

truffle mania...

BOON OR BOONDOGGLE?

BY MARILYN LAROCQUE

Photo courtesy of Napa Truffle Festival

Why chefs and foodies spend fortunes on truffles has always mystified me...sort of a culinary version of “The Emperor’s New Clothes.”

There’s absolutely nothing exotic about truffles until they appear on restaurant menus. Scrub their elitist image; truffles are parasites, spores that form on roots of host trees, usually nut producers.

Nevertheless, demand for these ugly diamonds in the dirt is insatiable; supply, miniscule. Diners at fine restaurants clamor for them. Chefs create entire meals showcasing them. Although there’s no truffle IPO envisioned...yet...investors are adding “truffle orchards” to their portfolios in hopes of harvesting a profit from Mother Nature.

Your choice for striking pay dirt by growing truffles is limited to black varieties. White can’t be cultivated. To “grow” truffles commercially requires arboreal insemination. The roots of nut tree seedlings are inoculated with truffle spores. The seedlings are planted in custom-tailored soil. There’s a long-term gestation before you know if you have pounds of truffles...or only tons of nuts.

To learn whether truffles are a boon or boondoggle, I went to the Napa Truffle Festival earlier this year. Getting down and dirty, Robert Chang, managing director of the American Truffle Company (www.americantruffle.com), enlightened would-be truffle growers about the Midas touch needed to turn truffles into gold while Michelin-starred chefs elevated the truffle to epicurean heights.

A very fertile ground for unearthing the truth about truffles!



Rico, the truffle dog, with his truffle partner, Guglielmo
Photo by Janna Waldinger



Sensory stations at Raymond Vineyards Truffle Lunch
Photo by Janna Waldinger



Bone Marrow 'Creme Caramel' with Mushroom Jam
Photo by Faith Echtermeyer

the tale of the truffle

Black truffles call several countries home, with France the reigning monarchy and the winter Périgord truffle, in season November or December to March, the Prince Charming. At wholesale it sells for about \$750 to \$1,200 per pound. The Burgundy black truffle, September-December, costs about one-fourth as much. The Branchetto black truffle sells for \$200-\$300. Black truffles double your pleasure because they can be served raw or cooked, and your taste buds can't tell the difference between farmed and indigenous.

Queen of the truffles is the white, primarily found in the area around Alba, Italy, and in Croatia. It costs a King's ransom, \$5,000-\$7,000 per pound. It's best raw, shaved onto a hot dish like scrambled eggs, pasta, or risotto just before it's served to release unique truffle aromas.

Since I'm agriculturally challenged, I was delighted to meet two exuberant experts who literally know truffles from the ground up—Enrico Bacio il Tartufo (Enrico Kiss, The Truffle Hunter), "Rico" for short, is a breed of dog called Lagotto Romagnolo originally from Mazara del Vallo, Sicily. He's a low-to-the-ground, perpetual motion personality pooch with curly brown and white hair, not fur, with a world-class nose for truffles, an amazing digging technique, and non-stop tail...and his Tartufo, truffle partner, Guglielmo, clinical psychologist Bill Collins, is his "interpreter." Collins revealed the tale of the Lagottos.

"Rico's ancestors were originally from Emilia Romagna near the Tuscan border,"

he commented. "They hunted birds with the Etruscans around 500 B.C. Birds were really abundant then. However, there were no guns. So people took small boats out into lakes and pounded the water with big poles. The Lagottos jumped into the water to retrieve the birds.

"In about 1540 A.D., someone drained the lakes and swamps that attracted the birds; so Lagottos needed a new line of work. At that time, pigs hunted truffles; but, because of the truffles' sexy pheromones, pigs went wild and ate them. Lagottos were a better bet. They're workaholics and intelligent and have an exceptional sense of smell."

Rico started truffle training when a pup. Talk about Pavlov's dogs...Rico really adapted to his training. His only toy was a tartufo (truffle) sewn into a borsa (bag). Mario, his first Tartufo in Sicily, would throw the borsa; when Rico retrieved it, he got a treat. Next, Mario hid the borsa, so Rico would have to search for it with his nose. He'd find it and get a treat. Then he buried the borsa, and Rico had to dig to find it. More treats.

