

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 gourmards, 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.

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.

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



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.



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.

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