

Oregon's Emerging Truffle Industry

by Charles K. Lefevre



Oregon black truffle. Photo: John Valls

IT WAS December 1995. I had been exploring the woods in the Oregon Coast Range all day looking blindly for buried treasure with no map and no directions. Knowing what I do now about hunting the native Oregon truffles, I was clearly on a fool's quest.

I had found everything else I was looking for. My chanterelle and porcini patches were abundant and reliable, and I had recently landed funding for doctoral research on the

American matsutake. The only members of the culinary mushroom pantheon left to find were the Oregon truffles, and I had no idea where to begin. There was almost nothing written about them; and where people would ordinarily at least describe habitat for other mushroom species, with truffles I got nowhere. No one, not even the academic truffle researchers, would breathe a word.

Happily, I was not without clues; I knew with certainty that there were truffles somewhere within the surrounding 20,000 square miles. I knew one other thing as well: Oregon truffles live beneath young Douglas firs, which narrowed the search to perhaps ten million acres. Trouble was, I had never seen the Oregon truffles, the field guides were useless, and there was no way to distinguish them from the 300 or so species of other "truffle-like" fungi in Oregon's woods. Nevertheless, on the final stop of my first day looking, I found them: the Oregon white truffles. It was a miracle, and no amount of skeptical inquiry will convince me otherwise.

It's odd that a day much like any other can be the turning point in one's life, but I find myself 13 years later living and breathing truffles. The native Oregon truffles are held low in the hierarchy of delicacies, so I quickly graduated to more lofty pursuits. Shortly before completing my Ph.D., I started "New World Truffieres, Inc.: Truffle Cultivation Specialists," which works with the famous European truffle species to establish their cultivation on farms in North America.

Despite humble beginnings with one customer in January 2001, we've expanded steadily since then. The first of the truffle farms that New World Truffieres helped to establish is now producing the famous French black truffles in northern California; we have received international media attention; we are ranked among Oregon's three most promising businesses; and we have provided inoculated truffle trees to several hundred farms around the U.S., including the 200-acre Black Diamond French Truffles currently under development in North Carolina, which will be the largest truffle farm outside of Europe.

Dr. Lefevre is president of the North American Truffling Society.

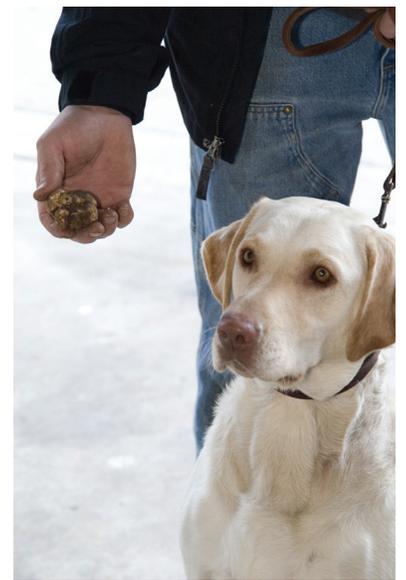
In this profession, fabulous dining and gorgeous wines are compulsory, and I make a point of visiting places where truffles are likely to be served. Our refrigerators are also very often filled with one or another of the many available species—those that I have harvested myself near home at a cost of some Sunday driving, or others at a shocking fortune from Europe. This allows me to see all of the various truffle species at their best and at their worst. Like many Americans, I find that I hold a culinary bias for all things French and Italian, but it didn't take much of this lifestyle to realize something rather startling: in many cases and in the right chef's hands the lowly Oregon truffles can outshine the magnificent French and Italian species.

A Little Background

Truffles and mushrooms are the macroscopic fruit of otherwise microscopic fungi. Unlike chanterelles or morels, which can be picked and enjoyed at any point in their development, truffles need to ripen before they are worth eating. Like many tree fruits, truffles require weeks or months to reach full size, and more weeks or months to ripen, which they do only days before the end of their lives. However, if you know where to look, you can dig them up like potatoes. This, unfortunately, is how the Oregon truffles are harvested. You don't need a trained dog or truffle pig to find them; a rake will do, but what you get more often than not is a lump of fungus with less culinary appeal than a white button mushroom.

The truffle pig or dog's role is not simply to locate the truffles. Good truffle hunters know *exactly* where the truffles will be. But like a gardener who only picks the reddest tomatoes, a dog chooses *only* smelly truffles that are ripe and ready to eat, and leaves the rest to ripen later—something a rake cannot do.

