

Hunt on for North Coast truffles

BY JEFF QUACKENBUSH | *Business Journal Staff Reporter* | October 19, 2015



The prospects of delivering highly valued but highly perishable European-style truffles to A-list Bay Area restaurants in hours instead of days has generated excitement in culinary circles about what may come out of the ground among a North Coast vineyard this winter. San Mateo-based American Truffle Company (ATC) partnered with renowned Napa Valley wine producer Robert Sinskey Vineyards in planting an experimental truffle orchard on 1.25 acres adjacent to vines on the Sonoma County side of the Los Carneros district nearly five years ago. The orchard contains a half-acre of Périgord black winter truffles, with spores inoculated via a proprietary process on 67 oak and 47 filbert trees, and three-quarters of an acre of Burgundy black summer truffles on 381 filberts and 94 oaks. ATC recommended those trees and truffle species, vintner Rob Sinskey said. Filberts mature these truffles a little more quickly than oaks but the latter tend to be better producers over time. So, the planting strategy is about hedging the bet, he said.

If the dogs find truffles in Carneros and they're of sufficient size and quality for restaurant needs, it could be a game-changer for fine cuisine in the US, according to Ken Frank, owner of La Toque restaurant in Napa. At this point almost all truffles consumed in US establishments are imported from Europe, or more recently Australia.

"They lose flavor before they rot," Frank said. "They start losing flavor almost from the time they are dug." A key reason truffles shaved onto fine dishes in restaurants near the European truffle orchards have such bolder aroma and flavor is they are much fresher, he said. No matter who is ordering them, truffles arrive in the U.S. likely four to six days after harvest.

And that unique, intense aroma that permeates the room makes the potency of truffles decline, analogous to the half-life of radioactive material, said Robert Chang, president of American Truffle Company. Truffles have an aroma "half-life" of four or five days, losing half their appeal in that time. By eight to 10 days, the pungency has dropped to one-quarter.

So, having a nearby source of an ingredient that costs up to \$1,200 a pound, for Périgord truffles, is a boon, Chang said. American varieties such as Oregon truffles and pecan truffles from Georgia don't have the same culinary kick, so they only command \$50–\$100 a pound.

Attempts to cultivate Périgord and Burgundy truffles have been challenging to date, and white truffles still remain a wild-grown phenomenon. Chang and truffle scientist Paul Thomas, Ph.D., in the United Kingdom in 2007 started the truffle company and just this year had the first commercial harvests in the U.K. and Macedonia, and the Sinskey orchard is reaching the key fifth year of potential viability. Partner orchards are in production in 25 countries.

Truffle cultivation can be culturally and agriculturally compatible with grape growing, Sinskey and Chang said. Sinskey was using the orchard ground for pasturing sheep used for organic management of vineyard cover crops. His vineyard crews have been cross-trained in maintaining the trees as well as vines. However, knowing how the truffle crop is progressing underground isn't as straightforward as it is for winegrapes visible on the vine. Thomas, his half-dozen-person team and their network of Internet-connected sensors in partner orchards monitor temperature and other conditions. And soil is sampled for signs that the desired fungus is growing at the desired rate.

Truffle Dog Company has been doing test runs through the Sinskey orchard and training Sinskey's two Portuguese water dogs — good sense of scent and food-motivated — to find and alert on a trove of truffles.

If a truffle orchard is successful, it could have per-acre net profit better than that of high-end winegrapes, Chang said. It could be \$30,000–\$40,000 an acre for select truffles, versus up to \$10,000 for certain grapes. With the close link between fine food and great wine, other vintners are exploring truffles, including Peju and unnamed others, Chang said.

ATC's Chief Scientist Dr. Paul Thomas on the BBC



American Truffle Company's partner/chief scientist Dr. Paul Thomas (based in the UK) created the highly rigorous scientific methods for truffle cultivation practiced by ATC. He started six years ago with a planting in the UK and has since had harvests with partner orchards in Spain and Australia. This harvest in the UK is significant because it's the first successful commercial UK farmed truffle orchard. It's also significant for ATC because ATC has used identical science and methodologies

in creating and managing truffle orchards with partner growers here in the US. ATC's first US truffle orchard was established two years after the first UK orchard.

With Dr. Thomas' scientific methodologies having been proven in the harsher and more difficult UK climate, ATC's truffle orchards in the US have everything going for them. In fact, all growing signals and regular monitoring results for existing ATC orchards show positive truffle progress.

Forbes

Coming This Winter: The First U.S. Grown Truffle

By Laurie Werner | September 29, 2015

When the sixth edition of the Napa Truffle Festival takes place next January 15-18, the star of the show might be local. After five years of cultivation in an orchard in Napa's Robert Sinskey Vineyards, the first Perigord truffle grown alongside the vines in that California wine region is expected to emerge this winter. And, as Robert Chang, Managing Director of the American Truffle Company which imports European black truffles and supplies the science for orchard owners to grow their own, explains, much is expected from it since a fresh U.S. black truffle is superior to even the best one imported from France.

"The aroma is the most important aspect to a chef," he says, quoting the Truffle Festival's home chef Ken Frank of Napa's La Toque. "And you lose half of that aroma after four or five days, about the time it takes to bring it in from Europe." The truffle's home turf isn't as important, actually, as its age. "The flavor is indistinguishable; it doesn't matter if it's grown in Perigord or Australia or the U.S." says Chang. "Even in Europe, everyone craves truffles from Italy and France but Croatia and Macedonia truffles often get shipped to Italy and claimed as Italian truffles." Those are black truffles. The more intensely flavored and prized white truffles only occur naturally, can't be cultivated and appear only in a narrow region around Alba although astute truffle dogs have also found a local variety growing in Oregon where truffle production has been going on for decades.

"Oregon has four truffle species that are harvested commercially, all of which perform very well in blind comparisons with the European truffles," explains Dr. Charles Lefevre, President and Founder of New



A black Perigord truffle.

World Truffieres, Inc., another company specializing in truffle cultivation, and creator in 2006 of the annual Oregon Truffle Festival. Lefevre admits that due to harvesting problems, Oregon truffles initially had an inferior reputation but quality has improved dramatically due to the location skills of the trained truffle dogs. "Part of the original purpose of the Oregon Truffle Festival was to carry out the redemption of Oregon truffles," says Lefevre. "We crossed a major threshold toward that goal last winter when the prices we received for selling Oregon truffles actually exceeded the prices we paid to buy Perigord truffles."

Whether the truffles coming up in Napa will match or exceed that success is a discovery probably years away. But Lefevre knows of several orchards in Napa and neighboring Sonoma County that are also involved in truffle production and could also bear their first results this winter. Others already have on a small scale. "I believe that truffle farming in Napa and Sonoma, as well as many other counties in California has a bright future, and that truffles will make a fine complement to the wine industry," says Lefevre. "It's just a matter of time before the industry flourishes all over North America."