

# 2013 Napa Truffle Festival Recap

by Barb Rybicki



Fresh Black Truffles

While Napa Valley farmers can earn \$5,000 a ton or more for wine grapes, there's another crop that puts that figure to shame. Truffles can fetch a whopping \$1,200 dollars per pound which is the equivalent of \$2.4 million per ton. It's the most expensive crop in the world, even though truffles are actually 83 per cent water.

The 3rd annual Napa Truffle Festival took place recently to celebrate the revered fungus – specifically the prized Périgord black winter truffle – through a series of ethereal meals and fascinating educational seminars. Ground zero was Napa's Westin Verasa and its La Toque restaurant – though actual ground played a role as well during truffle orchard and wild mushroom forays.

Eating and drinking is typically the chief goal of most Wine Country festivals, but this one was as much about inspiring would-be growers. American Truffle Company (ATC) Managing Director Robert Chang and partner and chief scientist Dr. Paul Thomas were on hand to mingle with participants and relay the science and economics of starting a truffle orchard.

The ATC's proprietary research in 23 countries has evolved understanding of truffles' unique biology. Data on soil moisture, temperature, acidity and other technicalities has been collected since 2001, and now streams in every 20 minutes from wireless worldwide sensors. ATC can safely be labeled the world's authority on the fungus.

Dr. Thomas' personal devotion is apparent in anecdotes of his children: as infants, they teathed on whole truffles and their skin smelled of truffles absorbed through their mother's breast milk.

While farmers with secret forest stashes in France, Italy and Spain broker cash deals at Saturday marketplaces and midnight bars, over 90 per cent of Périgord truffles are cultivated. They thrive in areas with tough soils, which is why vineyards can be ideal harbors. Napa winemaker Robert Sinskey planted oak and hazelnut trees alongside his grapevines. His saplings were inoculated so that the fungus would coat the root system and spread, yielding ripe black truffles in five to six years, and thereafter.

Unlike grapes, truffles don't grow in predictable clusters. Science helps ensure overall production, but it cannot yet anticipate exactly where or when the "black diamonds" will be ready. Certain mammals, however, detect their scent at perfect ripeness and root for them. This spreads their seed, the truffle's evolutionary *raison d'être*. Nowadays, commercial farmers rely on trained Lagotto Romagnolo hounds to smell them out, as Rico demonstrated for festivalgoers, vigorously excavating Mr. Sinskey's orchard. Pigs, the traditional European truffle hunters, have been officially banned by Italy's government because they not only inflict orchard damage, they devour the unearthed booty.

During the course of the festival, we encountered curious farmers, couples scheming retirement around truffle growing, and food geeks. The ATC adeptly fielded their hardball questions on topics ranging from soil pH and calcium level minutiae, to financial projections and risks.

The seminal non-classroom event was a five-course feast of truffles all the way through dessert, prepared by four Michelin-starred chefs: Ken Frank helming La Toque restaurant kitchen, Nico Chessa from Santa Monica's Valentino, Michael Tusk of San Francisco's Quince and Marco Gubbiotti from La Bastiglia in Italy.

Among the outrageous highlights: crudo beef gently massaged into a fat burger patty stuffed with oozing yolk and wisely kept from a grill, topped with anchovy pesto and sliced truffle; buttery candied parsnip puree drizzled with house-infused truffle oil beneath plush truffled salmon slow-cooked in duck fat; truffle-dyed ravioli bursting with sweetbread, suckling pig belly and (what else?) truffles.

If that weren't enough, lucky ticket holders also partook in a truffle-themed lunch at Silver Oak Winery and another at Beringer Winery. It was there that we had what might rank high on anyone's 'last meal' wish list: poached egg lounging in a well of soft cheesy polenta and griddled housemade kurobuta pork sausage and topped with truffles.

## A few truffle factoids:

- While there are many varieties of truffles including a desert breed in North Africa, there are only three commercially viable species: black winter truffles or Périgord, summer truffles and spring white truffles.
- All commercially available truffle oil, salts, popcorns and the like are made with synthetic truffles. Real-deal truffles are far too delicate and short-lived for production.
- White truffles have the pervasive scent we associate with truffles – which is why they are banned from public transportation in some countries. Black truffles have a mild earthy aroma best appreciated at close range.
- Truffle prices have been increasing year over year by 4 per cent, and demand far outstrips supply. They're categorized by size, aroma and shape. The heftiest, roundest and smelliest showstoppers, often reserved for shaving tableside at restaurants, command top dollar.
- There are currently less than 100 acres of productive truffle orchards in the U.S.