

It's All About Truffles! Napa Truffle Festival Kicks Off this Weekend

By: Jennifer Boden | Jan 17, 2019

The ninth annual Napa Truffle Festival starts tomorrow and runs through January 21st. During the event, guests will enjoy dining on truffles, truffle seminars, cooking demos and more! For details, we caught up with Michelin star chef, Ken Frank, to learn about this year's Napa Truffle Festival and Chef's All Black Truffle Menu served for a short time in Winter at his Napa restaurant, La Toque.



Black and White Truffles at La Toque, Napa. Photo Credit: Megan Menicucci

Travel Writer, Jennifer Boden: You are the official host chef of the annual Napa Truffle Festival. Tell us about this year's Napa Truffle Festival.

Chef Ken Frank:

This will be the 9th Annual Napa Truffle Festival. It is held every January over the holiday weekend. (January 18th-21st) It is a hands on deep dive into everything truffle for the expert or the novice. There are scientific presentations, visits to truffle orchards, culinary demonstrations, truffle lunches and dinners paired with exceptional wines prepared by world famous truffles chefs and even a wild mushroom foray in the local forest with a fungus expert.

Any special events during the truffle festival that you recommend?

Chef Ken Frank:

On Monday morning the "Dig Truffles" event at Copia still has tickets available and is great way to learn about and get a first taste of fresh truffle. My favorite event is clearly the Saturday night Gala dinner with guest chefs in the kitchen with me at La Toque.

Why are truffles considered a luxury?

Chef Ken Frank:

Truffles have long been important ingredients in French and Italian cuisine. Until very recently they were resistant to cultivation and hence only found in the wild. They are seasonal and challenging to find. Truffles are "tubers", the underground fruiting body of a fungus that grows in symbiosis with certain trees, most often oak and hazelnut trees. Truffles are famous for their intense aroma and truffle hunters use specially trained dogs (and used to use pigs

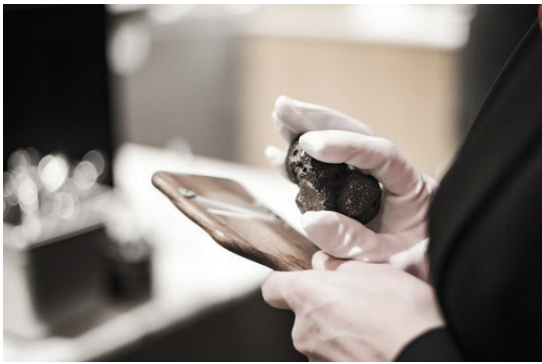


Previous Napa Truffle Festival. Top Left: Winery truffle lunch, Top Right: All About Truffles program at CIA-Copia, Bottom Left: Prepping truffle plates, Bottom Right: Wild Mushroom Foray

which are simply harder to deal with) to sniff and identify the location of truffles underground, sometimes quite deep. The hunter then carefully digs and excavates the truffle.

There are three main kinds of truffles with culinary importance. The Tuber Uncinatum (or Tuber Aestivum, same species 2 names) Black Truffle is found in the late Summer and Fall. It is black on the outside, milk chocolate on the inside and has a mild nutty earthy aroma. It is often called a Burgundy Truffle. The Black Winter Truffle (tuber melanosporum) is black inside and out with a much more pronounced aroma. Both the Italians in Piemonte and the French in Perigord consider it their own. It is in season from late December to early Spring. Both Species of black truffle have now been successfully cultivated.

We now enjoy terrific cultivated Black Winter Truffles from Australia from mid-June through August, their Winter. The White Truffle, Tuber Magnatum, is only found in the wild. Most famously around Alba, but in fact found across much of Northern Italy and East into both Croatia (Istria) and Hungary. This intensely aromatic tuber is most often shaved over risotto, pasta and eggs. Prices for this truffle can reach \$4,000 per pound (last year) though this past year which just wrapped up they were closer to \$1,500, still not cheap by any means. The white truffle season is from October through December.



*Truffle Shaving at La Toque.
Photo Credit: Megan Menicucci*



*Chef Ken Frank's Agnolotti with Porcini and Fresh Black Truffle course served during La Toque's All Black Truffle Tasting Menu.
Photo Credit: Megan Menicucci.*

Why do you enjoy cooking with truffles?

Chef Ken Frank:

I flew from LA to buy my first Fresh Black Truffles from Darryl Corti in Sacramento back in 1978. I have been enamored of the perfume and flavor of fresh truffles since I first encountered them. To get the most out of truffles takes some practice but there is no other flavor like them. I enjoy the challenge and I am still learning.

Tell us about La Toque's All Black Truffle Menu and describe four of the seven courses featured this year and the inspiration behind them.

Chef Ken Frank:

This January marks my 37th All Black Truffle Menu with Fresh Black Truffles in every course, even the butter on the table! Most of the dishes this year are entirely new. The first course "Good Luck Beans with Truffles in a Jar" was inspired by a similar dish that my friend Chef Gabriel Kreuther does in New York. Since it is considered good



Chef Ken Frank plating truffle dishes



Top Left: Good Luck Beans with Black Truffle, Top Right: Sea Scallop “Pithivier” with Black Truffle, Bottom Left: Guinea Hen Two Ways and Black Truffle, Bottom Right: Hazelnut Black Truffle Ice Cream Sandwich. Photo Credit: Megan Menicucci

luck to eat black-eyed peas for the New Year, we got some great little “Alubia Blanca” white beans from Rancho Gordo and cook them with fresh truffle in a jar to capture the aroma.

The next course is a variation on an old favorite. Truffle aroma bonds very well with the protein in egg yolk, and it happens to flavor scallop particularly well in the same way. We layer the scallop with slices of truffle, wrap it in thin pastry and refrigerate overnight allowing the truffle to infuse. We bake it for 10 minutes in a very hot oven just before serving.

The agnolotti is filled with ricotta and a little bit of mascarpone and parmesan to deepen the flavor and improve the “mouth feel”. We made a jam with local porcini and add that to the filling too. I love this course as I get to shave fresh truffle on it table side and meet our guests.

The Guinea Hen dish is a very complicated piece of professional cooking. We make a guinea hen mousse with trimmings and truffle. We stuff the legs with this and wrap them up in the skin. We stuff the breast with the same filling and wrap it in cabbage. The leg is roasted, the breast is cooked sous vide. We serve them with truffle braised cabbage and a mushroom duxelle with truffle.

I have been making truffle Ice Cream for decades. Black truffle infuses the batter with a subtle flavor, not unlike Vanilla. This year we made it into an ice cream sandwich with crispy Hazelnut wafer cookies.

What is a fun fact about truffles that most people don’t know about?

Chef Ken Frank:

If you refrigerate fresh truffles with fresh eggs in the shell in a tightly sealed container for 48 hours, they will absorb an amazing amount of flavor right through their shells!