

GASTRONOME

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Bailliages

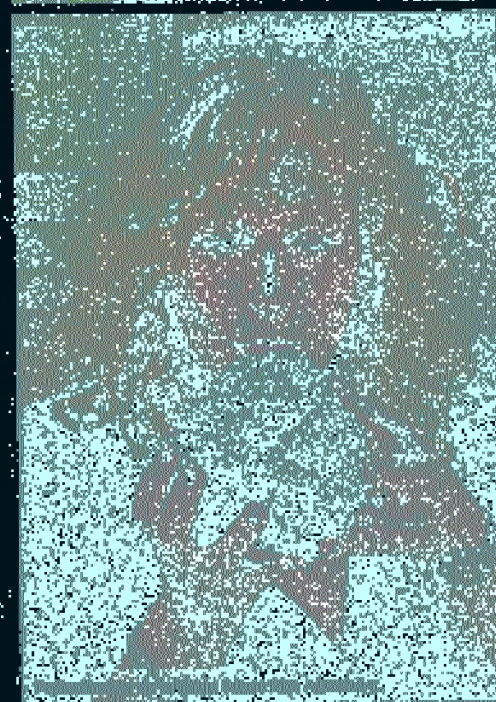
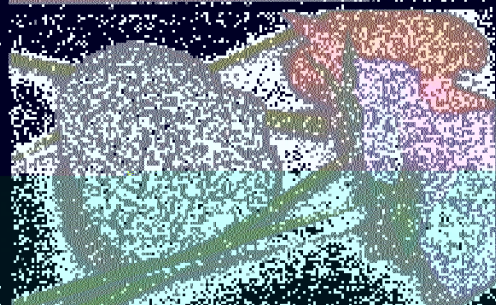
Heritage



1 Calendar • 3 Letter from the Editor-in-Chief • 5 State of the Cheese
 International • 7 The White Ribbon Induction of Pope Francis • 8 The Israel Baillage's Grand Chapitre and Ethical Anniversary Celebration
 National • 12 National Young Chefs Bâtisseurs Competition • 14 National Société Mondiale du Vin Meeting and Young Cheffiers Competition
 Politeness • 17 Building a Good Foundation • 18 Events
 France • 21 Mr. Maxime Rey - Maître Bâtisseur de l'année française
 Baillages • 23 Events
 Review • 112 Interview with David & Marjolaine
 Société Mondiale du Vin • 113 From Off the Vine • 115 Events
 124 Officers and Baillages • 128 National Offices

Heavenly Fungi

Truffles...Seducing Us with Their Perfume...So Rare, So Sexy, So American?



BY MELIE CAPPUCCINO, Assistant Chefs de France American Table Staff

KNOWN AS THE "DIAMOND of the gourmet world" and sometimes by sales as high as \$330,000 for a 2.87-pound pair of white truffles, truffles are the most expensive farmed food product.

Resembling small potatoes, truffles are the "fruit" of mushrooms. Although there are hundreds of different species, only a modest portion is palatable to the human palate, with even fewer considered delicacies. The black Périgord truffle (*Tuber melanosporum*) and the white Italian truffle (*Tuber magnatum*) are considered the most highly sought-after and most precious; they are also perhaps the best-known truffles.

Historically, truffle prices were inflated due to geographic selectivity and the difficulty in growing and harvesting them. Yet, a new, scientific approach to growing truffles, as well as harvesting new varieties, has led to a budding truffle industry outside of Italy and France, which traditionally controlled 85% of the truffle market. Truffles are now being cultivated in Asia, Australia, Canada, Spain, New Zealand, and the United States.

The first crop of truffles was planted in the United States in 1970. Today, there are more than 150 truffle-growing orchards across the country, with the second largest in the world (200 acres) in North Carolina owned by New Hampshire Professional de la Table Seaw. Eric Alexander.

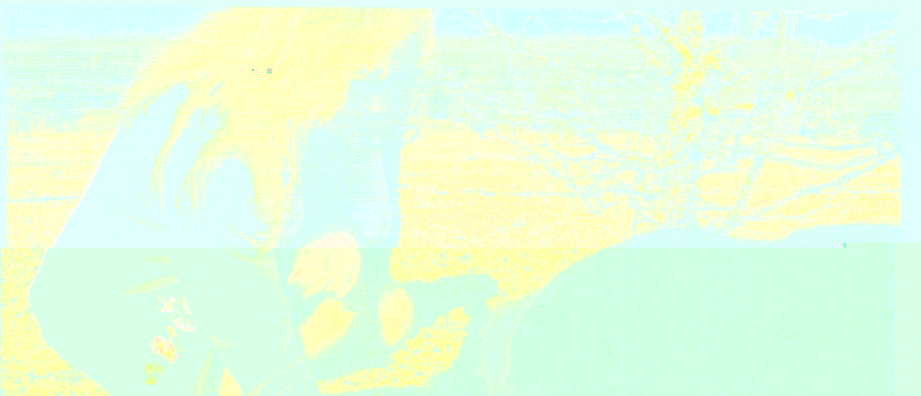
In 2005, Professional de la Table Alexander began her farm with ninety acres, planting oak and hazelnut seedlings inoculated with French Périgord truffles. The farm just yielded its first black Périgord truffle last year. Of her aspirations to bring truffles to the masses, she explained: "I wanted everyone to have a taste of how the truffle tastes and put an American twist on this beautiful food."

An important resource for starting truffle farms is Dr. Charles Lehoucq, founder/president of New World Truffles (www.truffles.com), a company that specializes in planting truffle-inoculated oak and hazelnut seedlings.

Several conditions must be met to successfully cultivate truffles. Mild summers and warm winters are best for these fungi, which live in mycorrhizal or specially inoculated tree species (oak,



New Hampshire Ball Room, Des Moines, Professional de la Table Susan Rice Alexander and Hermost Ball Room in Reno, John Vismarik



flavor and aroma during transport from other countries. The aroma is part androsterone, a component of human pheromones that emits the evocative, musky scent that is undeniably earthy yet so intoxicating that it seems otherworldly. That is why a truffle of just thirty to sixty grams in size will average \$75, and the rare larger ones, like diamonds, are very dear. ❁

