

The Truffle Lady cometh

Learn more about spores and the Jan. 23 Grand Vintage's Dinner.

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By **Rachel Forrest**
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The truffle. That aromatic, earthy tuber found near the bottoms of oak and hazelnut trees, from Italy (the prized white Alba), and France (the rich black Perigord) and even Spain. The flavor is hard to describe, but it's sexy, it's alluring and it's highly sought after. Truffles can cost \$1,500 a pound.

One of the upcoming dinners at The Winter Wine Festival at The Wentworth features truffles, but they're not from Europe, they're from much closer to us, North Carolina in fact, and Susan Rice, whose 300 acre truffle farm is starting to produce those truffles, will be at the dinner, bringing her truffles, along with some from Oregon and France. Certified Master Chef Ken Arnone will cook them in every dish, including dessert. The dinner is Saturday, Jan. 23, so before I go on, go to www.winterwinefestival.com to get a ticket if there are any left! And if they're aren't any left, sorry for the tease.

So, how did a real estate entrepreneur become a truffle cultivator? It was an idea that started with a whiff, a spore that grew and grew.

"It was a whole chain of events. In three weeks my mother passed away, a best friend died and I had a friend who was a top Realtor who said, 'I've got some land ... I'll come pick you up.' So I went."

Rice met some amazing people as she looked at land in North Carolina, families who had been on the land for decades. She bought the first acres for the timber, which paid for the land and that was the start. Another neighbor sold her his land, the land with the springs that fed into a lake, and another sold her more land to get road access.

"I was up to 200 and then I needed 100 more acres because the land was so pristine, so beautiful," says Rice. "I thought about using it for functions, I saw kids playing there. It as almost spa-like."

The last 100 acres were harder to get but Rice waited patiently and got them, but then a friend asked her what she was going to do with the land and Rice told her she just didn't know.

"She said to me, 'Susan, that just doesn't seem like you not to know!' So I just said, 'I think I'm going to farm it. Maybe I'll farm truffles. And that was it! I knew I liked to cook with truffles and I always asked for truffles at Christmas."

Rice planted hazelnut and oak trees that were already inoculated at their roots with the spores from Black Diamond French Truffles from Perigord. It takes up to seven years for the truffles to mature with hazelnut trees and up to 12 years with oak.

"It's been four years, now five years and we know we have truffles in there," says Rice. "With the freeze, we'll have some truffles but some will be from other farms near us and some from Oregon and France. These have the same DNA so they will be as good as the French."

Rice says that truffle farming is becoming very popular in the area, with 50 farmers now, and that the crop is a good alternative to tobacco. In the fifth year farms can get about 5 pounds an acre going up to 50 or more pounds in 10 years.

To get the word out while the truffles are maturing, Rice has released a line of products that introduces the exotic flavor in familiar ways, including a popcorn that has been sold in Broadway theaters.

"What I'm trying to do is give the American touch to a European product using something we know."

And one thing we know is that the Jan. 23 dinner is going to be delicious. Chef Arnone has been talking to Rice and has come up with a fantastic meal using the truffles and paired with wines from Kendall-Jackson.

"The climate where they are harvested and how quickly you use the truffles are important factors. Susan's got some fantastic truffles," says Arnone.

One course in the four-course meal includes a sous-vide truffled duck breast with white corn polenta, baby beets and beet greens.

"The truffles are sliced and put on top of the duck," says Arnone. "It's brushed with truffle oil and then cryovaccated. The truffles are infusing into the protein through the sous vide process. Also white truffles you tend to serve uncooked, and black truffles cooked. These will be the black truffles."

Other dishes include a seared scallops with a Sabayon sauce with truffles and braised bison short rib with truffles in pureed Yukon gold potatoes and celeriac. For dessert, Chef Arnone will create an orange cinnamon cake with honey truffle ice cream.

"This will be made with Oregon truffles," says Arnone. "They have a unique banana flavor and there will be dried pieces of truffle in the ice cream with a truffle honey that Susan makes, which is fantastic."

All of it paired with some rare Kendall-Jackson wines to make a powerful triumvirate of talent and taste.

For information, Susan Rice Truffles, www.susanricetruffles.com; Chef Ken Arnone, www.ka-cmc.com; Kendall-Jackson wines, www.kj.com.

The Dish

OK, this has nothing to do with food, but it has plenty to do with helping people eat — and get heat. H(eat) is throwing another great fund-raiser event on Jan. 24 (then on Feb. 21 and March 14 from 7 to 9 p.m., at the Red Door at 107 State St. in Portsmouth. It's called "A Winter's Tale" and each evening features autobiographical tales told without notes before a live audience. The \$5 admission fee goes toward Seacoast Local's (H)EAT campaign, which provides heating and food assistance to local people in need. Event co-sponsored by RiverRun Bookstore and The Wire. And guess who's telling a story on Jan. 24? That's right, Rachel Forrest (and for this first one, Mark Adams, Chuck Galle, John Herman, Phil Kliger, Sue Poulin, Becky Rule and Liz Wright.). We'll all be telling a personal story with the theme, "Firsts."

"A Winter's Tale" reinvents a tradition as old as humanity for tellers and listeners of the 21st century. The series is part of a nationwide storytelling revival sparked by The Moth, a New York City story hour begun by novelist George Dawes Green in 2001. Stories from The Moth can be on the public radio program This American Life; last year, The Moth developed its own radio show, The Moth Radio Hour, heard on NHPR. Events inspired by The Moth are popping up across the country, wherever creative storytellers can be found. Even in the digital age, it's our stories that make us human — the surprises and obstacles, the cliffhangers and lessons learned, the comic pratfalls and heroic moments.

The artists were chosen for their ability to spin a compelling yarn giving a glimpse into their unique life experiences. The format is simply structured: on each night, we'll stand before the crowd, one by one, and tell a true story from our own life experience, depending only on our memories. Stories will be 5-10 minutes long. And I've got a good one! But it's hard to choose. Find out something new and unique about us all.

Rachel Forrest is a former restaurant owner who lives in Portsmouth. Her column appears Wednesdays in Go&Do. Her restaurant review column, Dining Out, appears Thursdays in Spotlight magazine. Hear her on Wine Me Dine Me on alternate Wednesdays on WSCA-FM 106.1. She can be reached by e-mail at rachel.forrest@dowjones.com.