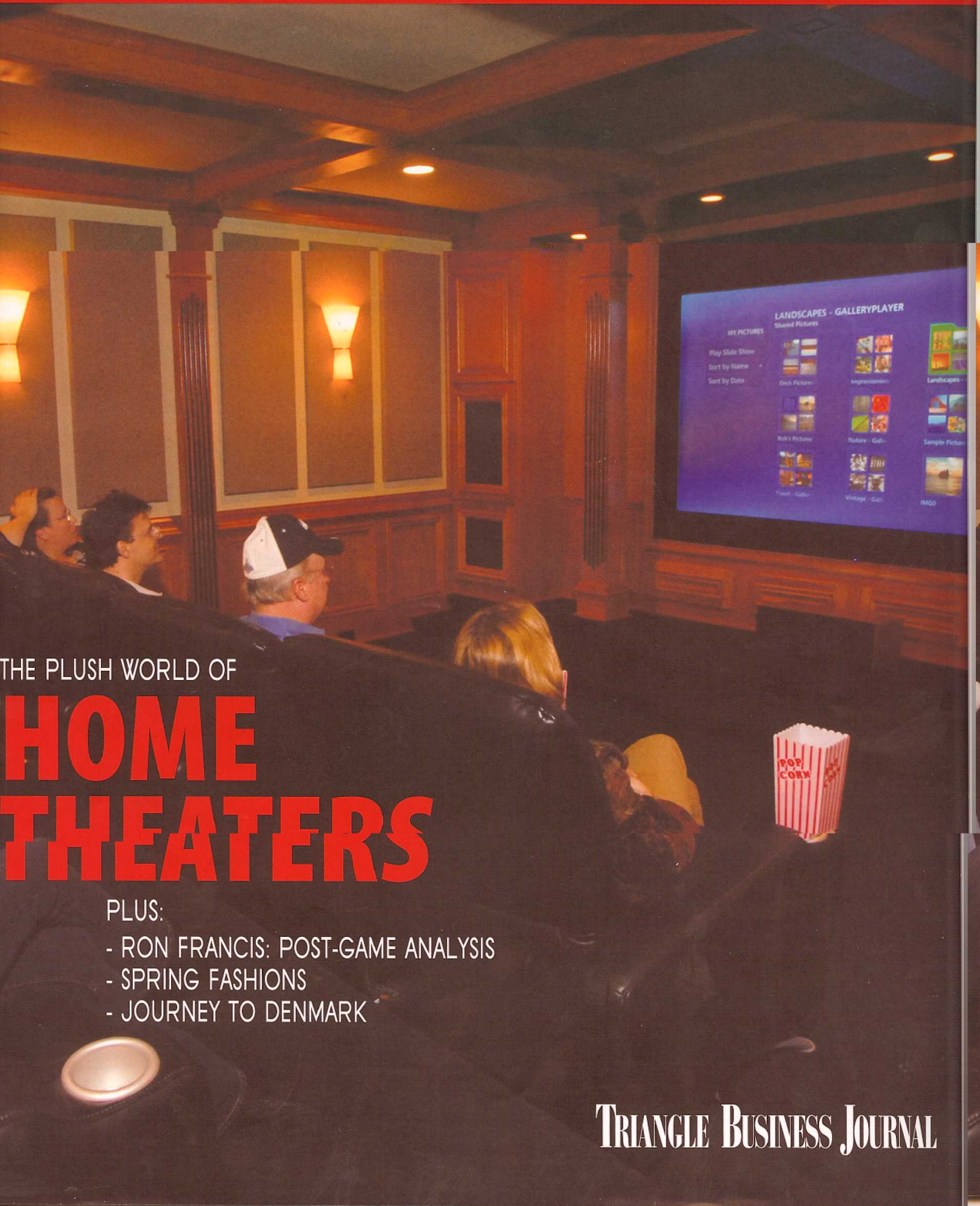


# LUXURY LIVING

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EXOTIC FARMING

# CASH CROP: MUSHROOMS

Some experts believe that North Carolina farmers can grow rare truffles in place of low-yield tobacco.

By Richard Rogoski | Photos by David Nicoll



Susan Rice has a new vision for North Carolina's farms: Instead of growing tobacco, farmers can cart away greater profits by growing rare truffles.

