

# EATER Could California's Wine Country Be the World's Next Great Truffle Region?

**Biodynamic winemaker Robert Sinskey will be wine country's first to harvest black truffles this fall.**

by Rachel Signer Sep 18, 2015

This fall, one of California's pioneering biodynamic winemakers, Robert Sinskey of the namesake Napa and Sonoma vineyards, will be the first to harvest black Périgord (winter) and Burgundy (summer) truffles in the area—two of the most expensive and desired varieties in the world.

In the AVA (American Viticultural Area) of Carneros, Sinskey farms five vineyards (four in Napa and one in Sonoma), spanning nearly 200 acres, producing several biodynamic wines in a style that leans Old World—low-alcohol, less oak. Five years ago, when the American Truffle Company was looking to launch their domestic truffle cultivation program, Robert Sinskey Vineyards, with its ample acreage and focus on biodynamics, was a natural candidate. (Domestically, farmers have successfully cultivated black truffles in Oregon and Washington, and are experimenting with other parts of the country like Tennessee and North Carolina.)

One of the foundational principles of biodynamic winemaking, a philosophy spawned by Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner in the 1920s, is that agriculture should be considered a whole system. A crop, ideally, is never in isolation, but rather grown in a setting amongst not only other crops, but also weeds, bugs, livestock and forest. Biodynamic agriculture is also, by definition, organic—meaning, no chemical pesticides and fertilizers are used.

The American Truffle Company is intent on fostering a domestic truffle market for one main reason: flavor. “Truffles’ quality is almost exclusively determined by the aroma. Truffles behave very much like radioactive material—they have a half-life of between four to five days,” explains Robert Chang, founder of the American Truffle Company. “Meaning, if you dig up a truffle ... the aroma starts dissipating immediately. After four to five days, you only have half of the aroma and the flavor. By the time truffles leave Europe to head to the U.S., they are about three to four days old, so they’ve already lost almost half their aroma and flavor.” Chang imagines a near future in which top American chefs can source their truffles from California, dramatically upping their freshness factor.

The idea to work with Northern California winemakers to cultivate truffles arose in 2000 at a now-annual truffle festival that Chang’s company hosts in the area. One of the event organizers knew of Sinskey and introduced Chang to him. Through Sinskey, Chang says he discovered that biodynamic wineries have an interesting requirement, “they must use at least 10 percent of their lands for something besides growing grapes.” This led him to approach Sinskey with the plan of serving as a guinea pig for the potential of blacktruffle cultivation in wine country.

According to Sinskey, cultivating truffles begins with inoculated



trees—in his case English Oaks and filberts—and a soil management system, ideally in an area that doesn’t have a lot of native trees. Picking a site heavily populated by trees would mean an already rich population of native mycorrhizal bacteria, the spores from which truffles grow, and would pose competition for the newly introduced inoculated saplings. Thusly, grasslands at Robert Sinskey Vineyards was perfect truffle terrain. “It fits in with our overall philosophy, what we consider our perfect circle approach to agriculture,” explains Sinskey. “Everything feeding into something else, making efficient use of open space.”

Now that the five-year truffle incubation period has passed, later this fall Sinskey will attempt to harvest his first truffles. He hopes that one of his Portuguese Water Dogs will be up for the task—a reasonable assumption, given that it’s a relative of the truffle-hunting dogs used in Europe: “... the trainer thinks Phoenix will be the better truffle dog, but Paolo is the more intelligent and food driven. If my guys don’t work out, we will ‘borrow’ an Italian Water Dog.”

Pending a successful harvest, some of Sinskey’s fruits will go to chefs around the country via Chang’s connections. But Sinskey and his wife Maria, who is a chef and cookbook author, also want to take advantage of the truffles for their own purposes. The winery has long had a strong culinary element, and now, following a remodel, the pair is gearing up to launch a broader food program, with cooking classes and guest chef dinners—which, of course, will include their homegrown truffles.

If the California truffle cultivation project proves successful, it could be revolutionary for the state’s culinary scene and beyond. Not only would it reduce the price of truffles—which go for hundreds, or even thousands of dollars, per pound—but it would improve their freshness.

For information: [americantruffle.com](http://americantruffle.com)