

(Re)Discovering the Oregon Truffle

by David C. Work

Now, I haven't traipsed the forest floor for Oregon Truffles, bringing them, dirt clods clinging, to my nostrils, the streaming sunspears piercing the moss-encrusted Douglas fir canopy above, but I have met the Oregon truffle with a beginner's mind and have discovered in the kitchen an ally of joyful power and subtlety, an ingredient full of surprising contortionistic capabilities that challenges me to leave preconceptions behind and rediscover myself in a creative exploration of the senses.

Someone once said that people who don't like truffles don't like sex.

Oregon truffles are a world-class, gourmet ingredient. In 1983, "the father of American gastronomy," Portland-born James Beard, declared their culinary values to be at least as good as their European cousins, the French Black and the Italian White. But they are (thankfully) quite different from those cousins.

Me and Truffles

Man, there is very little in this world comparable to the experience of good food, mixed with good people, wine, and truffles. The innately pheromonal nature of the truffle and its effect on some mammals encourages direct raw comparisons to sex and other blissful states of sensual intensity sought after and celebrated by dedicated epicureans around the world.

Over the years as a chef, my experience with quality fresh truffles has necessarily been limited to relatively few occasions underwritten by the curiosity and decadence of those in whose employ I was fortunate enough to reside. In a good year European truffles are very expensive, to say the least. In a season of reduced availability, the cost of the European black truffle *Tuber melanosporum* can run upwards of \$3,000 per pound. For the heady Italian white truffles, it seems the sky is the limit.

So, when I finally sat down to start the process of putting together some material for this special edition of FUNGI Magazine focusing on truffles, I ran smack into a financial quandary. How the *hell* was I going to relay some experiential verbiage, truffle recipes, and photos to our readers on my scant chef's salary with absolutely nothing whatsoever in the budget for ingredients? My desperate mind cast around for possibilities. I have no friends in the European truffle industry, and even summer truffles are too pricey for my blood. All of the cheaper Chinese and Himalayan truffles I have worked with in the past were beau-



Fresh Oregon spring white truffles.

tiful when sliced atop a lovingly prepared dish but possessed all of the lush and delicate flavor, aroma, and texture of a fine deciduous tree bark. I had to find another way.

I thought back a few years to a time when I tried some mushy white truffles from Oregon, frozen ones as I remembered, which half-intrigued me at the time, probably warranting more exploration, but which had unfairly faded from memory, eclipsed by the intensity of my fascination with the European varieties.

I hadn't heard anything about Oregon truffles for a long while and wondered why they had disappeared from my culinary awareness. One night I found myself surfing the Internet for a

way to contact a truffle purveyor out west who might have a budget for public relations.

Quite by chance, I happened upon Oregon Wild Edibles, a half-functional, mid-construction Web site that intrigued me. In an adventurous mood, I called the number listed on the bottom of the page. Jim Wells rang me back later that night, initiating what was to be a 2½-hour long conversation fueled by the fanaticism and dedication of a believer and pioneer (him) and an absolute lover of the culinarily significant fruits of creation (me).

About four-fifths of the way through that first conversation, Jim concluded that I was a kindred soul of sorts and decided that this article you are now reading was important enough to the cause of Oregon truffles that he would be willing to supply the FUNGI Magazine test kitchen (i.e. *moi*) with as many truffles as necessary to appropriately tell their story. In effect, I had received a blessing—*carte blanche* as it were—to explore the depths and intricacies of the Oregon truffle. This was a chef's dream; an opportunity this immense rears its head only once in a lifetime. And it felt honest, because I was not asking for anything close to what Jim was willing to provide. Faced with a generosity many orders larger than I had dreamed of, I silently thanked whatever karmic forces were at work. Humbly, I told Jim that I was hoping to create a cover photo for the magazine that would involve a BASKET of truffles, and that my culinary plans included putting together a smallish gala event which would allow me to explore the soul of Oregon truffle-ness with passion so that I could write about it meaningfully.

Shortly, I would have several POUNDS of truffles with which to create photographs, experiment, cook, and make love to with my inner palate. My refrigerator would never smell the same. I would never BE the same. I was about to meet the Oregon truffle really for the very first time. I had no idea what I was in for.