By the time Rico was three months old, he was truffle hunting with the pros. The technique is first to scent the air to determine the general location of the truffles, then ground scent for their actual location, and, finally, to scratch the earth to show that you've found the spot and start digging.

Rico and Guglielmo led Napa Truffle Festival fans into the recently planted "truffle orchard" at Robert Sinskey Vineyards' Carneros property, home to Pinot Noir vines.

"It's a romantic notion that we may be able to produce our own truffles...and there is nothing better than Pinot Noir and truffles," Rob Sinskey explained of the venture he and his wife, Maria Helm Sinskey, who is a chef and cookbook author, have started.

To hedge their bets, the Sinskeys planted a half acre of winter (Périgord) black truffles, dividing their host trees 59% to 41%, oaks/filberts, and three-fourths acre of summer (Burgundy) black truffles, with filberts outweighing oaks 80% to 20%. "Filberts mature the truffles a little more quickly," Sinskey revealed, "but oaks tend to be better producers in the long run. So, we planted both. We hope to have a truffle 'crop' in about four more years. We are all about DIY and will train our own dogs. The development of a truffle orchard is no more expensive than developing a vineyard. Although the risks are higher, so are the potential rewards."

Because there were no truffles from the new saplings, truffles had been hidden, much like Easter eggs. Rico hurtled into the hunt. Reaching pay dirt, he shifted his paws into warp speed, pausing for praise and a treat when he found a truffle.

truffle talk

Who better to tout truffles than the weekend's keynote speaker Barbara Fairchild, former Editor-in-Chief of *Bon Appétit* and now editor of the entertaining and breezy online Real Eats/Nomad Editions (www.nomadeditions.com/real-eats).

"There's nothing that you cook with that comes close to a truffle," she stated flatly.

She described black truffles, her preference, as “earthy and sour in a good way, with a very rich taste, almost a cross between dark chocolate and good quality beef stock.”

Despite her formidable culinary talents, she admitted she’d “never attempt” to cook with truffles. “I leave it in the hands of chefs more expert than I,” she revealed. “I enjoy going out to a special place and eating them in a good restaurant. They’re too expensive to ruin in preparation.”

Ken Frank, Executive Chef/Owner of Michelin-starred La Toque at the Westin Verasa in Napa, headquarters of the truffle weekend, masterminded the Saturday night truffle dinner. “Truffles are one of the true miracles of nature,” he asserted. “Everything about a truffle is exceptional. It has a compelling perfume, a short season, is hard to find, very mysterious, expensive, rare. It doesn’t last long...five to six days, then starts to fade. If they weren’t worth it, they wouldn’t sell. But thank God they’re not in season year ’round. Chefs, restaurants, diners...they’d all go broke!

“The white is more famous,” he continued. “It has a more powerful perfume with a more vegetable, sharper, green, oniony, garlicky family of flavors. Black is earthier, sweeter, with a more exotic spice combination. It is more multipurpose because it’s good raw or cooked. You can use it with cheese, butter, in ice cream, with eggs, insert slices under poultry skin or into mild meats or fish.”

Andrew Zimmerman, Executive Chef of Michelin-starred Sepia in Chicago, is enamored with “that crazy aroma that nothing else has.” He added, “It’s really loamy, earthy, funky but not pickled...more dirt. You want to get the truffle out of the ground and to the table ASAP,” he added. “That’s challenging for the U.S. In Europe, truffles arrive the same day or next day.”

As long as demand for high quality, fresh truffles keeps escalating, and the supply can’t keep pace, truffles will always be rare and expensive. The Napa Truffle Festival invested about \$14,000 in black truffles. What was the payoff?

truffles on the table

Truffles paraded their multiple talents during luncheons at Raymond Vineyards and Robert Mondavi Winery, the Saturday night feast at La Toque, and a truffle “day” at nearby Oxbow Market.

Raymond Vineyards’ Culinary Director Michel Cornu started working in restaurants at age 13 in France, so he grew up in the truffle tradition. “Today,” he commented, “whether they understand it or not, people are aware of truffles as a status symbol. They go for them because they’re expensive. To us, it was a familiar seasonal ingredient.”

