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FOOD

Wine Country vintners turn to truffles

By Carolyn Jung | December 13, 2014



On the edge of his Sonoma vineyard aptly named Scintilla (“spark of an idea”), vintner Robert Sinskey has yanked out grapevines to make room for a few hundred oak and filbert trees. It’s all part of a daring venture that may come to fruition — or folly — as early as next winter.

Sinskey’s not quite betting the farm, but rather 1½ acres of vineyard land in the hope that it will start producing both Burgundy and prized Perigord black truffles — the same coveted, heady tubers grown in France that can command more than \$1,200 per pound.

If he succeeds, he may be one of a small number of growers poised to reap the rewards of a burgeoning truffle industry taking root in Napa and Sonoma counties. Strolling the organic, biodynamic grounds on a recent afternoon with his Portuguese water dog, Paolo, whom he plans to train to sniff out the truffles, Sinskey surveyed the trees planted four years ago that have been inoculated with the truffle fungus.

“We have become such a one-trick pony with monoculture in Napa and Sonoma,” he says. “I would love to see truffles become part of the landscape here, with more people putting in orchards on less optimal vineyard land. For us, we can further our culinary mission with this and provide our sheep a place to graze. It seemed like a win-win situation.”

Perigord truffles were first grown outside of Europe in 1985 in a small Mendocino County property that is now fallow, according to Charles Lefevre, a mycologist and founder of New World Truffieres Inc., a truffle cultivation company in Oregon. That state now boasts a nearly \$5 million truffle industry, with 2 to 10 tons harvested annually, according to Lefevre.

With France, Italy, Spain and Australia the largest producers of truffles (in that order), chefs like Ken Frank of La Toque in Napa couldn’t be more excited about the possibility of getting their hands on truffles picked only hours ago, as compared to those that have been shipped from overseas. That’s because truffles are extremely perishable, with their hypnotic aroma dissipating by half after about five days.

“It’s impossible to get them too fresh,” says Frank, who recently returned from cooking at the Alba White Truffle Fair in Italy. “The thought that I could cook with truffles tonight that were in the ground in Carneros this morning is very tempting.”

There's no reason why that can't happen, says Robert Chang, managing director of American Truffle Co., which is in San Mateo and works with clients in 25 countries. Although white truffles are difficult to cultivate, black ones have the potential to be exceptional no matter where they are grown. Because Napa and Sonoma don't have harsh winters, they offer a truffle-friendly climate.

"A grape is heavily influenced by water and soil — terroir," Chang says. "That's why the same grape varietal tastes different here than in Burgundy. But if you look at bananas, no matter if they come from Florida or Venezuela, they all taste the same. Truffles are more like bananas than grapes."

They also can be exceedingly profitable, reaping five times or more what the same acre of grapes might bring. Plus, the inoculated trees, which need only irrigation and weeding, don't require much labor.

That's why brothers Todd and Trevor Traina decided to spend \$25,000 to rip out 2½ acres of their Cabernet vineyard in the Napa Valley's Stag's Leap district to attempt to grow Perigord truffles.

"Once you buy the trees — the biggest chunk of the cost — there is minimal cost after that," says Todd Traina, a film producer, whose mother, San Francisco socialite and philanthropist Dede Wilsey, may try to cultivate truffles on her Rutherford vineyard if her sons succeed with their project.

"For eccentric folks like me and my family, it was a perfect fit."

Sinskey believes the risk is no greater than that of growing wine grapes. For her part, his wife, former San Francisco restaurant chef Maria Helm-Sinskey, who oversees the winery's culinary program, remains skeptical. But like any proud parent, she already knows what she'll do with the first one pulled from the ground.

"We'll probably taste a slice," Helm-Sinskey says. "And bronze the remainder, like baby shoes."

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Truffles 101

Use your nose: Scent is the best indicator of a great truffle, according to La Toque chef Ken Frank. The stronger its perfume, the fresher it is. Bigger is not always better, either, although tiny truffles can be flavor-challenged. Toque prefers ones about the size of golf balls. Always buy from a reputable source.

How to store: Clean truffles by rubbing them gently every day with a soft brush such as an old toothbrush. Wrap in a new paper towel each time and refrigerate in a covered container. Storing in a container of raw rice is no longer considered ideal, Frank says, because the rice absorbs too much moisture from the truffle. But storing truffles wrapped in a paper towel with eggs is a great way to infuse the eggs with truffle flavor. Truffles are at their best for about seven days after harvesting.

How to use: Chef Maria Helm-Sinskey likes white truffles shaved thinly over risotto or softly scrambled eggs with chives. She puts thin slices of black truffles under the skin of chicken before roasting it.

Frank favors the simplest preparations with white or black truffles to allow their flavor to shine. Just don't be skimpy with them. "Don't have a little bit of truffle four times. It's better to have it only once, but have plenty to get a sinusful of them," he says. "Go big or go home."

Festivals

Fifth Annual Napa Truffle Festival: Jan. 16-19. Info at napatrufflefestival.com.