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By Christine Lyon - Richmond Review

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Alyssa Laing used to be a skeptic when it came to natural medicine. She would go on "kicks," trying out various minerals or fatty acids, but a lack of tangible effects always made her give up.

She changed her tune after someone offered her an herbal supplement extracted from a Japanese mushroom.

"I was blown away by how good I felt," she said.

Impressed with her increased energy and reduced stress, Laing started working for the Richmond-based distributor of the Mikei Red Reishi product.

She says Red Reishi mushrooms were once extremely rare and available only to emperors and royalty in ancient times.

"It was worth its weight in gold, just because it was so hard to get," she said. "Until 30 years ago, it was considered impossible to cultivate it. Nobody was able to do it for centuries, and then the Japanese had a breakthrough."

Mikei Red Reishi is produced by third generation mycologists in Japanese greenhouse. The growers use the traditional wood log method, whereby fungi is injected into logs, which are then buried in the soil for about a year until the mushrooms mature.

Traditionally people boiled the tough, woody mushroom and drink it as a bitter tonic. Mikei Red Reishi comes in concentrated swallowable capsules.

Taken once a day, Laing says the adaptogenic herb will bring the body into a balanced state. People tend to feel benefits within a week, she says.

"One of the things you notice is your energy levels are awesome... It's just a really nice smooth balance of energy because it helps balance your blood sugar," she said. "One morning you'll wake up and it's just a little easier to get out of bed; you feel like you had a more restful night's sleep."

Some experience increased mental clarity and no longer have to reach for that mid-afternoon energy drink to get through the day,

Laing says the product also reduces stress because it regulates the release of cortisone and adrenaline.

In the long term, Red Reishi is known to detoxify the liver, which can get overloaded with food additives, alcohol, pesticides, and toxins in the air.

Since Laing started taking Mikei Red Reishi three years ago, she has come down with fewer colds and flus.

"If you do get it, it's a two-day watered down version of the seven-day terrible thing that somebody else has."

She warns that not all Red Reishi products are alike. Most packages labelled simply "reishi" contains the less-effective brown or black variety. And some Red Reishi might be sourced from countries that do not adhere to proper growing conditions.

"If you buy a product that is simply ground up reishi, you may as well swallow a sawdust capsule because it's not going to be absorbable by the body," Laing said.

The Mikei product is harvested, boiled and the essence is extracted. Earmarks of quality are a dark colour, bitter taste and endorsement by the Japan Reishi Association.

Red reishi has been popular in the Asian community for years and is ranked the "No. 1 superior herb" in the first book of traditional Chinese medicine written some 4,000 years ago.

Mushrooms are just emerging in Western culture, said Laing, but the Mikei product is now available in dozens of specialty health stores.

Laing will showcase Mikei Red Reishi at the 18th annual Vancouver Wellness Show April 30 to May 2 at the Vancouver Convention and Exhibition Centre.

Wellness Show



Alyssa Laing shows off a Red Reishi mushroom grown in Japan.

Christine Lyon