

When the sixth edition of the Napa Truffle Festival takes place next January 15-18, the star of the show might be local. After five years of cultivation in an orchard in Napa's Robert Sinskey Vineyards, the first Perigord truffle grown alongside the vines in that California wine region is expected to emerge this winter. And, as Robert Chang, Managing Director of the American Truffle Company which imports European black truffles and supplies the science for orchard owners to grow their own, explains, much is expected from it since a fresh U.S. black truffle is superior to even the best one imported from France.

"The aroma is the most important aspect to a chef," he says, quoting the Truffle Festival's home chef Ken Frank of Napa's La Toque. "And you lose half of that aroma after four or five days, about the time it takes to bring it in from Europe." The truffle's home turf isn't as important, actually, as its age. "The flavor is indistinguishable; it doesn't matter if it's grown in Perigord or Australia or the U.S." says Chang. "Even in Europe, everyone craves truffles from Italy and France but Croatia and Macedonia truffles often get shipped to Italy and claimed as Italian truffles." Those are black truffles. The more intensely flavored and prized white truffles only occur naturally, can't be cultivated and appear only in a narrow region around Alba although astute truffle dogs have also found a local variety growing in Oregon where truffle production has been going on for decades.

"Oregon has four truffle species that are harvested commercially, all of which perform very well in blind comparisons with the European truffles," explains Dr. Charles Lefevre, President and Founder of New World Truffieres, Inc., another

company specializing in truffle cultivation, and creator in 2006 of the annual Oregon Truffle Festival. Lefevre



*A black Perigord truffle.*

admits that due to harvesting problems, Oregon truffles initially had an inferior reputation but quality has improved dramatically due to the location skills of the trained truffle dogs. "Part of the original purpose of the Oregon Truffle Festival was to carry out the redemption of Oregon truffles," says Lefevre. "We crossed a major threshold toward that goal last winter when the prices we received for selling Oregon truffles actually exceeded the prices we paid to buy Perigord truffles."

Whether the truffles coming up in Napa will match or exceed that success is a discovery probably years away. But Lefevre knows of several orchards in Napa and neighboring Sonoma County that are also involved in truffle production and could also bear their first results this winter. Others already have on a small scale. "I believe that truffle farming in Napa and Sonoma, as well as many other counties in California has a bright future, and that truffles will make a fine complement to the wine industry," says Lefevre. "It's just a matter of time before the industry flourishes all over North America."