



The truth about truffles

Local chefs find that Oregon varieties can hold their own against more famous, and pricier, European counterparts

Tuesday, January 24, 2006

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The Oregonian

That faint rumble you hear through the rain? It's the buzz that's building about Oregon truffles.

And please, we're not talking about chocolate.

Local chefs, even those weaned on truffles from France and Italy, are embracing our knobby native underground fungi, lacing their risottos and reduction sauces with their heady perfume.

Commercial pickers and starry-eyed amateur mycologists scour forests from the Cascades to the coast, rakes in hand, looking for dirt-caked diamonds among the tree roots. Others chase down truffle cultivation, hoping that French black truffles can grow in Oregon soil, on demand.

Meanwhile, a three-day festival celebrates truffles this weekend in Eugene (see accompanying story), and Oregon truffles get a coming-out party in the March issue of Bon Appetit. (Bon Appetit is a Conde Nast publication; Conde Nast is owned by Advance Publications, which also owns The Oregonian.)

The more we hear, the more we wonder: Are Oregon truffles good, on par with the legendary truffles of Europe, or even special enough to serve your sweetie on Valentine's Day?

With local winter white and black truffles at their peak, we figured it's time to find out.

Before we get to that, though, a little background on this sought-after fungus.

Most truffles come from France and Italy, where pigs and trained dogs sniff them out near the roots of oak and poplar trees. Purveyors pass them on to chefs and consumers for a small fortune. Before the season ended early this month, a pound of prized white Alba truffles cost \$1,600, while Perigord blacks, when you can get them, are pushing \$900 per pound. As truffle supplies shrink, prices spike even higher.

Oregon's black and white truffles, different but closely related, botanically speaking, to Europe's, can be had for a fraction of that cost, \$100 to \$450 per pound -- and no less an authority than the late James Beard once proclaimed our truffles their equal. Most chefs won't go that far, but most still favor local ones because they're cheap enough to really cook with and likely to be fresher. "By the time (imported truffles) get to us they're so dry," said chef Vitaly Paley of Paley's Place. "I'm like, 'I paid how much for this?' I would say, local truffles any day."

Too often, though, our truffles are dismissed as sub-par. They've gotten a bad rap because there are a lot of not-great specimens being sold. They're scooped up when they're not ripe or even mature, said Charles Lefevre, president of the Corvallis-based North American Truffling Society and widely considered the world's expert on Oregon truffles. Raking and indiscriminate harvesting are to blame, he says. "It's analogous to picking tomatoes with a blindfold on," said Lefevre, who holds a doctorate in forest mycology and owns a company that sells seedling trees inoculated with truffles.

"You should have had a strong experience, and if you didn't, the person didn't serve you a good one."

Within the perfect window of ripeness, often only a few days, you can expect black truffles fragrant with fruit and floral aromas, and white truffles redolent of ripe cheese and earthy fungus, with a distinctive propane or acetone smell.

Like caviar or oysters, it's an acquired taste, one that sworn truffle fans can't get enough of.

We got our hands on the best truffles we could find, from here and from Europe, to taste for ourselves what the fuss is all about. And we asked a few knowledgeable chefs to join us.

On our tasting panel: Philippe Boulot of The Heathman Restaurant; Peter Schuh of Giorgio's, formerly of Thomas Keller's Per Se in New York; Greg Higgins of Higgins Restaurant; and Joe Guth of Provvista Specialty Foods, importers of truffles and other high-end foods.

Going into it, we all agreed that European and Oregon truffles were different animals, with different seasons and characteristics -- a true comparison was impossible. The chefs' job was to judge each type on its relative merits.

We got an early lesson about these fickle fungi when the European truffles, because of a shipping glitch, arrived a day late, though still in time for the tasting.

The Oregon truffles arrived on schedule, ferried up the Willamette Valley from Eugene by Jim Wells, a bearded giant of a man in rainbow suspenders who prides himself on selling only ripe truffles gleaned without the vigorous raking that damages habitat. He handed over two plastic baggies plus detailed instructions on truffle care and feeding: refrigerate, check daily for overripe "sweaters" and "rotters," and regularly change their cloak of unbleached paper towels.

On tasting day, all four types were passed in sealed glass jars. The chefs sniffed, squeezed and sliced the truffles to check color, texture and marbling. Then we turned on the stove, cooked soft-scrambled eggs with each type of truffle, and let the chefs nibble their way to conclusions.

The biggest surprise came right off the bat.

"That's the Oregon white? They are very good," pronounced Boulot, who a month earlier had compared the flavor to a raw potato. "I've never had such good Oregon white truffles."

The others nodded in agreement, impressed not just by its delicate perfume -- Higgins noted sweet spice and hints of musk, along with the characteristic whiff of acetone -- but also by the low price. These knobby, grape-sized beauties, Guth noted, are a great value -- especially compared to the Perigord or Umbrian black truffles he splurges on at Christmas. Schuh called the Oregon whites overripe, but even he acknowledged the good aroma and price. Boulot proclaimed the Oregon whites "delicious."

A golf-ball sized Italian white Alba, at the tail end of its season, dwarfed the Oregon whites (big truffles command a higher price because "they're more sexy," Wells said), but didn't fare as well in the sniff test.

It lacked pungency in its meaty, garlicky scent. Not ripe, said the chefs, or maybe just suffering from the travel time to our Oregon table.

The chefs weren't offering excuses.

"At \$1,500 per pound, I want something very good," Guth said.

France's Perigord, another large truffle, was pronounced pretty, but not as aromatic as expected. "It's really weak," said Schuh, who compared it to charcoal. "It should be far more pungent in aroma."

On to the Oregon black truffles, which hit the chefs with an ammonia scent, sour and "funkier than any cheese rind I've smelled," Guth said. These had gone from ripe to rotten, they concluded, something that happens to truffles in the blink of an eye.

It wasn't exactly what we had in mind at Truffle Tasting Central, but Higgins gave us an out: A new stash arrived minutes later, delivered from his restaurant's walk-in cooler.

This second batch of Oregon blacks delivered a nose full of pineapple and apple, with hints of port wine, rose and chocolate. To chefs used to European blacks, it was a revelation.

"It's so different than the French," Schuh said. "That black truffle is impressive for Oregon."

Guth called it excellent; Boulot liked it as well. "That's good -- that's actually very pleasant," he said.

Plates of soft scrambled eggs -- the classic truffle companion -- were the final test. Heat and fat coax out truffle aromas, and the eggs proved the point, bringing out the Alba's garlicky, sulfury depth, the earthy-spicy-mustiness of the Perigord blacks. Oregon's fared well under the flame, too.

So are Oregon truffles better than Europe's? Maybe, depending on the day, the truffle and you.

At their best, they're very good. And a whole lot cheaper than the other guys.

That ratio of cost to value, the chefs said, is reason enough to warm to them.

"If I paid something like \$60 for these Oregon white truffles, I would be very happy," Guth said.

And really, why choose?

"I think of it like raspberries and strawberries," said Lefevre, who's traveled the world talking up Oregon truffles.

"The world is richer for having them both."

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