The package arrived at my place of employment mid morning, and I opened it with a curiosity informed by my previous experience with this domestic fungus, thinking that it would be a second-class citizen in the global truffle society, a less expensive cousin for those of us less fortunate. Let me start by saying that what I had previously experienced as Oregon truffle was but a shadow of what I received from Jim via overnight express.

An overwhelming aroma enveloped me as I opened the petite carton. The fresh truffles contained in this box were thoroughly encased in paper towels inside Ziploc bags, and the frozen truffles were Cryo-vac'd and protected within a styrofoam insulator. How could this much aroma escape such impeccable packaging? I opened the Ziplocs and nearly passed out from the heady vapors. The aroma made me moan. It made me growl. It made me blush. I felt ever so naughty holding them and inhaling their essence in this intimate manner.

Jim had sent a variety of materials to work with and included very specific handling instructions. I had an abundance of fresh



Cut faces of a mature Oregon Spring Truffle, an immature Spring, and a frozen mature Oregon Black Truffle.

white spring truffles, *Tuber gibbosum*, as well as frozen white and black ambassadors of the winter season. The main focus of this *first* shipment was to supply me with an impressive volume of photographable truffles as well as a healthy representation of premium, culinary-quality truffles to experiment with and observe as they moved through the progression of ripening.

Of course I had to show the truffles off before packing them away in the walk-in cooler. I was too busy with restaurant and catering business to think about them until the next morning when I came to work and opened the walk-in, which had been closed all night. Again I was assaulted by an utterly saturating olfactory moment that left me dizzy and amazed. I began to feel some concern for the other items in the cooler, especially the fruit. I would have to move the box of truffles out of this large refrigerator into an environment less filled with susceptible ingredients. I took the box home that night.

It is not in my nature to keep such a wealth of potential pleasure and excitement to myself. Early on in the process I had decided to invite a fellow epicurean and co-worker, Jonathan Sheridan, to collaborate in this glorious exploration. I realized that in order to do this right, to explore the soul of the Oregon truffle, I would need to play around with numerous dishes and

treatments. At the same time I'd need to throw a dinner, a fabulous dinner for a group of foodie mushroom appreciator-types who wouldn't mind being my guinea pigs for the evening. Hmmm, shouldn't be too hard! The difficulty would be in limiting the size of the group.

In my ongoing conversations with Jim I learned that when chefs approach Oregon truffles for the first time, their paths usually go in one or two of four directions. Some attempt to treat these truffles the same as European truffles (which usually meets a mixture of success and flops). Some attempt to overcome their preconceived notion of limited potential of these truffles by smothering a dish in them (so the diner KNOWS that she is eating TRUFFLES). Others will abandon any trust that the truffles hold any innate beauty of their own, using them for appearance only, drizzling "truffle oil" (most of which we now know is artificially produced) on the dish to fool diners into believing that they are eating the Real Thing (Old World truffles.) The last approach, which feels natural to me, is to find my own way: to show the truffles some respect, to trust that they will show me the way if I give them a quiet space to be heard.

The real excitement, the true learning, the communion, the searching and finding was yet to begin. Approaching a new ingredient, an entity of complexity and spirit, is akin to learning a new language. Discovering the nuances of how these truffles would relate to other ingredients—to heat, to acid, to other basic flavors—was like learning a new vocabulary. As I commenced the process with a beginner's mind, old meanings made new connections and extended into unforeseen territory. Only by paying exquisite attention to the initial responses of a new ingredient to its contexts can a cook bring that aroma and flavor meaningfully into the inner palate, where he or she can mentally project that ingredient into new contexts, using it creatively with playfulness, balance, and confidence.

One night, Jonathan and I were experimenting in my apartment kitchen, trying to get a basic feel for the way that these different truffles would infuse a simple double chicken stock. We were in listening mode . . . tasting . . . sensing . . . imagining. Each truffle was first applied to the stock and tasted, allowed to infuse in the hot liquid, and tasted again. The fresh spring truffle, shaved thin, had a marvelous texture in the broth, and its garlicky undertones melded beautifully with the stock's richness. We added different types of soy sauce, settling with a medium-bodied Chinese superior soy. Wow, things were building up! We shaved some fresh garlic into the one with the frozen winter white truffle in it. The effect was explosive—in a very good way. We added a little water, and the flavors opened up even more. We were discovering what I had long suspected, that truffles are strongly synergistic, multiplying the *umami* present in the soy and stock. I began to think about using this effect in a dish: this liquid would be an effective component in a fish course, or a brothy noodle dish. Or

both! I was thinking scallops, I was thinking noodles. Something earthy and centering. Something grounded to the firmament. Almost simultaneously, Jonathan and I said, "Soba noodles." On the inner palate, it all fit. The Japanese buckwheat noodles would be the *terra firma* for the dish, probably with some extremely thin strips of vegetable swirled in for life and color. In this way we came up with the fish course for our menu.

