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A glimpse into the secret world of truffles

Until you taste them, you won't understand, and when you do, you might become addicted. Haaretz got a taste of the rare fungi at the Napa Truffle Festival.

By Omer Shubert | 13:25 20.02.14 | 0

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At the first taste, you don't get what all the fuss is about. The first contact of the truffle with the tongue doesn't leave much of an impression. But then, within moments, the taste buds are activated and an extraordinary aroma assaults you from every direction. You're not quite sure if it's the taste or the smell, but you understand it has happened. Now you, too, have a moment to remember and recount. The moment when you were captivated by a bold taste that goes absolutely wild in your mouth and to which you must surrender completely. You may attempt to describe its delightful earthy flavor, perhaps call it the perfect combination of savory and sweet, or focus on the dazzling aroma, the likes of which your nose has never before encountered. Or you might just have to join the ranks of longtime addicts, who respond with a secretive smile when you ask them to describe that strong but elusive flavor – the secret having become the *raison d'être* of their lives, the secret of truffles.

Dozens of such addicts recently converged on the Napa Valley, northern California's wine region, for the Napa Truffle Festival. Attendees shelled out more than \$1,000 per ticket (the event sold out within days) to spend three days around these rare fungi with the unique flavor and astronomical price. The event is produced by the American Truffle Company, whose founder, Robert Chang, first experienced the wondrous taste of the truffle 10 years ago, when he happened to go to an Italian bistro in Munich. "I was addicted from the first bite," he says. "When I got back to America I thought I must try to see if there's a way to grow this thing that is insanely addictive and also insanely expensive." He joined forces with a 33-year-old British doctor named Paul Thomas, a leading expert who has been doing research in the field for more than a decade. Together they formed a company dedicated to spreading the word about truffles and promoting new growing methods to make this rare fungus much more accessible.

There are many species of truffles, a fact that is often a source of confusion, and sometimes deception as well. The finest and most expensive are the white truffles that grow only in Italy, mainly in the town of Alba, known as the world's truffle capital. These fungi can sell for tens of thousands of dollars per kilo (in 2007, a kilo of very fine white truffles sold for \$300,000). But white truffles cannot be cultivated, and they can only be had at the fanciest restaurants.

Black truffles are more common, their price is a bit more sane, and it is said that they can now be grown using a relatively simple method. But with black truffles, too, there are many sub-varieties with substantial differences among them. Perigord truffles (named for the region in France), also known as winter truffles, are the top species in this category. They sell for anywhere from \$2,500-\$7,000 per kilo, depending on the season. Burgundy truffles (named for another region of France), or summer truffles, whose taste is not as strong, sell for half the price: \$1,200-\$2,000 per kilo. These two fine varieties are the focus of the Napa event, and the ones we eat in a wide array of forms during the three-day festival.

White truffles, which have a texture similar to garlic and a flavor said to be even more marvelous and powerful than that of black truffles, will have to remain an object of fantasy for now.

Eat them fresh

In addition to these, there are many inferior types of truffles that have hardly any flavor or aroma. Chinese truffles are considered the worst, and one must take care, since they can look just like the pricey Perigord variety. They are sold throughout the world at inflated prices, even though a simple sniff will reveal that they are almost completely devoid of aroma (some wily merchants, mostly in Eastern Europe, mix them with better-quality truffles). American white truffles, which grow naturally in many places in the United States, are much smaller and also of limited aroma and taste, just like the few truffles that have been found in Israel and other areas in Asia and the Middle East.

Freshness is a key element in determining the quality and price of truffles. The aroma and flavor quickly fade from the moment the fungus leaves the earth. Within four days, it will lose about half its taste and smell, and four days later it will be practically tasteless. Truffles are best eaten when less than a week old, even if they have been vacuum packed as well as possible. The truffles on the menu at the festival had been taken out of French soil three to four days earlier.

Chef Ken Frank, owner of the Michelin-starred La Toque restaurant in Napa, was the main chef for the festival. He hosted three other Michelin-acclaimed chefs who specialize in truffles: chef Alessandro Boglione from Ristorante al Castello in northern Italy, chef Carrie Nahabedian from NAHA in Chicago, and chef Jarad Gallagher from Chez TJ in Silicon Valley. Together they prepared three extraordinary gourmet meals that drew foodies and restaurant critics from all over America to the festival. Gourmet meals based on black truffles, of course. A partial list of the courses: celery root soup with goose and truffle confit; tongue and Japanese beef with truffles; short ribs with sweetbreads and truffles; truffle-coated guinea hen (my favorite); scallops with pumpkin and truffles; caviar with truffles; creamed broccoli with truffles; and even baklava, fine chocolate and dessert cheeses – all with truffles, naturally. And since we were in Napa, each dish was served with the perfect wine to accompany it.

