

MEDICINAL MUSHROOMS

IMMC9 in Palermo

An idyllic venue was chosen to host the 9th 'International Medicinal Mushroom Conference' – the bay of Palermo in the north west of Sicily. From 24 to 28 September the participants were treated to sunshine, superb food and a relaxed ambiance, offset by a rather top-heavy programme of presentations.

By Magda Verfaillie, Mycelia

Local traders recounted how good life has become on the island since the power exerted by the Cosa Nostra (the local mafia) has declined. Professor Guiseppe Venturella from the University of Palermo was in charge of organising the practical aspects of the conference, under the watchful eye of Solomon Wasser, who can justly be labelled the 'godfather' of the IMMC.

The theme: 'Advances in Medicinal Mushroom Science: Building Bridges between Western and Eastern Medicine' was clearly a popular one, as no fewer than 250 participants from 45 countries attended the event. An estimated third of these were researchers, with a strong delegation from the Far East. The remainder were predominantly companies with a commercial interest in the production, processing and use of medicinal mushrooms.

The conference venue – Splendid Hotel La Torre – certainly did its name justice and offered a spectacular panoramic view of the bay. There were two conference rooms available and the foyer was used for the commercial stands and the posters. The largest of the conference spaces hosted the ple-

nary sessions in the morning and the two parallel sessions in the afternoon.

Current status

The conference kicked off calmly on Monday morning with three interesting keynote speeches. Dr. Wasser first brought everyone up to speed on the status of the recognition of the medicinal properties of mushrooms in the West. All the research performed into the substances contained in mushrooms point to a medicinal effect, but more clinical studies and double blind tests are necessary to validate this and provide hard evidence. He was followed by Dr. Cheung who explained more about his research into non-digestible carbohydrates in mushrooms that play a prebiotic role in the human digestive system. The third speaker was Dr. Van Griensven on pain relief using preparations of mushrooms.

In addition to this, the programme offered a very broad palette of subjects on medicinal mushrooms, divided into eleven themes: Social media; Biodiversity and taxonomy; Molecular systematics and phylogeny; Evidence-based medicine and trials; Animal health; Medicinal values and pharmacology; Human clinical trials; Potential values and new developments; Science and biotechnology; Quality control and regulations; Industrial production and marketing, technology of cultivation and fermentation.

A barrage of presentations

The remainder of the programme was, albeit with the very best intentions, top-heavy: the speakers in the afternoon sessions took to the stage in such rapid succession that it was virtually impossible to digest all the information before the next presentation started. It would have been a better idea to devote more time to a limited selected of speakers who could give more in-depth details of their research projects. The number of presentations on subjects that did not correlate with the medicinal aspects of mushrooms could also have been



All the participants of IMMC9 as group.



The culinary side of this edition of the IMMC couldn't be faulted.

Madre Yvonne networking with Christelle Chevalier.

somewhat reduced. Despite this, a wealth of valuable information was shared with the audience. I have learned that many of the substances that occur in fungi, and the beta-glucans in particular, have a beneficial effect on human and animal health. Mushrooms appear to be an inexhaustible source of pharmacologically interesting substances: some help boost the body's immune system, some aid recovery after chemotherapy treatment, others have an antibacterial or antioxidant effect, work as an anti-inflammatory agent or enhance brain activity.

No one attends a conference purely for its scientific content of course. And nothing helps promote networking more than a pleasant and relaxing atmosphere. This was certainly true here, as with temperatures averaging 24°degrees Celsius it was divine to sit out on the terrace with its stunning vistas during the reception, lunch and coffee breaks and meet new people or strengthen existing ties. It was not however such a joy for the exhibitors, who saw the audience run past the stands to soak up as much of the autumn sunshine as possible... The same applied to the poster sessions, which failed to attract a lot of interest. The presentation method was also partly to blame, no



Commercial stands at the fair of IMMC9.

matter how innovative it was: the 'Electronic Poster' concept meant the e-posters could only be displayed on four screens, which restricted the possibilities to consult the posters.

The conference dinner was delightful: refined Italian cuisine in the exclusive 'Restaurante Alle Terrazze', an elegant, nineteenth century former bathing establishment with an amazing waterfront location. Finally, on Thursday, conference attendees had the chance to join a group excursion to Palermo, which was enjoyed by all.

The 10th IMMC in 2019 will again be organised in China. After all, it is a jubilee edition that rightly belongs at home in the cradle of the production and use of medicinal mushrooms. ←