We now had a place to begin. From here we could build backward and forward in time to create the rest of the flow of our meal. Our dinner would consist of five or six courses, the first three highlighting the individual varieties of truffles we'd received, and the fourth, the main course, combining all three. The dessert course would follow Jim's suggestion that we try the frozen blacks in a sweet setting.

Things progressed quickly. Another couple of pounds arrived. Allowing no chance for the precious wealth of truffles in my possession to degrade, on very short notice (four days) I invited a group of folks to a Thursday night dinner. A free truffle dinner would get people interested enough that I wouldn't have to worry about weak attendance. The list landed at a very manageable ten guests, and we got to work.

With *umami* on my mind [see the last Wild Epicure article in FUNGI Summer 2008], in relatively short order we came up with the rest of the menu. I formulated a prep list and a shopping list. Jonathan and I surveyed the local farms for produce, adjusting the menu slightly when we felt we needed to include a particularly luscious addition. Bob from RSK Farms had a bag of his famous Corolla potatoes for us. Maria Reidelbach, my friend, dinner invitee, and New York Mycological Society president, contributed peas and pea shoots from Kelder's farm in Kerhonkson, where she runs her funky, brilliant, edible, mini-golf operation (complete with the Guinness Book of World Records Largest Garden Gnome, named Gnome Chomsky). We bought the morning's blessings from the fields at Gill Farms in Hurley: glistening herbs, broccoli, and cauliflower. I shopped for the meats. I hit the woods for wild mushrooms for the salad and took a special trip into the Catskills to a white birch tree that I knew had on it a nice growth of living *chaga* (*Inonotus obliquus*), which I had been saving for just such a special occasion.

Jonathan and I finished our normal work shifts after a seven p.m. Wednesday closing, took a short break, and got to prepping for the following day's dinner. By a little bit past midnight we were within striking distance of readiness.

The Inn at Stone Ridge – Hasbrouck House

In order to stage this dinner properly we needed to find a location as classy and delectable as the food would be. Early on in the process I'd asked my friend and former employer, Dan Hauspurg, innkeeper of the Inn at Stone Ridge in Stone Ridge, New York [www.innatstoneridge.com] for the use of his gor-



geous inn as our location. It is a lavishly renovated 18th-century Dutch Colonial mansion, offered by Dan and his wife Suzie as “your home in the country.” They provide high-quality, low-key hospitality, and their love for the place shows in the way it sparkles.

They generously opened their doors to us, though they knew they’d be too busy to attend the dinner (of course they were invited). By the time I arrived, some of the guests were already there, having rented suites at the Inn due to the distances they had come. Britt Bunyard, owner and editor of FUNGI Magazine, had trekked all the way out from the Midwest. There was absolutely no way he was going to miss this! FUNGI contributor David Rose and his wife Sue came up from New Rochelle. FUNGI contributor, foodie, mushroom enthusiast, and truffle expert Elinoar Shavit changed her travel plans, flying in directly from Salzburg and bringing with her, we would discover later, a genuine Sachertorte from the Hotel Sacher in Vienna. Maria and her man Chris came in bearing the pea shoots as Jonathan, our accomplice Shane, and I started really cranking in the kitchen. Our friends Carmen and Janet appeared as the ice cream churn finished its noisy work. Our employers, Chef Richard and Mary Anne Erickson, arrived after closing their Blue Mountain Bistro to Go, in Kingston, New York.

Cameras were everywhere. And it seemed as though I was constantly opening up bags of truffles to let the guests shiver and

groan their appreciation as they inhaled and anticipated what was to come.

