

SAVOR THIS™

Fall/Winter 2012 Volume 4 Issue 3 A publication of The American Institute of Wine & Food®



The Primal Appeal of Fresh Truffles

What's new at AIWF
The Gift of Membership
Holiday Entertaining
Tips & Recipes

AIWF Chapter Happenings



Chef Ken prepping a truffle dish (photo by Eric Risberg)

The Primal Appeal of Fresh Truffles

BY CHEF KEN FRANK, EXECUTIVE CHEF/OWNER LA TOQUE – NAPA



Chef Ken Frank cleaning truffles in his kitchen

There is simply no other food to rival the fresh truffle. I have yet to find words to easily describe the aroma and flavor of truffle. It's intoxicating, both subtle and powerful at the same time. Truffle has an appeal that is almost primal. Maybe we share a snippet of DNA with the pig.

When I started cooking in Los Angeles in the early seventies, canned truffles were common in the best French kitchens, Chefs slavishly copying the classic dishes that called for them. But the price just didn't seem worth it. Colleagues who had cooked with fresh ones in France insisted that if I had ever smelled a fresh truffle, which could perfume an entire kitchen, I would understand. So the quest began.

Cooking at Club Elysée, in the Winter of 1977, I heard about an Italian in Sacramento who was importing fresh black truffles. I ordered a pound, flew to Sacramento, picked up a car and drove to Corti Brothers. Little did I know then that Darryl Corti was exactly the man to point me in the right direction. He made sure I left with a few great bottles of wine too. Truffles in hand, I headed to visit my cousins in Chico where we stored the truffles overnight in a container with fresh whole eggs. The next morning we made omelets with fresh truffle and I was hooked. To this day I know of no



Jean-Charles Boisset leads a song and toast for the Truffle Lunch at Raymond Vineyards

better advice than to keep truffles with eggs. The amount of truffle flavor and perfume they absorb through the pores in the shell is simply a miracle of nature.

Truffles are the fruiting body of a fungus that grows underground in a partnership with the roots of a host tree. While there are many species of truffles, white and black, only a few are considered to be of great culinary im-

portance. It's tempting to try and rank them but I find it better to appreciate each for their own distinctive attributes. To keep them straight it is vital to use the latin names for the different species.

The rarest of all, the *Tuber magnatum pico*, is commonly called a white truffle or Alba truffle. It is still only hunted in the wild as efforts to cultivate it have so far been unsuccessful. It is found only in a very small geographical range from Piemonte down through Umbria and east into Croatia. It ripens in the fall from October through early January. It is the most pungent of the truffles with a sharp, somewhat vegetal leeky garlicky aroma. Invariably shaved raw over risotto, pasta, pizza or carpaccio, the sheer power of the perfume from a good specimen is amazing.

There are two important black truffles. *Tuber melanosporum*, commonly known as the black winter truffle or Perigord truffle, is the classic black truffle of French Cuisine. It is found in the wild in France and Italy, in a much broader range than the white truffle, but most now come from cultivated plantations. The first black winter



Truffles & Wine Dinner – inside-out – at La Toque (photo by Faith Echtermeyer)

truffles begin to ripen before Christmas, but the heart of the season runs from mid-January to early March. It packs a little less "punch", the flavor is less sharp and vegetal than the white truffle. I find it more earthy and there's a subtle sweetness in the aroma of the best ones. Black truffle is often cooked into dishes, most famously Paté de Foie Gras and under the skin of a chicken where it infuses its flavor into the meat. It too can be shaved raw over foods to great effect. Unlike the white truffle, I find it lends itself to both sweet and savory dishes. It makes terrific ice cream. Truffle ice cream can be simple perfection, in the same way as vanilla.

The other black truffle of note goes by two latin names. *Tuber uncinatum*, or Burgundy truffle and *Tuber aestivum*, referred to as a summer truffle, are in fact the same. They fruit in the fall, their season going well into December. They have a black outer shell and a light brown interior with the distinctive veining pattern that you find in all truffles. This species has made a comeback in recent years due to the

remarkable success in cultivation. The flavor is similar to the black Winter truffle, but much less pronounced. They typically fetch about a quarter to a third of the price of *Tuber melanosporum*.

