

# We're in Truffles Now

*Philadelphia's finest palates pass judgment on the new American version of the fabled fungus.*

*By Barbara Ann Rosenberg*

**W**hat are you trying to do, *poison me?*" shouts Georges Perrier at no one in particular as he bursts into a private dining room at The Rittenhouse Hotel one afternoon dressed in his tailor-made chef's whites.

Gary Coyle, the hotel's executive chef, is in the dining room too, chatting with half a dozen guests and looking pretty calm about Perrier's outburst, considering that the volatile Frenchman has just been cooking up a storm in his kitchen. Since he knows why Perrier is so hot under the collar, Coyle just laughs out loud.

Actually, the culinary rivals are collaborating on a very special luncheon in the interest of hedonistic research. They're determining which black truffles lend the best perfume to their cookery: the traditional bumpy, warty French variety that grows on the roots of oak and chestnut trees, or the new domestic truffles cultivated in a laboratory by two former University of California biologists.

The implications are serious indeed: If the American truffles are deemed worthy, these two chefs could conceivably start a trend in city restaurants whereby truffled dishes—the apex of gastronomic heaven with their earthy, intoxicating scent—could be offered at a stunningly reasonable price to discriminating diners. French truffles sell for upwards of \$200 a pound, while domestic ones go for a modest \$38 for eight ounces. Perrier, who's made no secret of the fact that he finds the latter highly inadequate, is shouting simply because he deems the presence of a domestic truffle in his general vicinity a terrible affront.

Usually when France and California go head-to-head in competition, it's the grape that contends. But a few years ago two California scientists named Moshe Shifrine and Randy Dorian used their backgrounds in micro- and cellular biology to cultivate the elusive fungus in a laboratory. Once the pair began marketing their discovery, they laid the groundwork for a whole new game of which-is-better that's irresistible to professional chefs and eaters.

Perrier and Coyle are working side by side for this tasting lunch, presenting the results to some of Philadelphia's most noteworthy gourmands, who've consumed far more than their fair share of truffles in the course of routine gustatory activity: Miriam "Mim" Enck of Les Dames d'Escoffier; Herbert Engelbert of the local chapter of the International Wine and Food Society; Mario Mele of the Caterina de Medici Gastronomic Society; and Aliza Green of the local chapter of the American Institute of Wine and Food. This distinguished crew, all presidents of their respective clubs, is eager to determine whether it's time to retire the truffle hounds that sniff out the subterranean French



*Truffles may look merely earthy, but their flavor is out of this world.*



fungi or whether the laboratory-grown species still has a long way to go.

Perrier keeps insisting that the California truffles might be lethal, though there is, to be fair, the matter of his French *honneur* to defend. Coyle plays his hand closer to his vest, reserving judgment.

All four hors d'oeuvres—tiny potato chaussons (fritters) with marinated salmon, pastry boreks (turnovers) of crayfish and leeks, miniature potato "sandwiches" and white port croquettes—and four lunch courses were prepared in duplicate. Perrier and Coyle used the same recipes, techniques and ingredients.

The panel members are intense as they set to work, nibbling in tiny bites, chewing reflectively and sipping wine until all the hors d'oeuvres are gone. "The croquettes really show what it's about, out of all these dishes, with the truffles totally enclosed," says Aliza Green of the exquisite morsels that explode with truffled port wine when they are bitten. "The French truffles seem much more delicate and yet complex."

"The French are more aromatic and the California a little earthier," says Herbert Engelbert. "But to me, it's like stroking silk versus stroking velvet—both are pleasurable." Engelbert, I should note, is prone to such similes; several years ago at an International Wine and Food Society

tasting, he recklessly remarked that a Meursault wine was "like a wheat field on a warm summer day," and none of his culinary cohorts has ever let him forget it.

The tasting advances to the first main course—French lentils from De Puy, in the south of France. Each taster is given one soup-plate-size portion cooked with a concentrated truffle juice furnished by the California Truffle Company and another with reduced French truffle stock.

"There's really no contest," says Green. "The dish made with French truffles tastes like truffles and the other one doesn't." "Smoky pungency," adds Engelbert, "versus nondescript—a more complex dimension that the dish made with domestic truffles totally lacks." The lentils with "pungency" are clear favorites.

The stream of colorful comments issuing from the mouths of the tasters continues. "The California truffles taste as if they're behind a screen," says Engelbert, "whereas the French ones not only come out from behind the screen, but open their kimonos, too."

Each diner then receives two magnificently decorated plates, each with a small "lasagna" of truffle-coated sweetbreads sandwiched between ethereally light truffled pasta squares, all topped with a truffle sauce. Does anyone complain about truffle overkill? Not on your life. Engelbert thinks the California truffle-based dish

tastes more like duxelles (an intense reduction of mushrooms). Green compares the two to wines, likening the California truffles to a young *vin ordinaire* and the French to complex, aged *bordeaux*.

