

BAY AREA BITES

Truffles for Locavores?

MARIA FINN | JAN 31, 2013



Truffles: Napa and Sonoma Counties may be a hot spot for black truffle cultivation.
Photo: Janna Waldinger/Art & Clarity



Michelin chefs gather to prepare the Truffles & Wine Dinner at La Toque left to right: Marco Gubbiotti of La Bastiglia in Spello, Italy; Nico Chessa of Valentino Restaurant in Santa Monica; Robert Chang, Managing Director of American Truffle Company (producer of the Napa Truffle Festival); Ken Frank of La Toque in Napa; and Michael Tusk of Quince in San Francisco. Photo: Faith Echtermeyer

There is no food on earth that inspires obsession like edible wild mushrooms and the Holy Grail of these are truffles. Out of the thousands of species of truffles, two are prized above all others: the white truffle (Alba madonna) and the black Périgord truffle.

Truffles cost more per ounce than many narcotics. They are auctioned off in markets in France and Italy or traded in back alleys. They are then shipped to chefs around the world who shave them over dishes like pasta or risotto in thin, aromatic slivers for well-heeled patrons. The white truffle costs up to \$3,600 a pound and has not been successfully cultivated. The black Périgord truffle, named for a region in France but often called “a black diamond” costs up to \$2000 a pound has been successfully grown in truffle orchards since the 1800s. Currently, wine producing regions in New Zealand and Australia are also planting and now harvesting black truffles and over 20 other countries have truffle orchards in the works.

Sonoma and Napa may very well be the next major truffle producing regions. This is due to the American Truffle Company. This business was formed by Robert Chang, an engineer from South Bay, and Dr. Paul Thomas, a mycologist from the United Kingdom. They set out to match the science of truffle cultivation with the ideal weather of California wine country. They are working to convince vineyard owners to plant orchards of trees inoculated with truffle spores. The interest is considerable: their town hall meetings in Napa have been sold out and standing room only. One orchard has been planted, four more contracted, and many other grape growers are considering it.

This year they hosted the Third Annual Truffle Festival in the town of Napa on January 18-21 where they rolled out their vision of truffle cultivation. Currently, most black truffles are grown in Europe, but Dr. Paul Thomas explained that black truffles like a climate with winters that range from 30 to 50 degrees and then very sunny summers: California wine country weather. The company provides young oaks and hazelnuts with roots that have been inoculated with truffle spores. They then give support through climatic reports, soil amending tips and irrigation advice.

Robert Chang, co-founder and director of the company, assured future truffle orchard investors that truffle orchards are 7 to 12 times as profitable as vineyards and that the price of truffles will never drop on the world market. This is in part due to the fact that truffles have a very short shelf life, so the less time they have to travel, the better. Robert claims that their business model helps to allay cynicism.

“We offer scientific support in exchange for a share of the harvest. And if growers desire, we will help market the truffles.”

The Truffle Festival helps the company to develop markets with chefs and create more knowledge and demand for truffles among diners. While vineyard owners who would be potential truffle growers needed a little convincing, diners did not. Every event sold out and visitors huddled around a pizza oven at Silver Oak Winery and watched chef Dominic Orsini shave truffles over sheep’s milk ricotta pizza. Later, he served a truffle luncheon, including black truffle and chicory salad with a quail egg croquette.

At Robert Sinskey Vineyards, visitors toured the first truffle orchard planted in Napa, now just a little over a year old. Early adopter Robert Sinskey, who farms biodynamically, admits,

“It’s a gamble. But so are grapes. I might have a truffle orchard one day, or maybe a shady grove to graze my sheep.”