As if by unspoken agreement, everyone had brought wine. Britt’s he had made himself, from well-heeled musts acquired around the world. I’d brought a delicious Caymus Private Selection Cabernet, which we worked on in the kitchen as we cooked. Richard brought a beautiful selection of French wines, whose names slipped my mind in the excitement. Dan, though not attending the evening’s festivities, donated two magnificent bottles of 1994 Conn Creek Anthology to the mix. By the time dinner drew to a close, we were feeling the warm buzzing love that comes from wonderful wine and good company. After a long period of mingling and getting to know each other, this eclectic group was called to order. It was time to succumb to the comforts of the table. We toasted the generosity that made this meal possible and began the grand experiment.

I spent about two thirds of the time during the dinner in the kitchen working on the food and the other third of the time out in the dining room explaining the next course and what we had done in the preparation, while Jonathan and Shane held the kitchen together.

DINNER

Soup

Beginnings are so important. They are tone-setters, direction pointers, place definers. We wanted to start the meal in simplicity, so Jonathan Sheridan created this cool *Cauliflower Soup*, elegant yet unpretentious, garnished with a lovely swirl of crème fraîche and slices of black truffle (we used frozen).

Method

Dice and sweat a medium-sized onion in a large saucepan in extra virgin olive oil and a little bit of salt until soft, allowing no caramelization to occur. Add 1½ pounds of cauliflower, allowing it to sweat briefly. Add 4 cups of water, a pinch of sugar, and 2 tablespoons of uncooked basmati rice; simmer until very soft. Cool and puree, stirring in 1 to 2 ounces of finely diced Oregon Black Truffle to infuse overnight. Adjust seasoning with sea salt and ground white pepper. Serve cold, garnished with more sliced truffle, crème fraîche, and minced chive.

[Note: you can easily make your own crème fraîche. Warm a pint of heavy cream to about 100° F, stir in a couple of tablespoons of buttermilk, and leave it covered overnight at room temperature in a warm kitchen.]

Salad: Warm RSK Farms Corolla Potato and Wild Mushrooms with Fresh Kelder's Farm Peas and Shoots, Truffled Shallot Vinaigrette, and Fresh Oregon Spring Truffles

With this course we wanted to include elements of hot and cold by mixing warm potatoes and wild mushrooms with cool peas, pea shoots, and vinaigrette. The mushroom harvest the day before had yielded a smattering of *Lactarius hygrophoroides*, *Cantharellus cibarius* (chanterelles), *Hydnum repandum* (hedgehog), *Hypomyces lactiflorum* (lobster,) and *Laetiporus cincinnatus* (chicken) mushrooms to play with. It is important, of course, to cook wild mushrooms completely before offering them for human consumption. Knowing that mushrooms rate high on the *umami* scale, and that the addition of truffles into the equation would likely enhance and multiply the flavors of everything, we kept the blend simple, bright, and fresh, hoping to create a contrast with the darker flavors of the following two courses, and taking advantage of the heady aromas and garlicky, chestnutty tones of the spring truffles.

The feedback on this salad was that the flavors were incredibly alive and the wild mushrooms in particular were absolutely over the top when combined with the truffle.

Fish Course: Diver's Scallop on Soba Noodles and Soy Truffle Broth with Oregon White Winter Truffles

At this point in the dinner it became apparent that each course would surpass the next. Truffles have a cumulative effect on the senses over the course of a meal. We had not previously cooked any of these recipes before plating them up for our friends, so we were caught up in the momentum of this meal. It also had the greatest *umami* intensity. The buckwheat noodles fully expressed the essence of *everything*, including the multiplied nuances inspired by the truffles. This dish really blew everyone away.

Element 1—Noodles. Cook the soba noodles in boiling water. When almost done, add some carrot that has been cut into long thin “noodles” on a Japanese mandolin. Drain and rinse in warm water to stop the cooking process but do not chill the noodles. Divide the noodles between the bowls in small humps.

Element 2—Broth. Begin by warming a nice rich dark chicken stock, 2–3 ounces per person. Add a few drops of medium-body soy sauce. Add slices of Oregon winter white truffle and allow them to infuse for a few minutes. If using defrosted truffles, add some of the truffle juice from the package to the broth. Slice in some very thin shavings of garlic scapes, scallion, or chive. Adjust salt carefully.