After a decent interval, each diner receives a poached lobster, halved and bedded on mixed baby greens liberally topped with chopped truffles. The dressing is an intense truffle-infused vinaigrette. By this time the group, perhaps sated or just happy and less critical, loves both dishes. "The vinegar in the sauce helps the California truffles," noted Coyle, who has become more stringent as the meal progresses. He likens the appearance of the domestic product to that of "sliced lunch meat on a plate—too uniform."

"Those guys in California are going to have a great market for this stuff, no matter what it tastes like," says Green, "because people like to see truffles on the menu and restaurants can still charge more for those dishes that contain them."

Caterina de Medici Society president Mario Mele, who's been unusually quiet throughout the meal, perks up at this comment. "What's the name of that California company that grows these truffles?" he asks, setting down his knife and fork. "Maybe I'll call my broker and buy shares before they go through the roof. You never know—truffle futures might be the next big thing."

#### RAGOUT OF TRUFFLED DE PUY LENTILS

Georges Perrier prepares this dish with tiny French lentils, which are available at Assouline & Ting and other gourmet shops. To make the *beurre manie*, mash equal parts of softened, unsalted butter with flour.

18 pearl onions  
2 tsp. unsalted butter  
1 tbsp. sugar  
1 cup minus 1 tbsp. lentils  
3½ cups chicken stock  
1 bouquet garni (3 sprigs of parsley, a sprig of thyme and 2 dried bay leaves, wrapped in cheesecloth)  
1 tbsp. California truffle juice (or 4 ounces French truffle stock)  
Pea-size piece of *beurre manie*  
2 tbsp. chopped truffles

In a large skillet, sauté the onions briefly in the butter and sprinkle with the sugar to glaze them. Set aside.

In a large saucepan, bring the lentils to a boil in the chicken stock with the bouquet garni, then reduce the heat to a simmer. Cook for about 15 minutes, until almost tender. Remove and discard the bouquet garni.

Combine the truffle juice with the *beurre manie* and stir into the lentils, simmering until the mixture is slightly thickened. Stir in the chopped truffles and the reserved onions and serve warm. Makes six appetizer servings.

### DIG THIS: A TRUFFLE PRIMER

The strange-looking fungus, a distant cousin of the mushroom, was first discovered in Roman times growing on the roots of oak trees in southern France. Culinary fables tell of French kings and courtesans gobbling truffles by the peck, as much for their alleged restorative powers as for their taste.

Over the years farmers in the Périgord and Vaucluse regions of France learned to forage for the aromatic tubers with the help of special pigs who were attracted to their scent. The pigs, however, liked truffles as much as humans did and often preferred to gobble them down rather than give them up. Obviously, that wouldn't do, so farmers first devised a special pig muzzle, which proved largely ineffectual. Ultimately, they turned to dogs, who could be more easily trained to sniff out the precious tubers without eating them.

Fresh black truffles from France now range in price from \$200 to \$400 a pound in season "depending on the year," says Joel Assouline, whose gourmet supply company Assouline & Ting (314 Brown Street; 627-3000) carries them fresh from late November through March. "We never know what nature has in store for us." The shop also stocks canned truffles year-round at prices ranging from \$30 for a one-ounce jar containing one tiny truffle to \$98 for seven ounces of "pieces."

Even rarer and more costly than black French truffles are the famed white ones from Italy. Looking a bit like freshly dug potatoes, they exude an exquisite, indescribable odor when shaved raw onto pasta or cooked in a cream-based sauce. Though the price for these beauties occasionally tops \$1,000 a pound, still the demand grows. To maximize the supply, Italian truffle packers have resorted to such measures as slicing the truffles and packing them with olive oil in one-ounce jars (\$11.95) or infusing minuscule bottles of olive oil (½ ounce) with white truffle essence (\$3.89). They also stir chopped truffles into four-ounce containers of fresh butter (\$14.95) ready to use on homemade or store-bought pasta—anything to make these desirables more affordable. East Indies Company (450 North 6th Street; 592-8787) carries the full line, including the distinctly luxurious fresh truffles in season.

No matter how many methods are used to reduce the price of European truffles, the fungi remain difficult to come by. Enter the California Truffle Company (Box 1288, Woodland, California 95695), which sells truffles by mail order in a number of forms: Truffle powder is \$5 for 2 grams. Half an ounce of truffle paste is \$11, 50 milliliters of truffled olive oil is \$9, and a 50 milliliter jar of concentrated truffle stock sells for \$14—relatively speaking, a pittance on the grand truffle scale. —B.A.R.