Cultivation techniques have made great strides, particularly in the last decade. Both species of black truffle discussed here are now grown around the world. Once a suitable location is identified, the secret is to scientifically create soil and other growth conditions that are conducive for truffle growth and then plant trees, often oaks or hazelnuts, whose root systems have been inoculated with the truffle spores. A successful planting can start to yield truffles in as little as five years. Properly managed, a truffle orchard will produce for decades. While you can make truffles grow under a tree, you still need a dog to sniff them out and pinpoint the location so they can be carefully dug by hand. Winter truffles from the Southern Hemisphere are of course in season during the summer months in the Northern Hemisphere.



Truffle Croque Madame

The crop has been getting stronger for the last few years and this past Summer they finally achieved true market scale. There are plantations in the US on track to begin harvesting fresh truffles in the next couple of years.

There is not necessarily a discernable flavor difference between wild and cultivated, each truffle is unique. The key to quality is the sorting of fresh truffles by an experienced hand. The large, evenly shaped, well perfumed truffles found in the best restaurants represent a small fraction of the total harvest. That is why it is so important to deal with sources you know and trust.

No ingredient in the kitchen has mesmerized me this long, I have spent every Winter since that first omelet in the pursuit of truffle perfection. Slowly I have come to understand how to coax the best out of truffles. The first thing is to start with the very best fresh truffles. The price is always so extreme that there's no wisdom in saving a little



Festival attendees touch and smell the truffles destined for lunch (photo by Jana Waldinger)



Shaving Truffles



Stand Up Gourmet Will Durst in the kitchen with Chef Ken Frank

money and getting the #2's. That in mind, use plenty, skimping on truffles is a fool's errand. For me it's all or nothing. Granted I am very spoiled, blessed every year with an abundance of fresh truffles for months on end. I enjoy every minute.

It's also important to use them quickly. Truffle aroma is very volatile, the major flavor components have a very low boiling point. I find it instructive to think of truffle aroma as having a "half life". Top quality fresh truffles, properly stored, have full perfume and flavor for close to a week. By the second week it starts to drop quickly and by the third it's a fraction of when it was first dug. Truffle professionals rarely store truffles in rice these days. The current best practice is to wash truffles in cold water, pat them dry and individually wrap

them in a clean a paper towel. Keep them in the refrigerator but don't let them freeze. I always store them with eggs. You never have too many truffled eggs.

Getting the most out of truffles is about making good choices. The trick is to pick foods that will allow the truffle flavor to develop and shine. Truffle flavor does very well with fat and protein. That's why eggs, butter and cheese are such great vehicles for truffle. Foods high in acid, citrus and tomato for example, tend to dull truffle flavor except in the smallest quantity. Hot spicy flavors simply overpower truffle. Long simmered dishes dull the flavor too. Since the flavor compounds have a low flash point, the flavor is boiled out. Add fresh chopped truffle near the end.

Over the years I have become very much the truffle purist. I banished truffle oil from my kitchen almost 15 years ago. Truffle oil first came on the scene in the eighties when scientists successfully replicated the flavor compounds in the laboratory. This is the same amazing science that has made every flavor of jelly bean possible, but it's all fake. In retrospect, it should have been obvious that if you could infuse truffle flavor into olive oil by natural means, the Romans would have figured it out. Truffle oil is simply too good to be true. Do the math. A little tiny scrap, of an often inferior species of truffle, is not going to infuse a few ounces of oil with the flavor of a Kilo of fresh truffle.

To make things worse, truffle oil is an enabler. Why spend 800 dollars on real

black winter truffles when you can buy flavorless Chinese truffles for 40 bucks and drizzle the food with truffle oil. Adding insult to injury, some people have now become desensitized to the flavor of true fresh truffle. To me truffle oil stains the palate for hours and ruins every dish that follows.

There are a couple of good ways to enjoy truffle out of season. Flash frozen truffles have very good flavor. They lack the intense perfume of fresh, but they are delicious. You can also make very good truffle butter yourself by mixing a good amount of finely chopped fresh truffle with butter and keeping it frozen. It's not the same as fresh, but with pasta and a little really good cheese in June, it's still pretty tasty.