Indulge for a moment in the truffle's perspective. It needs to disperse its spores, but it's underground with no way to get out. It can't squirm or yell, but it is perfectly capable of making a stink. Truffles don't just smell good or bad though: they are not playing around. Their survival as a species depends on getting out of the ground and dispersing those spores. Otherwise, their snug home is a death pit from which only the strongest escape, and they have become very, very good at making their smell work for them. They're strategic about *how* they smell, playing their emanations to the physiologies of specific animals like homely



"I found it . . . why can't I keep it? Photo: Georgia Freedman.

little magicians wiggling invisible fingers and suggesting “come closer. . . .” Some of the many truffle species have targeted us, or at least animals like us, by producing our pheromones. They don’t perhaps rob us entirely of our freedom, but we’re nevertheless willing to pay thousands of dollars per pound to do their bidding. However, the goal is to generate offspring, so before the spores mature, truffles produce as little aroma as possible to avoid being eaten prematurely. Immature truffles harvested by raking, therefore, have no culinary appeal at all.

Now, while I may be accused of taking an intellectual shortcut with all of that, the gist of an evolutionary argument would be the same. Harvesters with trained dogs locate only those truffles that are ripe at any given moment (which is only a small fraction of the total crop), whereas harvesters with rakes find larger quantities, but few that are actually ripe. This tragedy largely explains the low price and poor reputation of the Oregon truffles. But those few of us who have experienced them at their best side by side with their rich and famous European cousins know better.

The Oregon Truffle Festival

Several years ago my wife Leslie and I were mulling over the problem of how to redeem the Oregon truffles. It’s not that we think they are superior to the European truffles. Imported truffles are not always as fresh as we would like, but ultimately, the Oregon truffles are just different: they’re grand delicacies in their own right. As with strawberries and raspberries, the world is a richer place for having both.

The problem isn’t simply one of educating harvesters or chefs or consumers, or getting the field buyers to demand higher quality. The harvesters and buyers know what a good truffle is. The problem is a feedback loop where disappointed chefs demand lower prices, or won’t buy Oregon truffles at all, so harvesters have to be even more rapacious to make a living, which produces worthless truffles that chefs won’t buy and so on creating a stable system that holds the price and reputation down.

Simply introducing high quality truffles at higher prices into this dynamic accomplishes little, since at this point most chefs start with the perception that Oregon truffles are not worth very much. And finally, we face the widely successful cultivation of European truffles that sell for ten times as much and generate far more excitement, making it just a matter of time before locally grown European truffles become readily available to Americans and the Oregon truffles fall further into obscurity.

We needed to change the culture, to recreate the Oregon truffles in a different image akin to that of the European truffles, and we needed to start now. It’s more than just high prices with the European truffles; it’s the wealth of lore, the authentic connection with the Earth, and the experience of participation in a mystique.

It is also essential to place Oregon truffles in the context of other foods. While out of place by themselves, truffles are the kind of magnanimous collaborators that make everything around them seem better. They make buttered pasta into an object of worship, and cast a glow of the good life over entire regions where they are found.

All of this ruminating coalesced into the idea of an Oregon Truffle Festival, at which attendees could experience the Oregon truffles from their hidden source in the forest to their glory on

the table. We imagined the finest chefs of the region serving native truffles at their best, paired with our already celebrated wines and the seasonal foods meticulously grown or harvested from the wilds around us. The weekend would begin in muddy boots and rain gear chasing dogs on the hunt, progress through educational workshops on cooking with truffles, truffle farming, and dog training, and culminate in an elegant Grand Dinner, with guests treated to course after course of Oregon white and black truffles prepared in every imaginable way. The purpose, of course, would be entirely educational, but the classroom would be black tie, and the lesson would be one of exquisite cuisine. All of this has now come to fruition with a groundswell of support from the region, and we’re currently planning the fourth annual Oregon Truffle Festival, to be held January 30, 31, and February 1, 2009.

We’re not operating under the illusion that we can single-handedly create a new culture. That will depend on individuals, businesses, and governments seizing the opportunities the Festival offers by featuring their brands and products. However, since the first event the price of the Oregon truffles has risen substantially; at least two new businesses have started, based on the harvest and use of Oregon truffles; and a number of established artisan food producers are using Oregon truffles in their cheeses, pâtés, and chocolates. The James Beard Foundation has also embraced the Oregon Truffle Festival, naming it among their “out of house” events in 2007 when all of our Grand Dinner chefs were James Beard Award winners or nominees.

Like the symbiosis between organisms, tree, and fungus that leads to the creation of a truffle, the Oregon Truffle Festival depends upon and is designed to foster relationships of mutual benefit among researchers, local governments, food producers, restaurants, wineries, epicureans, and members of the tourism industry, many of whom have made the Festival possible through their support. As more farms cultivating the European truffles begin production, we will embrace them as we have already through the international cast of invited speakers and authors featured in the Truffle Growers Forum and Truffle Cultivation Seminar each year. We have plans to include additional aspects of the truffle world by bringing new chefs, cooks, authors, scientists, farmers, and dog owners together, in a milieu of grand cuisine. It seems that my fool’s quest produced not a grail, but a horn of plenty for all who come.



Tuna Crudo with white truffle. Photo: Georgia Freedman.