

Are Truffles the Next Big Napa Crop?

The Perigord, a favorite mushroom among chefs, is a black truffle variety, that fetches \$700-\$1,200 per pound, said Robert Chang, managing director, of the American Truffle Company. Napa Valley could see its first harvest in two years.

By Mike Treleven, Patch Poster | Jan 31, 2013



Truffles, not to be confused with the man-made confectionary chocolate truffle, are underground fungi (mushrooms) that are expected to pay the Napa Valley's winegrape growers more than their more famous crop.

The first harvest may be about two years down the road for winegrape grower Robert Sinskey, who has shown early interest in growing trees that are inoculated for Perigord truffles, according to Robert Chang, managing director of the American Truffle Company.

Sinskey is currently growing his trees in the Carneros District on a small land parcel surrounded by vineyards, Chang said.

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"Prices are driven by supply and demand," Chang said.

"Truffles are demand-driven."

White truffles are just as popular. These underground mushrooms also garner between \$30,000-\$40,000 per acre per year, Chang said, along with his partner and chief scientist Dr. Paul Thomas.

The two men were guest speakers and spearheaded the third annual Truffle Festival seminars in Napa, which were attended by about 100 inquisitive landowners.

Prices are increasing at a rate of about 4 percent per year for the popular Perigord and Burgundy truffle varieties, which are eyed as among the most suitable for Napa Valley.

Perigord truffles are often called "Black Gold" because of the high prices they garner.

They grow best in the soils around English Oak and Hazel Nut trees.

The Perigord produces its fungi during the winter months, while the white Burgundy is sniffed out of the soil during the summer.

There are four varieties of fungi that are rooted out at different times of the year are by trained dogs. Some truffles are rooted out by pigs, which, however, tend to eat the valuable underground mushroom.

"This is absolutely a viable crop in the Napa Valley," Chang said. "The valley is viable crop because of its soil types and Mediterranean climate."

Acreage for the orchards should be between three to five acres.

Oak and Hazelnut are the optimum choices for inoculation. It takes about five years for trees to become productive. Perigords are harvested December through March.

Because of the vineyards, growers already have the land, equipment and other resources to diversify into other crops.

Chang eliminates most of the upfront production costs can average between \$5,000 to \$25,000.

The bulk of truffles from the Napa Valley will be sold in the United States, statewide and the Bay Area.

Locally grown truffles are expected to fetch about \$4,000 more than imported fungi because they will be fresher than those shipped here mainly from Europe.

And labor costs are lower than in viticulture: Specially trained dogs can sniff out the location of the buried truffles. In some countries, pigs do this job.

Truffles also add to the valley's crop diversity that includes community gardens and small commercial farms.

ATC works in tandem in a consulting partnership role with growers. Chang and Thomas advise growers on soil types, cultivation and installation of a weather station to monitor rainfall and other conditions.