

European truffles coming to Carneros

By MIKE TRELEVEN | Oct 12, 2010

Napa Valley winery is not just about winegrapes anymore.

Soon truffles, an aromatic food delicacy, will be on the Carneros District's agricultural menu.

Growing the high-end edible mushroom is beginning to take off in California. Prices of truffles can range from \$100 per ounce to more than \$600 per ounce.

Robert Sinskey Vineyards will be planting two acres of truffles — the winter perigord and summer burgundy — both of which are also grown in France.

Vineyard growers are looking at truffles as a secondary crop that can be as lucrative as — and sometimes more lucrative than — winegrapes.

This trend has been occurring in Europe for several years, with winegrape growers ripping out less productive vines and planting trees that nurture truffle growth in the soil, according to Robert Chang, of the American Truffle Company.

Robert Sinskey Vineyards has partnered with the American Truffle Company to cultivate the underground mushroom in the Carneros District.

The bare piece of ground near the vineyard was being used to pasture cattle. "We chose this site because it has the right soil characteristics (to produce truffles)," Chang said.

"The truffle orchard seems to be a good opportunity to grow another high value crop while increasing the diversity of our ranch," Debby Zygielbaum, Sinskey's vineyard manager, said.

The tree that has proven best for hosting truffles is the English oak, according to Chang. There are several varieties of oaks as well as filberts that can be planted to start growth of the underground fungus.



An aromatic cooking delicacy, truffles can fetch between \$100 and \$600 per ounce. Submitted photo

Chang said his company is negotiating with a number of vineyard owners in Napa Valley about planting trees to cultivate truffles.

It will take between four to seven years to get a truffle harvest from the young sapling trees.

The delicacy will be rooted out by specially trained dogs. Initially Portuguese water dogs will be used to sniff out the mushrooms on the Sinskey property.

"Europe has met its match with Napa Valley wines and now they will meet their match when it comes to truffles," said Holly Krassner, the winery's communications spokeswoman.

The truffle orchard is located at the winery's Scintilla Sonoma Vineyard — a stone's throw from the Napa County line.

"As part of our biodynamic certification, we are required to keep 10 percent of each ranch in something other than grapes," Zygielbaum said. The orchard will be planted in about a month.

"Truffles are a super secret crop that is invisible to the eye, Zygielbaum. "It is nice to do something other than winegrapes. And it is nice to produce another high-valued crop."

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