## Foodie alert! N.C. farm plants rare truffles

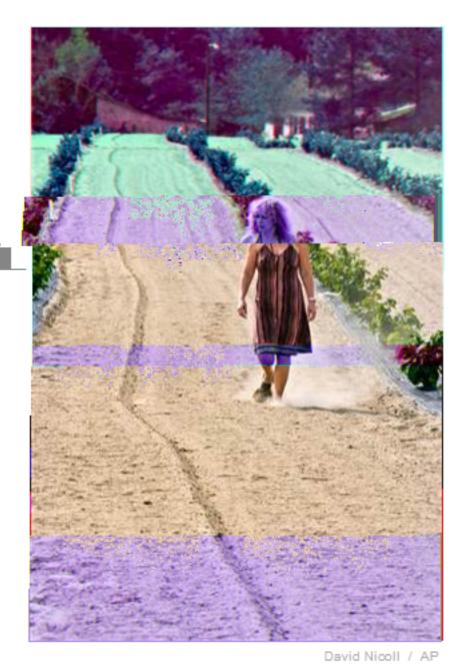
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In rural North Carolina, Susan Rice is planning her attack on the French.

Her strategy does not involve guns or soldiers... Instead, the assault is gastronomical, as she starts a 200-acre black truffle "farm" in hopes of earning beaucoup d'argent from the sale of the musky, earthy, aromatic fungi.

Truffles, which grow underground among the roots of trees, are prized by chefs and gourmands, but difficult to cultivate. A pound of fresh French Perigord truffles can cost more than \$1,500 retail, depending on the season. White truffles from the Alba region of Italy are even more expensive.

"We're trying to make it more of an American product, where we can enjoy it here," said Rice, whose farm is near Vass, N.C., about 50 miles southwest of Raleigh.



Susan Rice walks through her black truffle orchard in Pinehurst, N.C. The demand for black truffles, the delicacy favored by foodies and chefs around the world for their complex, earthy taste, has Rice hoping that she can turn her North Carolina tree farm into Truffle Town, USA, and corner a market that has been nonexistent in the U.S.

For centuries, France, Italy and Spain have

dominated the truffle market. That's in part because the spherical tubers only grow in moist soil in temperate climates and under specific trees, mainly hazelnut and oak. They don't always grow in the same place and are hard to find, even for dogs and pigs trained to sniff them out.

Alan Bergman, a chef and instructor at Johnson & Wales University in North Miami, recalls foraging for truffles in Europe. He said people who have trees that produce truffles were known to blindfold visitors to keep locations secret. Others tell stories about poachers, slayings of dogs by rivals, and car-trunk deals where brown paper bags and wads of cash change hands in a thriving black market.

Bergman, who worked as a chef in London for several years, would lock his truffles in a drawer.

"Sometimes I would take them out just to look at them, then put them back," he said.

In America, the truffle has only recently wafted into popular food consciousness, which has become much more global with the popularity of cable food networks and the organic and natural foods revolution. Even Cheesecake Factory, the American chain restaurant known for giant portions, has offered white truffle oil as a topper to its pasta Bolognese, at a \$3 premium.

To help educate the American palate, Rice has enlisted the help of celebrity Italian chef Nick Stellino, who has had television cooking shows and written several cookbooks.



David Nicoll / AP No truffles are expected to

grow at the North Carolina farm for another few years. If all goes as planned, the goal is to gross \$20 million in annual sales for the 200-acre orchard in a decade.

Stellino, who sits on Rice's advisory board, is confident at the success of the venture, comparing it to the wine revolution in California's Napa Valley, which also found itself behind France and other nations in quality and reputation when it first started.

"Teaching people how to use (truffles) for everyday cooking is the most important part," Stellino said. "We want to take away the mystery behind the truffle and make it available for everybody."

Brent Demarest, a produce buyer for Whole Foods Market, is interested in Rice's operation and, if the quality of the truffles is good, plans to sell the North Carolina truffles in its stores.

Demarest said producing truffles domestically would allow U.S. buyers to get them cheaper

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. \$25,million into the farm.

as been adjusted to acquire the right acidity for truffles. And be incentated with the tuber melanosporum, the coveted re.-based company called New World Trufficres Inc.

the farm for another few years, but Rice already is getting a

gross about \$30,000 an acre in the next five years, and

ering total: \$20 million in annual sales for the 200-acre

md it's also in North Carolina. Franklin Garland harvested his 2 and sold a yearly average of 50 pounds of truffles before hisis currently waiting for a 25-acre orchard to produce new

5 to 20 small truffle-producing orchards in the U.S., said vel in the soil have improved cultivation.

ees and pyay for truffles," Garland said.

perts say. Far-flung nations like Australia and China produce I has sent prices up a couple hundred dollars a pound over the

s little to do with quality.

er im Morth Mitauni Reach, said it's hard to prodict if Ries will. at truffles grown in countries like China.

and flavor and availability, you're comparing very different

l the rest of the world," Izquierdo said.

d take a while for Americans to catch on, especially in the face rufile market.

gman said. "I'm not sure if it will become part of our culture.

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But quantity, as any chef knows, ha Jaime Esquierda, a truitle distributa

Morgunamamberes

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However, he acknowledged it's not

"It's a big startup cost for her. It's k

unknown thing right now," Demart

Rice is using money she made from

She and her investors plan to pung

The soil where the trees will grow h

the 80,000 trees she is buying will

Perigord truffle, from an Engene, C

No truffles are expected to grow at

dog to begin exploring later this yes

If all goes as planned, the goal is to

Simple math results in a monthwat

But Rice already has competition, a

first commercial truffle crop in 199

orchard was exhausted in 2002. He

Garland, who estimates there are 1

methods such as raising the lime le

"It's farming now. It's not, 'Plant in

The truffle market is expanding, ex

truffles, and the worldwide demand

past few years.

\$100,000 an acre by year 10.

orchard in a decade.

finngi.

be successful. He turns his nose up "When you're talking about quality

things when it comes to France and And Bergman, the chef, said it coul

of French dominance in the black t

"It's ingrained in their culture," Be that quickly."

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