



CALIFORNIA STYLE

The illustrious truffle, set to be unearthed in California.



Black Diamonds

BY NICOLAS STECHER

Brace yourself: The truffles are coming. We know what you're thinking: *But truffles are already here*—shaved on your risotto (for a not-for-the-faint-of-heart surcharge) and flavoring your fries with their inimitable earthy tone. These nuanced delicacies hail from Europe (specifically France, Italy and Croatia) and, more recently, Australia. But the promise of the arrival of the vaunted California truffle—grown and harvested here in the Golden State—is the thing that has West Coast epicureans palpably excited. Because to a degree not matched in anything other than sashimi, the freshness of truffles is the root of their bewitching culinary properties.

The case for a homegrown crop (the most expensive legal crop in the world, commanding up to \$1,500 per pound in markets in France like Sainte-Alvère and Sorges) is straightforward; the logistics, however, are not. You don't so much grow truffles as make the environment as conducive to them as possible and hope for the best. Preparing the soil for inoculation is a complex, lugubrious process—instruments and measuring devices are needed, conditions of trees must be closely monitored, and plenty of space (a minimum of 3 to 5 acres) is recommended. Since it takes up to 10 years for harvests to begin turning profitable, patience is perhaps the most critical element.

Growers like Robert Sinskey Vineyards, Sonoma County's Sandy and Paul Otellini (former CEO of Intel), and brothers Todd and Trevor Traina (of Napa-based Hermosa Vineyards) have planted trees inoculated with truffles by the American Truffle Company (ATC), and are now simply biding time until their truffles reach maturity.

"We're about one or two years away from [California truffles] hitting their natural cycle," predicts Robert Chang, managing director of the ATC and the entrepreneur who started the scientific cultivation of truffles in North America. "We have been testing and confirming the presence of the truffle on the root system," he says. "We're not just waiting around and hoping—we know they're there, and we know they are vibrant." CONTINUED ON PAGE 144

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For chefs such as Ken Frank, who presides over the kitchen at the Michelin-starred La Toque restaurant in Napa and has been known to build entire menus around the knotted fungus, a native crop will be nothing less than revolutionary. "Getting California growers up to speed is going to be a game changer for us," says Frank, who points out that the need to transport the ingredient from its source to the table is paramount, given the fact that the majority of its aromatic properties evaporate in as little as a week. "Once you don't have the perfume, you don't have the magic." It's worth noting that the domestic crop's taste profile won't vary from its across-the-pond counterpart: "There have been blind tests with [Michelin-starred] chefs who cannot tell the difference between European and non-European [varietals]," says Chang. "The only difference will be freshness—which will be huge."

Otellini insists the wait is well worth its potential rewards: "The beauty of planting truffles is that once they're established, the maintenance is a fraction of the cost and effort of tending vineyards," he points out. "As truffle lovers, we're looking forward to the day when we can share them." •