

'Shroom Boom

These magical mushrooms won't give you a euphoric high, but they'll do wonders for your wellbeing *By Doris Lam*

Mushrooms can do it all. From adding earthy flavour to a risotto to being the secret ingredient behind Mylo, the new luxury vegan leather alternative, fungi have now found their way into skincare products and health supplements. They promise a long list of nutritional, medicinal and beautifying benefits that sound almost too good to be true—so how did the humble mushroom become the latest buzz ingredient in the wellness world?

Using mushrooms in these spaces is a relatively new concept for western cultures, but our ancestors here in the East have been reaping their benefits for centuries. During the Korean Goryeo Dynasty (918-1382 BCE), *Wolfiporia extensa* was listed as one of the medicinal ingredients sent to the Chinese Song Dynasty, while medicinal mushroom species from different regions of Korea were also recorded during the Joseon Dynasty (CE 1454). In China, alchemist Tao Hongjing also used the kidney-shaped *lingzhi* mushroom, also known as *reishi*, as early as the 5th century. Now a holy grail ingredient in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), *lingzhi* is believed to promote healthy ageing, lower your risk of cancer

and help prevent other diseases. But these benefits come with a cost: *lingzhi* supplements can set you back anywhere from a few hundred Hong Kong dollars to more than HK\$10,000, while a whole head of the dried mushroom will likely cost you a small fortune: in 2018, auction house Hong Kong Fuxi listed a 1.8kg *lingzhi* with a starting price of HK\$4,800,000.

Scientists seem reluctant to put a number on how many different mushroom species there are; reports refer to anything between thousands and millions. But this range is part of what inspired Chamani Wong, co-founder of Beams Coffee, a Hong Kong- and Sydney-based biodegradable coffee capsule brand that incorporates mushrooms into their recipes. “The mushrooms we use are known as adaptogenic mushrooms,” she says. “When consumed, they enhance our body's ability to adapt to our environment and stressors. It's almost like these plants have their own intelligence, because they work with our body depending on what's going on inside.”

Founded in 2019, Wong started Beams with her siblings Herman and Sharon, and brother-in-law, Stephen. The idea was sparked



IMAGE: CREATIV STUDIO HEINEMANN/GETTY IMAGES



Hong Kong and Australia-based siblings (from left) Sharon, Herman and Chamani Wong co-founded Beams Coffee

when Herman was diagnosed with cardiac arrhythmia after a prolonged period of burnout. “We were at a Sydney cafe discussing Herman’s heart condition,” Wong says. “The idea was to use superfoods to create a coffee that can be customised depending on what people need in their daily health routine.”

Currently, Beams sells five different mushroom-infused coffee formulas on its website, named mainly after what the product can help with: Mind, Energy, Beauty, Immunity and anxiety-relieving Sage. Each blend is infused with adaptogenic mushrooms: “*reishi* for immunity support, cordyceps for

recovery, tremella for protecting the skin and lion’s mane for brain health,” Wong says.

The popularity of mushroom supplements is also on the rise. In the past year, Google searches for mushrooms rose 22.4 per cent. More specifically, searches for turkey tail mushroom supplements rose 52 per cent, while searches for *reishi* mushroom supplements jumped up 55.5 per cent, according to trend analysis company Spate.

The mushroom boom goes beyond internal health. Beauty companies such as Fresh, Herbivore, Origins, Tata Harper, Hanacure and Lush have also honed in on the trend, introducing mushroom-formulated skincare.

“For topical beauty products, mushrooms may have an antioxidising effect on the skin,” said Beatrice Ho, co-founder of Mushroom-X, a Hong Kong-based social enterprise that studies fungal technology. The science behind incorporating mushrooms into skincare has been proven by numerous studies in the last few years. Citing high anti-inflammatory benefits, antioxidant levels, antibacterial properties and moisturising effects, mushrooms are the ideal ingredient to promote skin renewal and increase skin elasticity while also treating a wide range of skin concerns, from dryness and eczema.

Much like how kale and CBD have had their moments in the spotlight, mushrooms are the new up-and-coming stars who are slowly but surely on the rise. Unlike CBD’s too-cool-for-school reputation, however, mushrooms are the ugly ducklings that everyone knew about but whose potential they didn’t recognise until much, much later. Mushrooms, this is your moment: it’s time to step out of the darkness.

3 ways to incorporate mushrooms into your daily routine



PAT IT ON

Made with Japanese red *reishi* extract and ginseng extract, the Reishi Solution Custom Blended Eye Cream by MTMLabo promises to promote cell renewal and minimise signs of ageing around the eyes. mtmlabo.com



DRINK UP

To strengthen hair, skin and nails, try Beams’s Beauty Nespresso-compatible coffee pods. The blend contains tremella mushroom extract, which helps stimulate enzymes that aid with anti-ageing and improve overall skin health. beamscoffee.com

REPAIR JOB

Formulated to combat signs of stress-induced ageing, such as worry lines, dull skin and redness, Dr Dennis Gross Stress Rescue Super Serum contains three different mushroom extracts—maitake mushroom, *Cordyceps sinensis* fungus and chaga mushroom—as well as niacinamide, the herb ashwagandha and goji berry. sephora.com