

Enthusiasts prepare for 3rd annual Napa Truffle Festival

ROSEMARIE KEMPTON Jan 7, 2013

Truffles, the rare and delectable fungi — not to be confused with the chocolate candy that shares their name — have been shrouded in myth and mystery for nearly 4,000 years. The ancients thought they came from the ground after lightning struck the Earth.

Prized by Egyptians, they were eaten in goose fat. Greeks used them for therapeutic purposes, believing that they gave eternal health to body and soul. Romans viewed them as an aphrodisiac.

Truffles, also known as “witches’ fare,” nearly disappeared during the Middle Ages because the church thought they were the creation of the devil, but their popularity returned during the Renaissance.

In modern times truffles, the most expensive food in the world, have been sought after for culinary purposes. Many have been shipped to buyers across the globe from where they’ve traditionally been grown: France, Spain and Italy.

But that is beginning to change. Recently, truffles have been cultivated in countries around the world including Australia, South Africa, Canada and the United States.

One day Napa Valley may become as well known for its truffles as it now is for its fine wine. With this possibility in mind, some local landowners are adding truffle orchards to their vineyard properties.

Prospective truffle cultivators, as well as those who love to eat the aromatic tuber, are gearing up for the third annual Napa Truffle Festival next week at the Westin Verasa hotel, adjacent to Oxbow Public Market, from Jan. 18-21.

According to Ken Frank, executive chef and owner of La Toque restaurant at the Westin, black truffles are currently priced at \$800 a pound, wholesale. His restaurant, which has a seasonal truffle menu, is hosting the festival.

“It will be wonderful to get our truffles fresh from Carneros in a few years rather than having them shipped in,” Frank said. Presented by American Truffle Company, this festival highlights the black winter Perigord truffle, *Tuber*



Silver Oak Cellars winery chef Dominic Orsini prepared this frisée salad of black truffles, local foraged mushrooms, egg croquette and crispy potatoes for a cooking demonstration taped at Tout Suite Social Club for the upcoming Napa Truffle Festival. J.L. Sousa/Register

melanosporum (aka “black diamond”).

Leading truffle cultivation experts and scientists, special guests from the food and wine world, and internationally renowned Michelin-starred chefs will come together to discuss, examine, probe, prepare, demonstrate and, finally, pair truffles with wines to feast upon for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Among the speakers are Coleman Andrews, the internationally known food writer and editor; Dr. Paul Thomas, chief scientist for American Truffle Company; David Campbell, past president of San Francisco Mycological Society; and Robert Chang, managing director of American Truffle Company.

Chefs traveling to the festival include Michael Tusk, executive chef and owner of Quince and Cologna restaurants in San Francisco; Nicola Chessa, executive chef of Valentino Restaurant in Santa Monica; and Marco Gubbiotti, executive chef at La Bastiglia in Spello, Spain.

Activities for this year’s festival include a truffle orchard tour with Rico, “the wonder dog,” on hand to sniff things out and a wild mushroom forage excursion with truffle and edible mushroom expert David Campbell.

The festival will conclude on Monday, Jan. 21, with a marketplace set up at the Oxbow Public Market.

For information: napatrufflefestival.com.