

TASTE OF TRAVEL

MOTHER NATURE WINS

Topic and taste of truffles cultivates annual event in Napa

By Charlene Peters

As a Lagotto Romagnolo, Rico doesn't need to work, but he can't help it. He comes from a long lineage of "truffle hunters" from Italy — dogs who consider sniffing out truffles as playtime.

Rico is not only cute and cuddly, he's trained to conduct truffle hunts all over the world. He demonstrated his skills during the sold-out second annual event, the Napa Truffle Festival, an event in California's wine country that is growing faster than the world's most sought-after and expensive underground tuber, the truffle.

Native to Italy, Spain, Australia and France, truffles are considered a luxurious culinary delight to Michelin chefs worldwide. These ascomyzetes grow in the earth and form a symbiosis with the roots of trees, and are the highest paid "legal" crop you can grow. Truffles are now being cultivated in the U.S., thanks to the American Truffle Company. New to the Napa Valley, truffle growers in the area can expect a yield in a few more years.

During the Festival, The Westin Verasa Hotel Napa Valley welcomed close to 100 attendees, with ATC Managing Director Robert Chang at the helm. During the first morning's seminar, Chang shared his first experience in tasting a truffle at an Italian bistro in Munich.

"I'd heard aromatic tales of truffles," he said, "but I was blown away."

Chang's fascination for tubers evolved into founding a company, the American Truffle Company, which presents the annual event that has included a reception at Ken Frank's Michelin star La Toque restaurant, located inside the Westin Verasa, and a keynote address by former Editor-in-Chief of Bon Appetit magazine, Barbara Fairchild.

The science behind cultivation

Why choose Napa Valley for truffle cultivation? Well, for one, explains Chang, it's a culinary and wine mecca. Secondly, truffle cultivation is a great way to incorporate biodiversity in farming, adding diversity to land normally utilized for growing grapes.

But unlike a vineyard, cultivating Perigord and Burgundy truffles are significantly less expensive to maintain once the necessary 7.9 pH balance of the soil is achieved and rows of either Filberts (a.k.a. hazelnut trees) or English Oak saplings are planted. Unlike growing grapes, little maintenance is necessary to grow truffles: soil testing, weed prevention and protection from gophers and various critters are the basic requirements, and the returns are significantly higher. Truffles will produce for 40-80 years, depending on the conditions and the trees planted (English Oaks typically produce for 80 years).

Most foodies who first experience the truffle taste are instantly smitten with the fragrance and flavor of this spore that grows with the help of animals who eat and release more spores to multiply. The actual term is "mycorrhiza," defined as the organs created as a result of the symbiosis between trees and spores. Mycorrhiza covers the root system, ultimately connecting with the roots of trees to grow truffles one to four inches below ground. But in order to grow the all-organic truffles, a free-draining soil high in calcium or limestone is required to raise the pH to an alkaline level before saplings inoculated with the right truffle spores are planted.

All-truffle menus

From truffle seminars to a grand dinner, the Festival continues to draw an international crowd. But most importantly it provides a venue for chefs to fly in from all over the world and gather together to showcase their culinary talents, concocting recipes that all include the black truffle sure to get everyone hooked on the flavor and aroma.

For the second annual event, 14 pounds of black Perigord truffles (Latin, "tuber melanosporum vitadini") were purchased from Europe — with the hefty price tag of \$1,200 per pound, according to Chang.

"I get to indulge my inner truffle geek," Chef Ken Frank says of the dishes he prepared for the Truffles & Wine Dinner, where a handful of Michelin star chefs gather in the La



Rico the truffle-hunting dog leads a group through a staged truffle hunt in Napa, Calif. Truffles look like mushrooms, but are actually an underground tuber that infuses a smoky taste and aroma to culinary dishes. WICKED LOCAL PHOTO BY CHARLENE PETERS

Toque kitchen on Saturday evening to conduct a ballet of fine service and exquisite recipes.

Even Margrit Mondavi, widow of winemaker extraordinaire, Robert Mondavi, attended the celebratory dinner, lifting her glass of Domaine Doudet and announcing "Salute!" to the wine and truffle experience. During the Festival, truffles are everywhere — in hors d'oeuvres such as croquet madame and "Vitello Battuto" with truffled Parmesan cream, better paired with a glass of Roederer Anderson Valley Brut. Attendees hovered at the edge of ecstasy in these culinary captivators.

For this year's Festival, Chef Marco Gubbiotti of La Bastiglia in Spello, Italy, inspired Chef Frank to create a ravioli di tartufo, perfectly paired with a 2003 Miner, Wild Yeast Chardonnay, Napa Valley. This tango of tastes was followed by a plate of John Dory, a buttery white fish wrapped in a thin pork belly wrap and crispy Feuille de Brique surrounded by truffled sunchoke and smoked lobster butter. Chef Michael Cimarrusti of Providence in Los Angeles spearheaded this dish, paired with a 2008 Pernand-Vergeleses, Les Pins, Domaine Doudet from the south of Chablis, which added minerality to the plate's smokiness.

The most talked about dish of the evening was Andrew Zimmerman's (Sepia restaurant in Chicago), who utilized four pounds of veal bones to create a bone marrow "crème caramel" with mushroom jam, sauce Perigord and truffled broche. This dish offered a vivid aroma that emitted many oohs and ahs from the mouths of truffle babes.

