

Food For Thought: Digging Down Under for Black Gold --- Tasmanian Farmers Hope the Scent of Truffles Will Make Them Stinking Rich

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Many Ancient Roman recipes for truffles begin with instructions to thread them on to a skewer and grill them lightly. Nowadays you are lucky if you get a few dark flecks shaved on top of a dish. At the beginning of the 20th century, France's annual black truffle harvest exceeded 1,000 tons; recipes often called for half a kilo. After a century of deforestation, the abandoning of orchards and acid rain, the yield has plummeted to a paltry 30 tons. That, combined with an ever-wider appreciation of truffles, has thrust prices into the stratosphere -- with desperate gourmets shelling out as much as \$1,000 a kilo for the stuff.

Indeed, truffle growing is something of an enigma wrapped in mythology. Until a century ago, there was no clear idea what they actually were (ideas ranged from roots to frozen nodules of lightning). To this day, European truffle hunters, particularly those looking for the prized white truffles in Italy, operate at night so others won't know where they were looking. Fierce rivalries still sometimes end in the poisoning of truffle-hunting dogs. Stories abound of ways to encourage truffles to appear, ranging from planting trees at certain times in the moon's cycle, getting a basketball team to play near an orchard or using a jackhammer -- the vibrations are said to stimulate the tubers.

Mr. [Tim Terry] laughs off all of these stories as mere mumbo-jumbo. But in reality, very little is known about their cultivation, which has been something of a hit or miss process. Well-tended orchards yield more truffles but there are no guarantees that any will appear. Finding them is also a problem. Traditionally dogs have been used in a very labor-intensive process. At Askrigg, a young Labrador chases a tennis ball and looks a bit disoriented from the overwhelming smell. (Hunting truffles with pigs is unusual nowadays -- they are too difficult to get into a car and they like to eat the truffles they find.)

FULL TEXT

DELORAINÉ, Australia -- Even in the open-sided barn, the smell was overpowering: a miasma of rich earthy notes with something musky and pheromonal. Sitting on a table surrounded by tiny oak saplings was a small bag of dark mush from which the smell was emerging. Three women, wrapped up against the damp chill of a Tasmanian spring, were spooning the mush onto the roots of the saplings. In about six years, if everything goes to plan, nestling in these roots will be the fruiting bodies of tuber *melanosporum*, or the black truffle, the rarest of all edible fungi.

Many Ancient Roman recipes for truffles begin with instructions to thread them on to a skewer and grill them lightly. Nowadays you are lucky if you get a few dark flecks shaved on top of a dish. At the beginning of the 20th century, France's annual black truffle harvest exceeded 1,000 tons; recipes often called for half a kilo. After a century of deforestation, the abandoning of orchards and acid rain, the yield has plummeted to a paltry 30 tons. That, combined with an ever-wider appreciation of truffles, has thrust prices into the stratosphere -- with desperate gourmets shelling out as much as \$1,000 a kilo for the stuff.

Little surprise, then, that enterprising farmers half a world away sniffed a gold mine. In the past decade cultivators in

New Zealand, the Australian state of Tasmania and at a few outposts in Europe and North America began to establish commercial trufferies in the hopes of producing the ultimate cash crop.

Tim Terry, owner of the Askrigg estate, was one of the first farmers in Tasmania to trade in his sheep for the elusive truffle. Located near the town of Deloraine, his farm lies in the sort of lush, rolling landscape that might be in France but for the distinctly Australian trees. Lining the driveway are several hectares of oak and hazelnut that are already starting to produce. In this fertile soil, truffles appeared just four years after the trees were planted, two years earlier than expected.

Though diners have feasted on the fungus for millennia, it was only in the 1970s, after truffle supplies had begun to shrink severely, that farmers in France began to look for ways to cultivate them, rather than simply hunt for them in the wild. That led to the inoculation process, in which a dark mixture of mashed up truffles and other ingredients are spread on sapling roots.

Mr. Terry keeps the recipe for his mixture a closely guarded secret. It took some time to devise and it will take years more to test its true effectiveness. He now has 31 hectares of his elixir under trees and is planning another 50 hectares if he can raise the capital. The careful irrigation and pruning required means the operation doesn't come cheap. A hectare costs \$15,000 to plant the trees and another \$20,000 in maintenance before it will yield its first truffle.

But the payoff could be tremendous. If production in Australia and New Zealand really takes off, it could revolutionize the market, providing fresh truffles year round instead of just during the European winter. Truffles from Mr. Terry's farm currently sell for \$1,250 a kilogram but he thinks with increased production that could fall to \$750 (wholesale prices in Perigord, France, at the moment are around \$785 a kilogram).

"We need to get a larger area under cultivation but it takes a huge amount of money to get it running as a commercial venture," says Mr. Terry. A larger area would enable them to guarantee supplies to restaurants and also to open a processing plant to produce truffle oils, pastes and pates. But given the difficulties of growing these mercurial mushrooms, don't expect to be lining them up on skewers for a Roman-style snack any time soon.

The first truffles from Askrigg have won raves from chefs who say they are equal to anything grown in France. Mr. Terry hopes the land eventually will yield about 70 kilograms per hectare. The amount produced by more mature trees in France is hard to discern as truffle farming there is part of what is euphemistically known as a "cash economy" -- out of reach of the tax man. "Nobody wants to be straight about it," says Mr. Terry.

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Mr. Terry is working on an electronic nose, a group of vehicle-mounted sensors coupled with a Global Positioning System receiver that will be able to sniff out truffles. The device, being developed with the University of South Wales, could be more productive than truffle dogs, which tend to lose concentration after an hour. "We won't eliminate dogs completely, but we'd like to be able to get 80% of the truffles at 5% of the cost," Mr. Terry says.

I have to admit I never saw what the fuss about truffles was until I ate at the chef's table at Le Cirque 2000 in New York. The chef served a baked potato filled with foie gras which was then tiled with overlapping slices of truffle so it looked like a tiny armadillo. The scent was overpowering, the taste extraordinary. Like so many delicious and complex foods, it teetered on the edge of disgusting. Only then did I understand how truffles have driven so many people to such raptures.

Send comments to awsj.food@awsj.com

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