



Mushrooms in the forest

Mushroom pickers employed by Copasize ... the fresh mushrooms they collect are being served at the best restaurants around the world.

It is a little known fact that wild mushrooms occur naturally in and around the Mondi and Mondi Shanduka Newsprint pine forests. One of these mushroom species is *Boletus edulis*, a delicacy that is highly prized in the best restaurants around the world. Commonly referred to as the 'Porcini', these mushrooms are widely used to flavor soups, pastas and risottos.

The *Boletus edulis* is the fruiting body of a fungus that attaches to the underground roots of pine trees. The picking season in South Africa (summer and autumn) coincides with the off-season in the Northern Hemisphere, and global demand is typically high during this time.

Copasize (Pty) Ltd is a company established by Mondi Zimbe, the small business development arm of Mondi, together with World Wide Fungus (Pty) Ltd, an experienced packager and distributor of

mushroom products. The aim of Copasize is to create value through the picking, processing and distribution of the wild mushrooms harvested from Mondi's forestry operations, as well as create much needed employment opportunities in rural forestry environments.

Wild mushroom harvesting occurs in the KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga and is a challenging operation. The *Boletus edulis* mushroom blooms for a very short period and spotters are used daily to find signs of the often unpredictable mushroom growth. Once a boom is identified, pickers are deployed into the area early in the morning to carefully collect the mushrooms. Harvested mushrooms are then brought back to packaging plants in Bulwer or Amsterdam.

Although the lower quality mushrooms can be processed and sold dried or frozen the most valuable are fresh mushrooms. Fresh mushrooms are packaged into small wooden crates and sent in refrigerated vehicles to distribution centres for overnight flights to end consumers. Although the local market for wild mushrooms is growing,



the bulk of the fresh South African *Boletus edulis* mushrooms are exported into Europe and North America. This means that wild mushrooms harvested by community workers in Mondi's forests may find themselves on the very best restaurant tables in New York or Paris within a few days.

Copasize aims to harvest 50 000 kgs of mushrooms per season, and currently employs around 50 seasonal pickers with seven permanent employees. Copasize is confident that there is significant opportunity to expand, which is good news for local economic development in our rural forestry environment. ▲