Long considered a gastronomic delicacy around the world, this underground fungus can fetch as much as \$2,000 per pound, Rice says. In fact, Rice estimates her 200-acre orchard could yield nearly \$40,000 per acre – more than 10 times the yield of tobacco, she says.



Rice is not the first person in North Carolina to leap into the truffles business. That distinction belongs to Franklin Garland and his wife, Betty, who have a thriving Perigord truffles business at their farm in rural Orange County.

Garland, who began raising truffles about 10 years ago, received a \$235,000 grant from the North Carolina Tobacco Trust Fund as part of a statewide initiative to help financially strapped tobacco farmers find alternative cash crops. There are now about 50 farmers across the state who have received similar grants to try their hand at cultivating truffles, Rice says.

Another successful truffles grower is Bob Pasarelli, better known as "Chef Bob." Pasarelli spent 15 years as the executive chef in the Governor's mansion, but with Garland's help now raises black truffles on leased farmland just north of Raleigh.

Their success became an inspiration for Rice, who also is talking to farmers in the Sandhills about the benefits of growing truffles.

#### INVESTING FOR THE FUTURE

After growing up in Tampa, Fla., and Savannah, Ga., Rice for 15 years has lived in Pinehurst, where her husband has an orthopedic surgery practice called the Sandhills Orthopedic and Spine Clinic.

Avid golfers, they own a home on the fifth hole of the famed Pinehurst No. 2.

Rice is no stranger to business ventures. Before starting her truffles company she was owner and president of Nicor Inc., a firm that buys and sells residential and commercial real estate; she also owned Forest Haven LLC, which invests in raw land for timbering and land development.

It was while acquiring parcels of

land to use for timbering that Rice began to see herself getting involved in truffle farming.

With ponds and a spring-fed 15-acre lake that can be used for irrigation, most of the 280 acres of land she bought appear to be a perfect location to grow truffles.

Rice enlisted a number of experts to help lay the foundation of her company. Her team includes Charles Warren, an investment and financial analyst; Rice's son, Corey, who has a degree in ecology and evolutionary biology from Princeton University; advisor George Little, a 2004 gubernatorial candidate who serves as a liaison to the State Department of Agriculture; and attorney Mark Mirkin, who specializes in entrepreneurship law.

After putting up some of her own money, Rice raised \$25 million over two years in startup funding.

Rice plans to eventually package and sell truffles to wholesale and retail customers around the world. And while she admits she has yet to sign a contract with any restaurants or high-end food stores, Rice says talks are ongoing with some large food store chains, the names of which she would not disclose.

Because her first trees were planted in May 2007, Rice expects to harvest her first crop of truffles in 2011.

That five-year gap, the time it takes from planting to harvest, may not suit many farmers who are used to quicker crop cycles, says Jeanine Davis, an associate professor and extension specialist based at North Carolina State University's field station in Asheville. "You are tending an orchard for years before you see any returns. That's going to be a challenge for some people," says Davis.

Davis says chefs are excited about the possibility of getting locally grown truffles. But she



*Susan Rice enjoys truffles at her home, which is located near the fifth hole at the famed Pinehurst No. 2 golf course. Below, Rice inspects her truffles plants, which are spread over 280 acres of farm land.*

tell whether raising truffles will be a viable option for farmers or if it will become more of a hobby for a few. "Because it's such an unusual crop, I don't think many will try it," she says.

#### DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH

For Rice, her passion for dabbling in businesses led to the opportunity in truffles. "I had already known about truffles from cooking and used to order them at Christmas," Rice says.

So after talking with experts and completing loads of research, Rice decided to grow her own black truffles – the most prized among gourmet chefs. In 2007, Rice launched a firm called Black Diamond French Truffles Inc.

Truffles have an intense fragrance and carry a unique taste. "The smell is sort of a woody, musty smell," Rice says. "And the taste is very sub-

host tree gives sugar to the truffle, while the truffle provides mineral salts to the tree.

"Planting" truffles involves inoculating the roots of saplings with the fungus and then planting the trees in an "orchard."

But not any tree will make a good host. "We've got about 500 trees per acre, of which 300 are Turkish and European hazelnut trees and 200 are holly oak trees," Rice says. "We'll also have some English oak trees."

While oak trees have a long life, they don't produce truffles for 10 to 12 years. Hazelnut trees, on the other hand, can produce truffles in about five years.

What makes truffle farming an option in North Carolina is the temperate climate, which has some freezing but not to the extent that the ground will freeze solid, says