It takes approximately five to seven years for a truffle orchard to start producing, and the one at Robert Sinskey Vineyards was planted in 2010. So to demonstrate how dogs sniff out truffles, a black truffle from Italy was buried into the ground so that Rico (short for Enrico Bacio il Tartufo) the truffle-hunting dog could display his skills at finding it. Rico was born in Italy and is a Lagotto Romagnolo, a breed of water dog that dates back to Etruscan times. Truffle hunting pigs have fallen out of favor because they dig for and eat truffles with such gusto farmers have been known to lose digits when interfering. In Italy they have been outlawed because they damage the tree roots. And so Rico was a celebrity at the truffle festival.

Truffle sniffing dogs are critical to the operation. The best way to know a truffle is ripe and ready to harvest is from the aroma that it gives off. Any harvested before or after this aromatic time will have very little value. Black Périgord truffles contain the chemical compound androstenol, a sex hormone that beckons animals to it. Once unearthed, a truffle only has a short shelf life. According to Ken Frank, owner and executive chef at La Toque,

“After four days, it loses 25 percent of its aroma and flavor. Over the next four days, another 25 percent. And you can’t store truffles,” he explained. “Truffle oil and truffle salt is all chemically made. It’s a steroided-out version of them and a palate killer. Their fleeting nature is an element that makes them special. The art to cooking with truffles is to keep it simple, and let their perfume shine. The challenge is cooking with them and not just shaving them onto stuff.”

This was the bar set for the Saturday night, Truffles and Wine dinner at La Toque Restaurant. Michelin Star Chefs created a truffle-tasting menu that included Fagotelli of Four story Hill Farm Sweetbread and Black Truffle by Michael Tusk at Quince paired with Pinot Noir by Robert Sinskey Vineyards. Even the dessert featured with a truffled mascarpone crepe cake with sherry brown butter sauce by Deborah Yee-Henen at La Toque and Sideshow by Nicole Plue.

On Sunday, Beringer Vineyards hosted a cooking demonstration with Nico Chessa who brought the spirit of his native Italy in the dishes he prepared, like the just-made Kurobuta pork sausage with truffle soft polenta and poached egg. At this lunch, I spoke with Gretchen and Dale Demmin, who traveled from Virginia wine country. They planted a truffle orchard on their farm in collaboration with the American Truffle Company. Gretchen had recently retired from the Army where she worked as a microbiologist. “Mushrooms are the next place we will find an antibiotic or cure. I’m convinced of this,” she explained. “I used to grow medicinal mushrooms, but it just got so hot where I lived, I need to grow underground mushrooms. So I’m making the transition from medicinal to luxury.” Also at the lunch was prospective truffle farmer David Mahaffey, winemaker and partner at Olivia Brion. “A truffle orchard is the sizzle on the steak,” he said “If I can grow world class Pinot Noir with truffles adjacent to them, that’s a great match, and a great story.”

The final event took place at Oxbow Marketplace in Napa, where crowds swamped vendors that each interpreted the truffle in their own way. Ca’ Momi Enoteca had truffled pizza, The Model Bakery served mushroom-truffle bread pudding, Pica Pica Maize Kitchen offered truffled yucca fries and Gott’s Roadside made truffled Niman Ranch sliders. And there were also truffles--both black and white, for sale by the ounce. Visitors all stopped to sniff the truffles: earthy, fruity, musky. Some found them irresistible and wanted to take home their own delicious black diamond.

The writer, Maria Finn, attended this event as a guest of the American Truffle Company.



Rico the truffle hunter with his owner, Bill Collins, a psychologist who works with depressed veterans in the San Francisco Bay area. Rico goes with Bill to work and is also a therapy dog for soldiers with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Photo: Maria Finn



Truffled Mascarpone Crepe Cake with Sherry Brown Butter Sauce Prepared by Deborah Yee-Henen, La Toque, and Nicole Plue, sideshow by Nicole Plue Photo: Faith Echtermeyer



Just made Kurobuta pork sausage with truffle soft polenta and poached egg and shaved truffle. Photo: Maria Finn



Truffles for sale at the Oxbow Marketplace. Photo: Maria Finn