Ken Frank is executive chef and owner of La Toque and the host chef for the annual Napa Truffle Festival. Chef Frank's 31st annual Truffle Dinner kicks off on January 7, 2012 and the Napa Truffle Festival takes place January 18-21, 2013. More information is available at NapaTruffleFestival.com.



Chef Ken Frank

Ravioli "Sunny side up" with Farm Egg and Truffle Butter

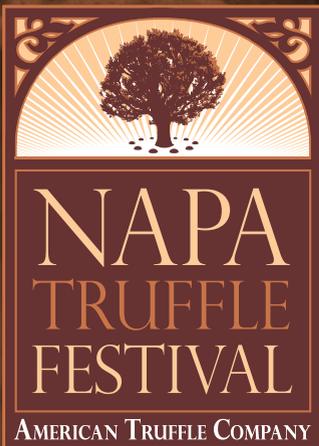


Serves 4

- 4 fresh farm eggs (plus one egg for egg wash)
- 1 sheet fresh pasta (eight 5 inch squares)
- ½ cup cooked white beans
- ½ cup ricotta cheese
- 4 tablespoons finely chopped fresh truffle
- 3 ounces good sweet butter
- Salt

In a tightly sealed jar, store whole eggs with fresh truffles in the refrigerator for at least 48 hours. This is critical to allow the truffle flavor to infuse. Puree well cooked white beans in food processor until smooth. Add ricotta and half of the chopped truffle and mix well to incorporate. Season with salt to taste. Load truffled bean/ricotta mixture into a pastry bag. Pipe a 3 inch circle of the bean/cheese mixture onto 4 of the pasta squares making sure the whole in the center will be the perfect size to gently cradle a raw egg yolk. Without breaking, carefully place a truffled egg yolk in the center, brush the perimeter with egg wash and carefully press the top sheet of pasta around the yolk. Trim the rim to give each piece the free form shape of a fried egg. Cook 3 minutes in boiling salted water. In the meantime warm the butter and remaining fresh truffle in a sauté pan, season with salt and swirl in a small amount of the pasta cooking liquid to make a sauce. Place each ravioli on a plate and spoon truffle butter on top.❖

3rd Annual



World Class Cuisine Meets
Cutting Edge Truffle Science

January 18-21, 2013



Host Chef Ken Frank
La Toque
Napa, CA



Colman Andrews
Keynote Speaker

Co-founder of *Saveur*. Internationally renowned food writer and award-winning cookbook author. Editorial director of the culinary megasite *The Daily Meal*.



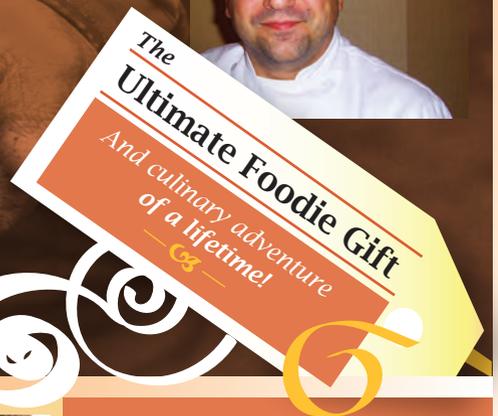
Chef Marco Gubbiotti
La Bastiglia
Spello, Italy



Chef Nicola (Nico) Chessa
Valentino Restaurant
Santa Monica, CA



Chef Michael Tusk
Quince
San Francisco, CA



Truffles anyone? Join in the fun, science and culinary adventure of a lifetime in pursuit of the rare and delectable black winter Périgord truffle (aka black diamond) — which will be discussed, examined, probed, prepared, demonstrated and, finally, paired with wines and feasted upon for breakfast, lunch and dinner! New this year: wild mushroom forage!



Reserve your tickets now!



Take advantage of the special 15% AIWF Member discount - login to www.aiwf.org/members for code.

For more information and tickets, visit napatrufflefestival.com.