A silky 2000 pinot noir from Robert Sinskey Vineyards in Carneros paired well with the silkiness of the bone marrow.

Suzette Gresham-Tognetti of Acquerello in San Francisco stole the show with flavor in what looked like a simple dish of ridged pasta, but with added foie gras, black truffles and Marsala, this taste sensation sent many swooning in palatable delight. The truffle scent, in particular, stood out, and paired with a 2003 Bonny Doon, Le Cigare Volant, was the perfect dish.

Chef Ken Frank's dish ended the evening with a slow roasted veal tenderloin stuffed with fresh black truffle and paired with a high tannin 2006 Barolo, Cannubi Bochis, Varo, an old world wine described by the sommelier as "opening an old jewelry box" with notes of rose and leather.

Raymond Vineyards and The Robert Mondavi Vineyard provided truffle-inspired menus for lunches during the weekend. In the decadent crystal cave of the Raymond winery, lunch was set in the barrel room, where guests ravaged through a delicious wild forest mushroom purse topped with truffles and paired with Raymond Vineyards 2009 reserve Napa Valley Chardonnay, followed by a black sea bass and seared sea scallop with calamari ink truffle sauce and 2008 reserve Merlot.

Ending the Festival weekend, guest chef from San Francisco's Quercello restaurant, Suzette Gresham, led a lunch at The Robert Mondavi Vineyard, but before lunch she offered a comprehensive lesson on kitchen tools and herb-cutting techniques

on making a veal carpaccio. To match the character of the salmon carpaccio later served, guests were given a glass of an oak forward 2009 To Kalon Vineyard Fume Blanc Reserve from the Mondavi winery. Next, a "mock" potato wrapped cannelloni of black Angus beef brasato and truffled verdure was enjoyed with a 2009 Mondavi Carneros pinot noir reserve.

The most complicated preparation of a dish was the truffle-scented breast of guinea hen with Madeira sauce, paired with a bold, fruity and expressive 2008 Mondavi reserve cabernet sauvignon. Before lunch, Chef Gresham shared her preparation of this rolled up concoction that made many in the audience realize this is a recipe and technique best left to the great chefs of the world.

Truffles were infused in every dish, but the most truffle flavor was found in a spoonful of Acquerello's truffle gelato, which ended the lunch on a truffle high note. Monday ended the Festival with time spent at the Oxbow Public Market for more tastes of truffle-inspired recipes from local vendors, as well as wine samples and the chance to purchase an ounce or two of Perigords.

A high yield for cultivators

The investment in cultivating truffles brings back a return beginning in the fifth year. At \$750-\$1,200 a pound, Perigord truffles are the financial leader, followed by Burgundy truffles with a sell price of

\$150-\$300 a pound. Summer Burgundy truffles yield \$25-35,000 per year per acre in profit, versus Chardonnay grapes, which yield \$3-5,000. (To get the lowdown on weekly truffle prices, visit sainte-alvere.com. To cultivate your own truffles, July is the time to commit to November plantings. Visit AmericanTruffle.com for more information.)

Italian white truffles are sold at \$5-7,000 per pound and cannot be cultivated, but for the 2013 Napa Truffle Festival, there is a rumor that these delicacies might show up in a few dishes. Domestic truffles are the way to go, however, as they're fresher, not to mention an eco-friendly business.

"You'll lose 10 percent of the aroma in shipping," explains Chang. Additionally, you'll be hit with a 100 percent tariff. So, if a Perigord is selling for \$650, you'll be paying \$1,300 for the pound.

Portions of the proceeds from this year's Festival benefit the Napa Valley Food Bank / CAN-V. Tickets for next year's Napa Truffle Festival, set for Jan. 18-21, will be available for purchase in August. There's a good possibility that the event will sell out, and that Rico will once again be part of the festivities.

Visit napatrufflefestival.com for truffle recipes and more information.

THEATER

Coming to the Marblehead Little Theatre this summer

One of Shakespeare's most beloved comedies finishes off the summer season at Marblehead Little Theatre. No one will be able to resist the magic and mayhem of "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

In Athens lately, the weather has been apocalyptic — even as Theseus, the Duke, prepares for his nuptial celebration with Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. A group of amateur actors, hoping to avoid the prying eyes of potential audience members, venture into a nearby forest to rehearse. Four lovers, fleeing the tyranny of adults, escape there as well. But in the forest also dwell the battling King and Queen of the fairies and their sprites, who hold sway over everyone else's story. Here, a world is created from the ground up only to disappear in the blink of an eye. As it shifts

and transforms, the maze traversing the "real" and "dream" worlds disorients inhabitants and visitors alike.



Director Christopher Martel's unique vision will surprise and amaze all who join the adventure. In the end we will all be awakened from the night's dreaming and wonder how much of it was real. How much of this really happened?

Show dates are Aug. 16-19 and 24-26. Tickets are now available online at mltlive.org (until the morning of the show) and at Spirit of '76 Bookstore (until the Tuesday before each week's performances), 107 Pleasant St., Marblehead. Ticket prices are \$20 (\$15 students) in advance. There is a \$2 surcharge per ticket for all online orders. Tickets at the door will be \$25 (cash only).

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