Truffle tips

Certain things get Ken Frank a bit worked up – like people who consume truffle products or believe that such things really exist. "There is no such thing as truffle oil; there is no such thing as truffle salt. Anyone who sells that should go to jail," he says, pointing to several labels to back up his claim: "If you look at all the ingredients you'll see that either there are only flavoring ingredients and no truffles, or only a very tiny amount of truffles. It's not possible to make truffle oil.

I've wasted ridiculous amounts of truffles attempting to make oil from them – It just doesn't work. Oil is not an effective vessel for truffles. I hope the government will eventually ban the sale of such products. People should avoid all so-called truffle products. Truffles are only good when they're fresh, i.e., in the first week. Meanwhile, I still get annoyed when I go to a restaurant and see truffle oil on the menu. I always request that it not be used in whatever I'm ordering."

He has a few more tips for beginners: "Truffles don't work with everything in the kitchen. Don't insert them in sauces and don't eat them with spicy food – that's just a waste. They do go with fish, especially with scallops and salmon. Cheese and truffles also go well together, but you have to give them at least 48 hours inside the cheese before you eat it because the flavor takes time to develop. Anyone who tells you that their truffles are more expensive because they grew in the wild and not on a farm are talking nonsense. There's no difference, and you can trust me on that; I don't know anyone who has eaten more truffles than I have. And most important, if you're going to go ahead and spend the money on truffles, then really do it. If you buy too few of them, it will just leave you frustrated and you won't feel the magic."

The gourmet meals that were whipped up here were true culinary marvels. The chefs were given standing ovations and all the foodies in attendance were left gaping in awe. But if you ask the old guard, they'll recommend using truffles in the simplest manner possible. Truffle cultivation expert Robert Chang likes to use them in a simple pasta sauce with a little butter. Scientist Dr. Paul Thomas insists the most delicious way to enjoy them is just to mix them with eggs. He also says that unlike with other kinds of fungi, "Our stomachs are able to digest truffles even uncooked. These fungi were meant to be eaten, and therefore they are also healthy."

Frank's recommendation is to mix them with butter and put them in the freezer. "They won't have the smell, and won't be as tasty as fresh truffles, but it's the best way to keep them and it's better than doing without any truffles at all."

Local black gold / Ronit Vered

Two research projects currently underway in Israel are aimed at making it possible to grow different types of truffles commercially. One of these, at the Ramat Negev Desert Agro-Research Center, under the direction of Dr. Yaron Shitrit of Ben-Gurion University, relates to a local variety of truffle known in Hebrew as the Samson truffle, which grows in symbiosis with the roots of the *Helianthemum sessiliflorum* shrub (Shimshon Yoshev in Hebrew). The second research project, headed by Dr. Ofer Danai at Migal – The Galilee Technology Center, is focused on the European black truffle, which grows on tree roots, primarily oaks.

"The problem is that we haven't been able to artificially recreate the conditions that exist in nature," says Prof. Yoram Kapulnik of the Volcani Institute, an expert on the interaction between plant roots and fungi. "The fungus grows on plant roots that nourish the mycelium [the mass of branched, tubular filaments of fungi] until it sprouts a fruiting body, which is the truffle. The fungus itself can grow on the root for a long time, but the fruiting body only grows when the right combination of factors is created."

Local truffles are considered relatively inferior and are therefore less expensive than their famous European counterparts. "In southern Israel, they've been studying this subject for many years," says Prof. Kapulnik. "But this is just the second year of the current research. We're at the stage where we've succeeded in replicating the natural process, in being able to make it happen, but we still have to come up with the technology to make it worthwhile to the grower – to be able to increase the crop per dunam so it can become a commercially viable industry."

"In the last few years, there have been reports in the professional literature of successes in cultivating truffles in different places in the world, mainly in the southern hemisphere, that aren't known as natural growth areas," says Dr. Danai. He took over the project in northern Israel from colleagues who began it in the mid-1990s. "In the beginning we were working with a black truffle from Perigord, which is a winter truffle, and now we're studying the black truffle from Burgundy. I can say that there has been good progress; the cold and high-elevation areas in Israel are suitable for growing truffles, and our aim is to make this a new agricultural industry in the north. Last year, we sent our truffle crop to local chefs like Erez Komarovsky, and the response was fantastic."