



Napa Truffle Festival

World Class Cuisine meets Cutting Edge Truffle Science

by Tim Polk
Photographs by Faith Echtermeyer and Art & Clarity

Say the words “black gold” to almost anyone around the world, and he or she will more than likely immediately think of oil – literally the main fuel that keeps our modern world running. From Persian Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar to the dusty-dry plains of Texas, oil has made individuals, companies, and even entire nations extremely rich.

But whisper “black gold” to serious food and wine fanatics and you’ll receive a different answer: truffles. Perhaps no other food evokes such reverence, passion, or mystery. Why? Well for one, truffles are an act of nature, and thus are extremely difficult to commercially harvest (though as we’ll see, some are trying). This rarity leads to another of the truffle’s aura, its heady price. A pound of white truffles, for example, has a retail price of \$2,600-\$4,000. That’s serious cash, even when using paper-thin shavings!

We recently basked in all-things-truffle during the second annual Napa Truffle Festival, a three-day event held at food and winery locations throughout the Napa Valley. The sold-out festival brought together food fanatics from around the world who shared one common passion: a love of truffles.

What Are Truffles?

Truffles have been a prized culinary treat for more than 4,000 years. They have a distinct, even heady aroma that Robert Mondavi Winery Chef Jeff Mosher describes as “like the forest floor after a rain.”

So just what are truffles? They are the fruiting body, or spore, of an underground mushroom. Because truffles have no green leaves, they must attach themselves to host trees, such as oaks and filberts, and live off the trees’ root systems. Thus the truffle-tree symbiotic relationship benefits both: the trees give the truffles nutrients, while the truffles facilitate better absorption of nutrients for the trees.

There are hundreds of types of truffles. The Napa Truffle Festival focused mainly on the black truffle prized by all, the winter harvested Périgord truffle. Black truffles have a tough exterior; they are generally chopped or sliced, and can be cooked. White truffles, on the other hand, are much softer and don’t like heat. They are usually either shaved raw onto a dish or placed on something warm, to help release the aroma.

In earlier times wild boars (and later, domesticated pigs) hunted truffles. Misguided female boars would dig them up in fits of lust, as truffles produce the same pheromone produced in the testicles and secreted in the saliva of male boars. Today trained dogs sniff out and find the wild truffles.

Truffles vary from marble-sized to larger than baseballs. Robert Chang, Executive Director of the American Truffle Company, the festival’s primary sponsor, said the maturity of a truffle depends on something other than its size. “The scent is the key,” Chang says. “If a truffle has a certain scent threshold, it’s mature regardless of its size.”

Chang also explained to festival attendees that, unlike grapes, which are influenced by elements such as soil type or amount of sunlight, truffles aren’t “fussy”. “Different trees or different soil types won’t influence the taste of a truffle,” Chang says.



“black gold”

Truffled Out? NO!

In addition to learning about truffles, attendees also had plenty of opportunities to taste! The Festival started with a superb luncheon hosted at the opulent grounds of Raymond Vineyards, where vintner Jean-Charles Boisset welcomed everyone and set up a lavish lunch prepared by Chef Michel Cornu with endless servings of Raymond Vineyard's reserve chardonnay, merlot and cabernet sauvignon. "The place was orgasmic; I had to pinch myself several times in fact. I wasn't used to this particular kind of setting in the valley," added EIC Kaye Cloutman who was convinced that "this winery was certainly the place which truly united food, wine and fashion flawlessly". From a tantalizing purse of Wild Forest Mushrooms with Truffle Girolles Fume' to the Apple Tarte Tatin under Truffle Ice Cream, guests felt this luncheon was beyond reproach."

Dinner that evening was held at legendary La Toque restaurant in Napa where five different chefs from around the world each prepared a truffle-inspired dish. Dinner items included John Dory wrapped in Pork Belly and Crispy Feuille De Brique with Truffled Sunchoke and Smoked Lobster Butter (Chef Michael Cimarusti, Providence restaurant in Los Angeles); Bone Marrow "Creme Caramel" with Mushroom Jam, Sauce Périgord, a Petite Herb Salad, and Brioche (Chef Andrew Zimmerman, Sepia restaurant, Chicago); Ridged Pasta with Foie Gras scented with Black Truffles and Marsala (Chef Suzette Gresham-Tognetti, Acquerello, San Francisco); and Slow Roasted Veal Tenderloin Stuffed with Fresh Black Truffle (Chef Ken Frank of La Toque). Vintner Robert Sinskey who so graciously took us to his truffle farm earlier that day provided dinner guests with abundant glasses of their special Cuvee Vandal Vineyard 2009 pinot noir from the Carneros region. His sensational wife Marie Helm Sinskey shared our table that evening as well. Other notable guests who took pleasure dining under the 5 Michelin-starred chefs that evening were Margrit Mondavi (Mondavi Wines), Joel Riddell (NewsTalk910), Author Amy Reiley (www.eatsomethingsexy.com), Robert Moon (Genjoro Winery) and Mary Orlin (The Huffington Post).

Day two of the event had Chef Suzette Gresham of San Francisco's one-star Michelin restaurant Acquerello leading a 90-minute cooking demonstration followed by lunch. Gresham said she prefers that truffles highlight, rather than overpower, a dish. "Truffles show themselves best on the simplest dishes," she explains. "My favorite application is next-to-nothing."

Gresham's truffle-inspired lunch for attendees, held with Chef Mosher in the Robert Mondavi Winery's famed glass-surrounded Vineyard Room, included a Carpaccio of Loch Duart salmon with truffle vinaigrette, celery root, and the chef's own mini Meyer lemons; potato-wrapped cannelloni of black Angus beef brasato with truffled verdure; and one delicious spoonful of Acquerello's truffle gelato.

Meet a Truffle Grower

A love for truffles (and the potential lucrative ongoing income) has led some hardy souls to attempt to farm the delicacy here in the United States. One such new truffle grower is Sandra Younger, of San Diego. Several years ago, she and her sister inherited their family's 91-acre family farm in the Piedmont area of North Carolina. Younger researched various crops to grow attempting to find something that wouldn't require her to be in North Carolina on a regular basis. One day she read a short magazine article about a North Carolina farmer who had successfully grown truffles, and her quest began.

Younger and her husband, Bob, eventually planted five acres of European oak and European filbert (hazelnut) trees. The seedlings were inoculated with a truffle-based slurry to ultimately produce the Burgundy truffle which matures in the summer, and the ground was treated with lime to increase its pH value (truffles like soils with high pH values). The results are still unknown at this time; the Younger's trees are just beginning their fourth growing season, while traditionally the first truffle "crop" comes at about the five-year mark.

It isn't lost on Younger that her family's land, once home to poor Depression-era tobacco and cotton farmers, might now yield one of the food industry's priciest ingredients. "The juxtaposition of what the property was with what it could be is pretty fun to consider," she says. "It's all about love. I love my truffle trees!"

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Next year's Napa Truffle Festival will be held January 18-21, 2013.

For information or to sign up for their email newsletter.

www.NapaTruffleFestival.com.



Chef Suzette Gresham-Tognetti, Chef/Proprietor Acquerello, San Francisco, CA works with Robert Mondavi Winery Chef Jeff Mosher

