

# Meet the Company That is Cultivating American Truffles

BY KATIE SWEENEY | DINING + DRINKING, NEWS | DECEMBER 10, 2015



Robert Chang



Dr. Paul Thomas

Black truffle lovers, brace yourself. One of the first large-scale, successful American black truffle harvests could be taking place early next year. You may be thinking aren't truffles only found in Europe? Well, allow me to introduce you to Robert Chang and Dr. Paul Thomas, the dynamic duo behind the mushroom magic that is making all of this possible — meet the American Truffle Company (ATC). After a mind-blowing first taste of tagliatelle with truffle butter and mountain of shaved truffles, Robert Chang, an entrepreneur with a ferocious appetite for knowledge (he's got a BS, MS, and MBA from Stanford, has worked as an engineer and marketing product manager, and speaks English, Japanese, Mandarin, and German), decided to make truffles, specifically the cultivation of American truffles, his life project. "I was living in Munich and had my first truffles at an Italian bistro. After that initial taste, I became addicted to truffles," explained Chang over a recent lunch at Boulevard. "They are expensive, so I couldn't help but wonder how can you grow them?"

Chang went on a global wild goose chase in search of someone who knows everything there possibly is to know about truffle cultivation. One day he flew to London to meet with Dr. Paul Thomas, a truffle researcher who has been studying how truffles grow since 2001. What was supposed to be a quick one-hour meeting turned into a four-hour discussion about all things truffles. With Chang's business know how and Thomas's grasp of the science behind truffles, the two set out to cultivate, harvest, and study truffles all over the world. vineyard employs sheep to "mow" the cover crops during the winter. Since the vineyard owners were planning to hold some land in reserve for the sheep, they decided to plant a "forest" where the sheep can graze while cultivating truffles below.

What many people don't realize is that 95 percent of all black truffles are farmed and that, like growing grapes to make wine, there is a science behind it. Unlike wine, however, is the black truffle's ability to always taste the same. Its flavor is not affected by terrior or other environmental conditions. Whether it's grown in the French countryside or on a winery in Sonoma, there will be no difference in the truffle's taste. According to Chang and Thomas, with the proper growing conditions and the knowledge of harvest, truffles can be grown anywhere in the world.

While Thomas has yet to figure out how to cultivate Italian white truffles, he's figured out how to inoculate the host trees and prepare the soil for the fungus to naturally grow underground. It takes five years for the conditions to align and next year, the truffles that were spawned at Robert Sinskey Vineyards in 2009, could be ready to be harvested by a team of dogs trained to sniff out the underground black knobs. First in line to receive the inaugural batch of American black truffles? The country's hottest chefs. Freshness is key when it comes to truffles, which have a somewhat radio-active half life. As soon as they are dug out of the ground, they start to lose flavor exponentially. Naturally, truffles that are three hours old, driven into San Francisco from Napa, are going to have a more intense truffle flavor than truffles that are days old, flown in from France. Chefs like Rick Tramonto, David Barzelay, Michael Tusk, Andrew Zimmerman, David Kinch, and Nancy Oaks all can't wait to get their hands on the freshly grown fungus.

The cool thing about ATC is that they are helping people — anyone with the acreage, resources, proper growing conditions, and time — to grow their own host trees and truffle orchard. If you're interested in partnering with Chang and Thomas to cultivate black truffles (which are 10 times more profitable than wine grapes), they will sell you the inoculated trees and provide you with the expertise necessary to grow and harvest the truffles. With access to farms all over the world in Napa, North Carolina, Australia, Finland, Sweden, South Africa, New Zealand, Canada, and most recently, Macedonia, the ATC has accumulated a massive amount of scientific research about truffles. They continue to constantly monitor the biology of each of these growing areas. This data is used to help growers produce a maximized yield.

If all this talk has you craving truffles, make plans to attend the upcoming Napa Truffle Festival, on January 15 – 18, the ATC's annual celebration of all things truffle, now in its sixth year. The festivities take place at wineries throughout the valley and there are educational classes on truffles as well as a dog training demonstration, morning mushroom foraging, and a truffle party at Oxbow market. The highlight is an over the top, 5-course truffle dinner at Ken Frank's at the Westin Verasa Napa.