Fujian Province (福建省) has the reputation of being the largest production base for edible mushrooms in China. Within 11 years, the output, production value and export value of edible mushrooms in Fujian has topped that of other provinces. It is also active in the research and development of edible mushrooms.

Fujian began producing edible mushrooms as far back as the 1930s. However, a systematic research on the resources and technology for production only began in the early 1960s, during which wild mushroom varieties were collected. It was only in the 1980s that edible mushroom production finally took off in a big way, with the development of a technique to cultivate mushrooms using fungal hypha. This new industry became especially important for farmers in the countryside, who saw it as a means to increase food supply. A few major varieties of mushroom began to dominate the local market (see table). In 1987, the yield of dried *Lentinus edodas* Sing from Fujian Province reached 23,000 tons, overtaking Japan to become the world leader.

Eventually, further development in production technology led to the regional production of mushrooms. Mushrooms which grow on wood have been cultivated in the mountainous regions of Longyan (龙岩), Sanming (三明), Nanping (南平) and Ningde (宁德) where forests are abundant. Meanwhile, mushrooms which grow on compost have been cultivated on the coastal plains of Fuzhou (福州), Putian (莆田), Quanzhou (泉州) and Zhangzhou (漳州), where this has become a key industry in the countryside.

In 1996, the total output reached 380 thousand tons, valued at 3.1 billion yuan (US$0.4 billion). This amount accounted for 17% of the total agricultural output in Fujian. Thus, the industry has helped to develop the rural economy and to augment the income of farmers in the province. Statistics revealed that 3 million laborers have been employed who are indirectly or directly engaged in the edible mushroom industry.

Edible mushrooms produced in Fujian have become the major agricultural product for export to America, Canada, Japan and Germany. In 1996, the export value was recorded at US$220 million. Meanwhile, taxes obtained directly from the edible mushroom industry amounted to 40 million yuan (US$4.8 million).
The sheep industry in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, has been threatened by the spread of Ovine Johne's Disease (OJD), a wasting disease in sheep. The causative agent of OJD is intestinal bacteria similar to those responsible for causing tuberculosis and leprosy in humans. As a consequence, thousands of sheep producers have been denied access to markets in Queensland, Victoria, western Australia and southern Australia. Some states have imposed a ban on the interstate movement of sheep from NSW without the ‘Monitored Negative Status' under the market assurance program. It has been estimated that more than 180 flocks in NSW have already been infected with OJD.

After months of impasse between the state and federal governments over farmers’ compensation in a national eradication program endorsed in August 1997 during a meeting of state and Commonwealth agricultural ministers, state and federal ministers of agriculture have recently agreed to implement the eradication program immediately. The minister for primary industries and energy, Mr. John Anderson, with the support of the Agriculture and Resource Management Council of Australia and New Zealand (ARMCANZ), has decided to base the eradication program on the report given by Mr. Denis Hussey, a principal of the ACIL agricultural consultancy firm, and Professor Roger Morris, a renown veterinary epidemiologist and animal health economist from Massey University, New Zealand. The two experts had been commissioned to review the case for an immediate Commonwealth commitment to the eradication program. The Hussey/Morris report recommended the following program over two consecutive three-year periods:

- scientific evaluation of property destocking and implementation of alternative management strategies with assistance;
- enhancement of surveillance, zoning and control activities and provision of better market assurance activities;
- development of research to improve the detection of infected flocks, to better understand the epidemiology of OJD and to review the role of vaccines.

The proposed program will be managed and further developed by the Australian Animal Health Council (AAHC), with the federal government providing leadership, coordination and funding for an interim monitoring surveillance and research program. ARMCANZ has already taken steps to implement an interim monitoring and surveillance program to obtain critical information about the current spread and distribution of OJD. A business plan will be developed as the next step toward the implementation of the program. The plan will be discussed at the next ARMCANZ meeting to be held in July 1998. Any activities carried out after July will be based on the plan. The eradication program is now open to review and acceptance by the sheep industry.

The program will bring some relief to sheep farmers, who in the past have refused to test their flocks for OJD because of the impasse. Veterinary costs for treating the disease is extremely high. For an average-sized flock of 2500 sheep, the estimated cost for testing is A$5000 (US$3340). Testing involves obtaining blood samples from a minimum of 400
El Nino to Hamper Asia's Economic Growth

The conclusion of the four-day Asian Regional Meeting on El Nino Related Crises, held recently in Bangkok, was that the El Nino weather phenomenon that is currently affecting Asia will probably be the most significant climatic event of this century. Coupled with the regional economic crisis, El Nino is very likely to slow growth and development in Asia over the coming year.

El Nino is the result of a warming of the upper Pacific Ocean which has led to drought and floods in East Asia, greatly affecting the region's agricultural capacity. With more than half of the regional population working in the agricultural sector, and with most countries heavily dependent on agricultural exports, this is expected to have a severe impact on the region's economic competitiveness. The last major occurrence of El Nino, in 1982–83, caused US$8 billion worth of damages. This time around, the costs are expected to be higher.

French Government Funds SGPGIMS

The French government will provide medical funding to the Sanjay Gandhi Post Graduate Institute of Medical Sciences (SGPGIMS) — the first ever French venture into the healthcare sector in India. The funding will cover four major areas mainly in the field of high-tech radio diagnostic, namely intensive care unit, radiotherapy, immunology laboratories and intervention radio diagnosis. The French will send equipment worth some 72 million francs (US$11.7 million) to the institute, and also provide training for doctors in their use and maintenance. Their objective in this venture is to provide medical assistance — in the form of equipment — to develop India's expertise.

A four-member delegation appointed by the French government has evaluated SGPGIMS in terms of its capacity to absorb the latest technology and its infrastructure. Their aim is to study the feasibility of undertaking a large-scale collaborative program with the institute. The delegation was led by Phillippe Domy, director of Acodes co-operation agency for the development of healthcare services development. Apparently, the group had been much impressed with the institute's clinical capabilities and expertise.

Colored Food Gains Popularity in China

Colored food such as brown rice, black beans, black sesame seeds and black edible fungi have gained much popularity recently as some studies have reported that they have a higher nutritional value. Recently, China successfully cultivated a colored wheat and rye hybrid called 'triticale.' It has the superior traits of both wheat and rye such as a stable high-quality yield, a high level of stress tolerance, and a high nutritional value. It contains 16.5% protein (higher than in wheat — 13%, or rye — 11.4%), 1.79% fat, 70.4% starch, 8.04% pentose sugar, and 2.08% cellulose. In addition, the percentage of lysine is very high. 'Triticale' also contains three times more calcium than wheat, and significantly higher levels of selenium, phosphorus and vitamins.

Sheep and an assessment of the farmer's property in terms of its management regime, boundary fences, stock replacement practices and the risk of the spread of the disease from a contaminated flock nearby. Farmers of infected flocks will then face an immediate quarantine for two years, during which destocking of the flock is required to eradicate the disease. Thus far, the best solution is the slaughter of infected animals at the present meat market value of A$15 (US$10) per head.