Element 3—Scallops. These were big beautiful sea scallops, maybe five or six of them per pound. (We prepared them with a surprise: the night before the dinner, Jonathan cut a small slot into the bottom of each scallop and inserted a sizeable wedge of



David in the kitchen with truffles & Jonathan's arm. Photo: Mary Anne Erickson.

white winter truffle to infuse into the flesh overnight. I believe this made an impact on the overall experience, even if people didn't notice.) Immediately before cooking, season the scallops (one per person) with Fleur de Sel or Kosher salt and freshly cracked black pepper. Sear them on both ends in a hot pan with olive oil or grapeseed oil, allowing the middle to remain medium rare. [For details on the method for this, see Wild Epicure, FUNGI Summer 2008 issue]. Place the scallop on top of the soba noodles and ladle the broth into the bowls.

Main Course: Slow Roasted Truffled Chicken Breast with Potato Gratin, Broccoli and Tomato Hollandaise

Here we combined the three varieties of truffles. This is the course in which we used the most classic truffle treatments. Some preparation occurred the night before. We used whole chicken breasts on the bone with the skin on and prepared a truffle butter, which we rubbed into the breast under the skin to allow the flavors and aroma to permeate the meat.

Method

Combine 1 pound of softened unsalted butter with five or six finely minced small frozen or fresh winter white truffles, the juice and finely grated zest of one lemon, and your favorite salt to taste in a mixing bowl until evenly distributed. Scoop the butter

out of the bowl onto a large parchment paper and roll it into a long cylinder, tying each end to make it tight. Put the cylinder into the refrigerator or freezer to firm up a bit. When firm, slice discs about 1/4" thick, removing the strips of parchment still attached to the discs. With your fingers, gently separate the skin from each chicken breast only enough to form a pocket in which to slide a truffle butter coin. (An alternate method for inserting soft truffle butter would be to put the butter into a pastry bag with a tip that has a hole larger than the largest pieces of truffle and squeeze portions of butter under the skin.) Store the rest of the truffle butter in the freezer for future use.

Potato Gratin

Layering truffles into a gratin with potatoes is another classic way to use truffles; and, although our experience with the Oregon varieties was limited, we suspect that they would pair with potatoes just fine. We used the black truffles with this dish because all by themselves, very ripe Oregon black truffles possess flavor and aroma reminiscent of good Gruyère or Reggiano cheeses, both of which rate highly on the *umami* scale. Since truffles seem to multiply *umami* sensations, the addition of a truffle that has these cheesy qualities into a lush potato gratin might, I thought, put the whole thing right through the roof. Our guests gave this gratin major raves.

We used the RSK Farms Corolla Potatoes again for this dish. (If you prep this the night before, it gives the truffles time to bloom in the cream and permeate the potatoes.) Begin with a medium-sized square or rectangular pan or casserole with 2" sides. Butter the inside of the pan. Preheat the oven to around 375° F for a still oven or 325° for a convection oven. You'll need:

- ◆ whole potatoes, peeled and sliced on a mandolin to about 1/16" thickness
- ◆ 1 pound of Gruyère cheese, shredded
- ◆ fresh thyme leaves, chopped
- ◆ salt and pepper
- ◆ shaved Parmesan cheese for top layer
- ◆ heavy cream
- ◆ 2 ounces Oregon black truffles, shaved thinly

Method

Lay down a single layer of potato slices. (For this gratin I did not overlap the potatoes. I merely laid down a layer of potatoes as closely as they would fit together in the pan.) Very lightly add salt and pepper (Remember, these are 1/16" thick!) Add a little bit of the Gruyère

and strew a few slices of truffle here and there. Sprinkle a little bit of thyme evenly over this layer. Repeat the process over and over again until the level of the potatoes almost reaches the lip of the pan. For the top layer, lay down potatoes and salt and pepper and spread the shaved parmesan evenly over the top. Slowly, through the crevasses on the edges, add heavy cream, allowing it to settle into the pockets between the layers of potatoes until the cream level comes up to about a half inch below the lip of the pan. Cover with foil and place on a sheet pan to catch any cream that bubbles over. Bake until the potatoes are easily penetrated with a knife, usually at least 45 minutes to an hour.

