

Truffles From the Wine Country?

Hopeful vintners team with scientists to add 'black diamonds' to their reds and whites

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We're standing in a truffle orchard on a tract of hilly vine-covered property owned by Robert Sinskey Vineyards in the Carneros region, which stretches across parts of southern Napa and Sonoma. Sheep cluster in the shade in one field and around us are plots planted with grape varieties popular in Alsace — riesling, gewurztraminer, pinot blanc, pinot gris — but at our feet, literally, are the roots of young trees that may one day produce a treasure more often associated with southwestern France and Provence: *Tuber melanosporum*, the black Périgord truffle, one of the world's great gastronomic rarities.

Truffles are the fruiting bodies of a number of different subterranean tubers. They grow out of mycelia, a weblike network of thread-like filaments that have a symbiotic relationship with the roots of trees — most famously oaks, but also hazel, pine, beech, poplar, birch, and other kinds as well. The most celebrated truffles are the black Périgords and their more fragrant counterpart the white (or beige) *Tuber magnatum*, the most appreciated of which come from Italy's Piedmont region.

But these two species, and dozens of other ones, grow in other parts of the world as well. More are being discovered all the time, in fact. Not all of these were put there by nature, though. The rarity of truffles, and their correspondingly lofty prices — the best fresh white ones sell for more than \$3,500 a pound, the best fresh blacks for up to \$2,000 — stems from the fact that they are mostly found in the wild. Because they're not visible, as wild mushrooms are, and because there is no way to predict where they will appear or which specific trees will host them, they are hunted with the help of pigs or dogs who can smell them through the ground cover. Pigs don't need to be trained (they love the scent of truffles, which apparently resembles that of hogs), but have the unfortunate habit of eating what they find; dogs must be brought up to seek truffles, but generally don't eat them. (The most popular truffle dog in Italy is a curly-haired mid-sized retriever called the langotto romagnolo, or lake dog from Romagna.)

Farmers have been trying to cultivate black truffles at least since the early 1800s. One Joseph Talon, from Apt in the Vaucluse, in Provence, had the idea of gathering acorns that had fallen from oaks around which truffles had been found



and planting them in fresh ground in the hopes that some of the older trees' magic would eventually find its way into the new soil. Reportedly, after some 40 years or so, truffles were found around his new trees.

The process was refined over the years — it isn't the acorns but the spores that grow underground that are the key — and by the early 20th century, almost 200,000 acres of truffles were under cultivation in France. The agricultural labor force was decimated by World War I and the advent of industrialization, which drew young farmers away from the fields to the factories, and truffle orchards were abandoned. This was fine with experienced truffle hunters, because the fewer of these "black diamonds" (as they have been called) there were, the more they could be sold for.

Today, however, truffles are being cultivated in many parts of the world, including Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and... California. To say that they are being cultivated, though, means that potentially hospitable trees are being planted and the ground inoculated with truffle spores in the hopes that some will grow. Very few have yet appeared anywhere, and the process takes time. How much time nobody is exactly sure.

Rob Sinskey planted his orchard about three years ago, in partnership with the American Truffle Company. Robert Chang, who holds degrees in the seemingly unrelated field of electrical engineering, works with environmental

scientist Paul Thomas, the lead researcher and managing director of British-based Mycorrhizal Systems Ltd., who works with truffle growers, both actual and potential, on four continents.

To date, the Sinskey orchard consists of about 600 three- to four-foot-high infant trees, alternating English oaks and hazels, growing up out of black plastic, which will potentially produce both *Tuber melanosporum* and the so-called summer or Burgundy truffle, *Tuber aestivum*, another variety of black truffle, less expensive and considerably less flavorful and aromatic than its Périgordian sibling. The tour of Sinskey's property is part of the third annual Napa Truffle Festival, held Jan. 18 through Jan. 21, with headquarters at the Westin Verasa hotel in Napa — also the home of truffle-loving chef Ken Frank's well-regarded (and Michelin-starred) restaurant La Toque. The festival, which included talks on the science and economics of truffle cultivation, winery lunches, a mushroom foraging expedition, and cooking demo, and a truffle-themed day at Napa's Oxbow Public Market (and an 8:15 a.m. keynote speech by yours truly), drew about 500 attendees — everyone from food bloggers to entrepreneurs who have already cultivated truffles or are planning to do so. The centerpiece of the weekend was an extravagant black truffle dinner at La Toque, cooked by Ken Frank, Michael Tusk of the superb Quince in San Francisco, Nicola Chessa from the first-rate Valentino in Santa Monica, and Marco Gubbiotti, imported from La Bastiglia in Spello, in Italy's Umbria region.

The meal began with Gubbiotti's sphere of raw beef, steak tartare-like, mixed with truffles and formed around a soft egg yolk. Next came Frank's truffled Loch Duart salmon cooked in duck fat with braised cabbage and hedgehog mushrooms. Everything was excellent, but Tusk's black fagotelli (a sort of ravioli) stuffed with truffles and ground sweetbreads was the standout. Chessa provided an elegant variation of chicken cordon bleu — speck-wrapped quail with ubraico del Veneto cheese and black truffle risotto. Dessert, by La Toque's pastry chef, Deborah Yee-Henen, and confectioner Nicole Plue, was a truffled mascarpone crêpe cake with sherry brown butter sauce. The standout wines were Robert Sinskey 2008 Pinot Gris (from the vineyards where the truffle trees are planted) and 2004 Luigi Einaudi Barolo from Piedmont's white truffle country. The truffles included in all the dishes, incidentally, were also from Italy — from the region of Norcia, in Gubbiotti's home of Umbria. There were no Napa Valley truffles at the Napa Valley Truffle Festival for a simple reason: So far there are no Napa Valley truffles.

Nobody can say for sure how many of the trees will produce truffles or how many they might potentially produce, and nobody is sure how long it will take. They could start appearing this year, or it could take... well, who knows? Winemaker Larry Turley of Turley Wine Cellars on California's Central Coast planted 2,600 spore-innoculated hazel trees eight years ago, with the help of Charles Lefevre of New World Truffières, the American Truffle Company's competitor. So far, he apparently hasn't harvested any.

Rob Sinskey isn't worried. He thinks there's a good chance that truffles will grow here — Chang and Thomas regularly monitor the development of mycelia in the orchard, with promising results thus far — but says he's not particularly worried if they don't appear. "At worst," he says, "we'll have nice shade trees for our sheep."

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