Cornu introduced the kissin’ cousins relationship of truffles and mushrooms with a savory Wild Forest Mushroom Purse with a truffle Girolles (chanterelles) Fumé. And demonstrated versatility with a seafood duo of black sea bass and seared sea scallop, adding contrasting calamari ink truffle sauce. “The nutty sweetness of the scallop reflects the same qualities in the truffle,” Cornu commented, “and the sea bass, a mild fish, frames the flavors perfectly.”

He was the first to surprise everyone with truffle and vanilla ice cream, a perfume, cool, back-to-nature companion to very French apple tatin and apple chips.

Suzette Gresham-Tognetti of one-star Acquerello in San Francisco collaborated with winery chef Jeff Mosher for the luncheon at Robert Mondavi Winery. They, too, rode the truffle’s multiple personality bandwagon. “We put together a menu of scope and breadth to show the diversity of the truffle,” she said.

First up was Gresham-Tognetti’s tangy truffle vinaigrette on carpaccio of Loc Duart salmon, followed by Mosher’s rich verdure sauce drizzled on potato-wrapped cannelloni of Black Angus beef brasato. “With the rare veal, there was very little to interfere with the truffle,” Gresham-Tognetti said. “The carpaccio vinaigrette with the lemon and oil on the salmon added tartness. Truffle was the accent for the beef cannelloni.”

Gresham-Tognetti proved the delicious effect of truffles inserted under poultry skin with her dish of Guinea hen in Madeira sauce. The surprise was truffle honey spiking Italian cheeses. She termed her truffle gelato dessert “a lark.”

For Saturday night, Frank had recruited friends who shared his truffle addiction and were also Michelin-starred chefs...Gresham-Tognetti, Zimmerman, and Michael Cimarusti of two-star Providence, Los Angeles. Together with La Toque’s Pastry Chef, Deborah Yee-Henen, they orchestrated a seven-course truffle extravaganza.

“When you work with truffles,” Frank asserted, “Go big or go home. Sure it’s expensive, but you need to use enough in a dish so it’s noticed.”

I now blame stingy chefs for my truffle disdain. “Flakes” don’t impress.

Cimarusti prepared John Dory wrapped in pork belly and crispy *feuille de brique* (crepe) with truffled sunchoke and smoked lobster butter. “I seasoned the John Dory with salt, then microplaned truffle onto the fish so the strong flavor of the truffle permeated it,” he explained. “Wrapping it in pork gave rich fat flavors, and enclosing it in the crepe sealed in flavor and moisture.

“Part of the truffle mystique is that they create different flavors in different dishes,” he remarked. “Their smell and taste change. They’re the earthy center of a dish.”

Elegance and earthiness connected in Zimmerman’s Bone Marrow “Crème Caramel,” Mushroom Jam, Sauce Perigord, Petite Herb Salad, Brioche. The opulent bone marrow custard and perigourd sauce “needed contrast,” he said, “without starting a fight on the plate. The herbaceousness of the salad gave the palate a break from the richness of the other elements.”

Gresham-Tognetti married ridged pasta with foie gras scented with black truffles and marsala. “I liked the richness of the companion products like soft, creamy cheese and the foie gras and the light, supporting cast members and how they interacted,” she remarked. “Reducing the marsala and cream made a caramelized sauce. I chose twisted rigatoni, a tubular pasta, so the tubes would carry the sauce.”

For the main course, Frank prepared over-the-top Slow Roasted Veal Tenderloin stuffed with fresh black truffle and foie gras, plus root veggies, merged through a sous vide preparation. Truffle ice cream was again the finale.

Zimmerman said it all: “You eat like this once in your lifetime.”

As for me...yes, I’m a truffle convert. But acknowledging budget constraints, I like Barbara Fairchild’s idea. “Truffled cheese from Italy is really wonderful,” she told me, “very nutty like a Gruyère. The essence of truffle permeates it. You can enjoy truffles without spending so much money.”

Tempted by Truffles? The third annual Truffle Festival is set for January 18-21, 2013 at the Westin Verasa in Napa, California. www.napatrufflefestival.com □