Remove the foil and return the pan to the oven for 10–15 minutes to allow the cream to thicken and the top to brown slightly. Remove from the oven and cool at room temperature. Place in the refrigerator overnight. (Note: Cutting this into portions is easiest when it is cool. The reheating method for the plate is described below.)

The preparations for the broccoli and tomato hollandaise were pretty basic, and rather than include an extended discussion on these elements, I encourage you to seek out other resources (cookbooks, Internet) as needed. The hollandaise was made *sans* lemon with a simple tomato concasse added at the end. The broccoli was dressed with some beautiful sautéed squash blossoms that the Roses brought with them fresh from their neighbor's garden.

Bringing the Elements Together

Working with multiple elements like this sometimes takes a little extra time, so work with hot plates to keep the food from cooling too quickly.

Cut the gratin into portions, lay out on a tray, and heat until very warm in the microwave, transferring to a metal pan for browning under the broiler. Place portions on plates along with large broccoli florets.

The chicken is roasted slowly on the bone on a rack on a sheet pan until just underdone (still pink), rested for at least 15 minutes, and then removed from the bone. To bring it up to temperature, warm the breasts gently in about 3/4" of truffled chicken stock on the stovetop, then flash under the broiler to finish browning the tops. Lean the breast against the gratin over the broccoli stem to raise it from the plate. Sauce around the chicken and over the broccoli. Shave some fresh spring truffles over the broccoli. *Voilà!*



Saucing. Photo: Mary Anne Erickson.

Dessert: Truffle Ice Cream, Coffee with Truffled Whipped Cream, Chaga Chai

As you might imagine, by the end of the main course people were slowing down a bit. There was a buzzing, sated aura wafting from the table, and I actually saw some plates that weren't finished when we cleared the table, but there was still plenty of energy there, too. People basked in the legendary sensual spell that comes from consuming truffles (and wine and good food).

When we brought out dessert, our appearance was greeted with, "Oh my God," "Truffles for dessert?" and simply, "Wow." If I hadn't tasted it myself while prepping the night before, I too would have sat in suspicious disbelief. But this was so unusual and fun to spring on people, and absolutely delicious.

The base for the ice cream must be started the night before to infuse the cream with the truffles and to ensure that it is as cold as possible before churning. You'll need:

- ◆ 1 quart heavy cream
- ◆ 2 cup milk
- ◆ 14 egg yolks
- ◆ 5–6 whole Oregon black truffles
- ◆ ¾ cup sugar

Method

This is essentially a crème anglaise without the vanilla beans. In a large mixing bowl, whisk together the egg yolks with half of the sugar until dark yellow. Heat the milk and cream in a saucepan with half of the sugar and the whole truffles to just under a simmer. Carefully temper in the hot milk and cream and the truffles into the yolks by adding a small amount of the hot liquid while mixing the yolks with a rubber spatula. Add a little bit more while stirring. A little more. Now you can add the rest all at once. Place the bowl over a hot water bath, continuing to stir gently. (This can also be done in a double boiler. The aim here is not to allow the mixture to coagulate into scrambled eggs but rather to encourage it to slowly thicken into a smooth sauce by gradually heating it.) When you can scoop up some sauce on the spatula and drip a complete figure-8 back into the sauce before the beginning of the 8 disappears, you are ready to remove the bowl to an ice water bath to cool quickly. (You want it to reduce in temperature rapidly because you do not want the egg proteins to coagulate any further.)

Leave the truffles in the custard base overnight. Before adding the custard to the ice cream machine (following whatever directions are appropriate to your machine) remove the truffles, dice them fine, and reserve them until the ice cream is ready to come out of the machine. Fold them into the ice cream while it is still soft. Remove the ice cream to the freezer to firm up. We served the ice cream with a simple sugar cookie. Divine.

The whipped cream for the coffee was merely Oregon black truffles minced and added to the cream with sugar to taste and whipped. This was so good that one couple spoke frankly about taking it home to spread all over each other. Truffles inspire such ideas!

