales films, selling farmers about the new John Deere equipment for sale during the coming year. The other type is non-commercial in nature and is intended to help keep farmers informed on new developments in agriculture, research, marketing and ag sciences affecting farming.

Over 230 informative films have been produced in the past 17 years, with films also produced in Japan, Australia, Poland, Spain, England and other foreign countries dealing with subjects like farm exports, livestock breeds, and the metric system.

The films are part of a program called “Farming Frontiers” and nearly half a million farm family members see these films at dealer meetings each year. The films are also available free of charge through Modern Talking Picture Services libraries to colleges, high schools, 4-H and FFA groups, etc. throughout the year.

Boltz felt the film featuring the shiitake mushroom segment filmed in Lanesboro should be available through Modern Talking Picture Services libraries in about one year. The John Deere Company will also provide the Forest Resource Center with a complimentary copy.

“We’re filming in almost every section of the country each year, but I can’t recall being in southern Minnesota recently with this type of film,” Boltz remarked.

Producer Boltz is from the head Deere and Company office in Milwaukee, Illinois, and the two-person film crew that was at the Forest Resource Center filming the shiitake segment is from Milwaukee. Boltz congratulated that they work with five or six different film crews around the country, depending on the location and nature of the film. Enough 16 mm footage will be shot on the alternative crops film to make a one hour film, but it will be edited to a tight six minutes.

Boltz and the film crew also enjoyed eating shiitake mushrooms last Tuesday evening at Mrs. B’s. They sampled shiitake fixed three different ways, sautéed, fresh on a salad, and grilled. Boltz remarked enthusiastically, “I loved them! I think the flavor is something else. I just wish I could take some back home with me somehow. They were really delicious!”