Coming Together at the End

During dessert, Jonathan and I agreed to sit down with our friends at the table. We were able to gather their impressions about the meal, and we could finally slow down enough to assess what we had done. We had truly met the Oregon Truffles for the first time, learning their language. We had explored new ground with each other, conversing with respectful and open minds. It was during these lovely moments, after so much work to make this dinner happen, that I realized something profound about my experience with Oregon truffles

I think those who are accustomed to the experience of European truffles are used to being smacked between the eyes with the intensity of the experience. It's true that Old World truffles tend to be saturating in their effect—the proverbial ice pick in the forehead. What I learned from the Oregon varieties that we worked with for this dinner was that sometimes subtlety opens up possibilities that intensity will not abide. With the Oregon truffles I was able to explore nuances of flavor and aroma that would have been nearly impossible with the highborn truffles. By not overpowering the other ingredients, the Oregon truffles become more accessible as part of the chef's palette vocabulary by drastically enhancing compatibility between flavors, synergizing umami, and elevating taste and sensitivity among all those involved. It reminds us that sometimes less is more, and that when we back off from the need for intensity, we create space to enhance and experience other elements more completely, which can be even deeper and more satisfying.

In the end, it was a magnificent celebration from soup to nuts, including those afterglow moments of an amazing meal where people who came to the dinner as strangers literally got up from the table arm in arm. As for Oregon truffles, all I can say



Jim Wells, founder and proprietor of Oregon Wild Truffles!—truffle joy.

is that it is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Back to the Land

At least six varieties of truffles from Oregon are considered to be culinarily excellent. They fruit only west of the Cas-

cade Mountains, from Vancouver Island to San Francisco Bay, below 2,000 feet, and always in association with 15- to 40-year-old Douglas fir trees. Two of them, “brown” truffles of the genus *Leucangium*, have been found only once or twice so have no presence in the annals of Northwestern mycophagy, let alone on foodie radar. A third brown, *Leucangium brunneum*, is found so seldom that it is available only sporadically in certain years. The remaining three truffles in the group are the heavy hitters, the ones that command the market:

- ◆ Winter White Truffle
Tuber oregonense
Early December to Valentine’s Day
- ◆ Winter Black Truffle
Leucangium carthusianum
Early December to mid-March
- ◆ Oregon Spring Truffle
Tuber gibbosum
A three- to five-week period centered in June

Finding Them—Again and Again

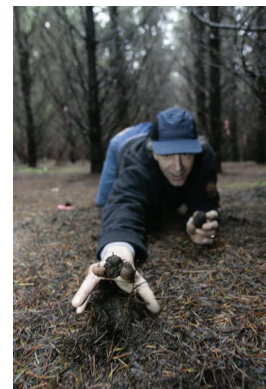
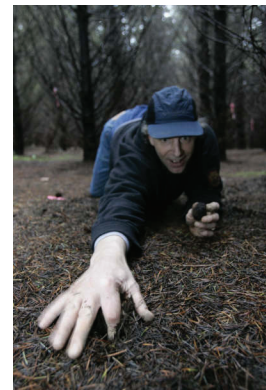
Insistence on sustainability is not merely a sentimental notion. Jim Wells has actually deflected advances by entities looking to open up enormous Asian markets for Oregon truffles by insisting that in order to do business with him, prospective customers must agree to adopt practices in their business that would support sustainability both in Oregon and in their own countries, with a timeline for the development of truffles from their own soil. Both Wells and Charles Lefevre, (president of the North American Truffling Society [see page 38 of this issue]), realized long ago that the sustainability of the Oregon truffle industry cannot depend entirely on wild truffles. As quality increases and demand grows, demand will outstrip what the forest will be able to support, so encouraging the cultivation of Oregon truffles is a necessity. Due to the place that truffles hold in the ecosystem, truffle farming can be considered a form of agriculture that restores

health to the land, as well as giving public and private landowners good economic reasons to manage their old farmland or pasture into stands of Douglas fir. Lefevre estimates that an Oregon truffle farmer could harvest 100 pounds of truffles per acre each winter (at about \$100 a pound, that’s \$10,000 per acre each year) while also growing a crop of timber. Truffle farming also redirects land-use practices away from those that erode the soil and pollute the air and water with chemicals, and toward practices that can support wildlife habitat and a thriving forest.

Besides enhancing efficiency and quality, another facet of the sustainability picture is the use of animals to locate mature truffles, in lieu of wholesale excavation. In Europe each truffle that comes to market has been collected when mature with the help of dogs that sniff out only those truffles that are highly aromatic from above ground. This method is still in its gestational phases in the U.S.A. Wells’s circle of sustainability-conscious truffle experts and handlers (or as mushroom chef extraordinaire Jack Czarnecki of the Joel Palmer House, in Dayton, Oregon, calls them, “our Oregon truffle mafia”) is interested in including dogs in a proposed system of guidelines to be adopted by the larger Oregon truffle industry. Using dogs to find mature truffles—rather than the wholesale use of shovels and rakes (or, in one case, a rototiller!) to excavate truffles that are sometimes not always even commercially or culinarily viable—would make it easier to sustainably manage truffle grounds, increase harvesting efficiency, increase general quality of industry output, and improve the quality of experience for end consumers.

Symbiosis

It is possible to locate mature truffles by the aroma above the ground where they lie hidden, but without a trained truffle sniffer, finding them is easiest by observing the animal life that eats them. The sexual allure of the Oregon truffle is no accident.



Finding truffles without a dog or a rake. Photo series: Michael McDermott.

It is, in fact, a brilliant ruse intended to lull us into private sensual reverie while we are actually being utilized for the truffle's own procreative purposes. Hypogeous fungi depend entirely on members of the animal kingdom to disperse their spores. They *have* to attract us for their survival.

Red-backed tree voles and red squirrels consume a lot of hypogeous fungi. Northern flying squirrels also eat truffles. Mule deer eat them occasionally, as do elk and bears. When these animals consume the mature truffles and defecate—or in the case of the vole and flying squirrel, when they are in turn consumed by the Northern Spotted Owl—viable spores spread far and wide.

When the spores are deposited in the forest, the subsequent truffle mycelia support the Douglas firs by forming a symbiotic relationship with the roots of the trees. Fibrils from the mycorrhizae tap the soil for nutrients and water, making them available to trees. In return, trees supply the fungi with carbohydrates. Because of this symbiotic relationship, trees thrive for longer, and mycelia happily produce truffles.

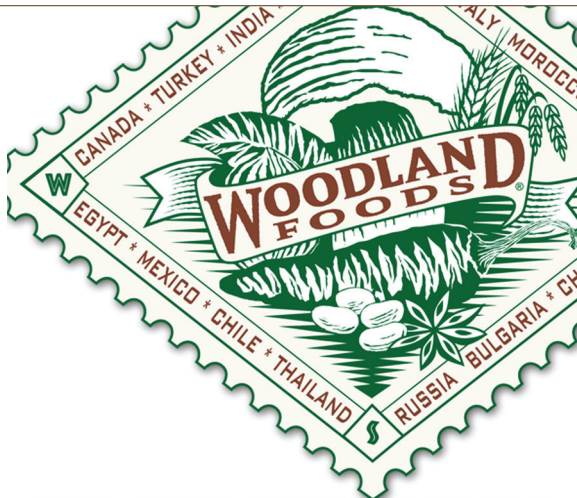
The Impact of Harvesting

Some anecdotal information from a retired high-volume master truffer seems pretty striking. Speaking generally of virgin Oregon truffle sites he has excavated over the years, this man states that every site subjected to “wholesale” harvesting yields less than 50% in subsequent years. Taking into account yearly fluctuations that seemed to be weather-related, digging a given spot *every* year appears to lead to declines in productivity both in poundage and in sporocarp size. He discovered that the method for maintaining productivity involved excavating a site only once every two or three years, with meticulous replacement and re-contouring of the soil after digging. Failure to replace and contour the soil after harvest can rapidly kill productivity of a site.

Because the earth **MUST** be disturbed to gather Oregon truffles, and because of their essential roles in the forest ecosystem, the potential for environmental degradation due to commercial harvesting seems tremendous. Gourmands of the world who discover the magic of Oregon truffles have power in that equation.

I heartily encourage every reader to try (or try again) Oregon truffles, to experiment, to find out the love, and to support suppliers who involve themselves in stewardship of the forests from which they obtain their treasures.

[Editor's note: Discussion of the chaga chai will appear in an upcoming issue of FUNGI. For more information about this legendary dinner, including photographs and recipes, visit the FUNGI Web site: www.fungimag.com.]



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Rhizopogon nigrescens. Photo: John Plischke III.