

DIAMONDS *in the* ROUGH

New England's top chefs discover the luxury of truffles unearthed close to home.

BY VICTORIA ABBOTT RICCARDI
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDY RYAN

Decadence. Sex. Bliss. This is what I'm thinking of one recent morning before my rendezvous with Virginia-born Barry Maiden, chef-owner of Hungry Mother, who, hunk of bacon in hand, ushers me through the back door of his Cambridge kitchen and over to the bar. We've gotten together not for something illicit, but to talk about truffles, those earthy, intoxicating tubers that offer a fleeting moment of musty carnal pleasure for an unbearably high price.

Maiden is onto something big: He's discovered a source for black truffles—not in Périgord or Umbria, where many of these highly delectable edibles are farmed, but right here in the US. Few chefs in America have access to, let alone know about, this secret stash of *Tuber melanosporum* that arrives in December from a mushroom expert in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains named Thomas Michaels, who has a PhD in plant pathology and owns Tennessee Truffle. He and Tom Leonard, owner of Leonard's Truffiere, also in Tennessee, are the only two major commercial purveyors of black truffles, also known

as black diamonds, in the United States.

"I'd heard about Tennessee Truffle from my southern connections, who knew I'd be interested in them because of their quality, their link to my home region, as well as my interest in local and sustainable produce. These are the best truffles outside of France," says Maiden, recalling his first shipment back in 2008. "They came by FedEx, humbly packaged in a Styrofoam box with ice packs. I'd ordered about a quarter of a pound, which amounts to three or four decent-size truffles. When I opened the package the whole restaurant immediately filled with the aroma, that smell of dirt, clay, and damp leaves, like walking in the woods—like home." Maiden immediately cut into one of the truffles, sliced off a thin round, and placed it on his tongue, like a communion wafer. "A lot of a truffle's appeal is the aroma. But this one had great flavor. It tasted a little spicy, a little earthy, and had just the right texture—firm but still creamy, not slimy or too dry, just the way a fresh mushroom should be."





Barry Maiden preparing truffles over Carolina gold rice and sweet scallops



Tony Maws unpacking truffles



Maws shaves a truffle over his leek and potato soup.

Oregon State University as part of his doctorate thesis, resulting in America's first truffle-producing tree. Years later, he moved to eastern Tennessee, which has a terroir similar to that of France's Périgord truffle region: well-drained soil, enough rainfall each year, and moderate summers and winters. In 1999 Michaels planted 100 hazelnut trees coated with the black truffle spore and then kept his fingers

crossed for eight years, since truffle-inoculated trees—if they're going to produce any truffles at all—won't do so for approximately seven to 10 years. Michaels struck gold in 2007, and harvested enough truffles to sell commercially to chefs like Maiden.

Tony Maws, chef and proprietor of Craigie on Main, is also privy to Michaels' Tennessee black diamonds. "When I first saw them I said, 'This is the real deal,'" explains Maws. "They were very good and extremely fresh, because they were picked one day and arrived the next. There is no middleman. I am talking and dealing with Tom [Michaels] directly."

Most of the *Tuber melanosporum* shipped in from overseas go through several handlers, thus extending the time from soil to plate by several days. As a result, the truffles' scent begins to fade and the fruit dries out. For the diner, the taste can be pure disappointment instead of enchantment.

Truffle is a very broad term. For many people, the word suggests a rich chocolate candy. In reality, truffles are a kind of underground mushroom. Roundish and with no stems, they grow along a web of fungi filaments around the roots of trees, mainly hazelnut and oak. According to the North American Truffling Society, hundreds of different truffles grow wild in this country (excluding the *Tuber melanosporum*) and vary in color, size, shape, and perfume. Because truffles rarely see the light of day, they rely on animals (and humans and their dogs) to dig them up and spread their spores. The truffles do this by sending up a luscious, irresistible odor that becomes more and more potent as they mature.

"The ripening season lasts three months—December through February," says Michaels of Tennessee Truffle, referring to his black diamonds. "In the early part of the season the aroma is lighter, floral and fruity. Toward the end of the season, around Valentine's Day, the ivory marbling in the truffle darkens and the smell is more earthy and musky." While Michaels can't quantify it, he knows from years of observation and experience that women far prefer the late-season truffles. "They go wild over them," he says, chuckling. "There is a male pig pheromone, androstenone, that the truffle produces," he adds, and that could explain the magnetism.

Michaels got his start in truffles back in 1977, when he adapted the French technique for coating sapling roots in black truffle spores at



A Lagotto Romagnolo on the hunt

GOLD DIGGERS

These dogs have a nose for truffles and an ear for Italian.

When Tom Michaels' Tennessee Truffle first started to take off, the nearby resort, Blackberry Farm, wanted to support him and the burgeoning truffle industry. Their creative approach? To breed the dogs traditionally used to sniff out the tubers in Italy. Enter former elephant trainer Jim Sanford, who heads up the farm's canine training program. Sanford traveled to Italy in 2007 to acquire the farm's first curly-haired Lagotto Romagnolos from a breeder just southwest of Milan, near Alba.

The breed, which nearly became extinct over the last century, originated in the 1500s outside of Bologna, as waterfowl hunting dogs. Over time they became preferred over pigs, the traditional truffle hunters. "In the old days, truffles were found only where you knew there was a source, and you protected this knowledge. But going for a walk with your pig was a dead giveaway that you were headed to your secret truffle trove. Hunting dogs made it a lot less obvious what you were up to," says Sanford. Pigs also love to gobble up the truffles, but dogs don't care for them so much, he notes. "And pigs can weigh in the hundreds of pounds.

I'd rather deal with a 35-pound dog."

Since his first buying trip, he has gone back several times, acquiring a total of three males and five females, who have produced more than 40 puppies among them. They're still very rare, even in their native country, and they're not yet American Kennel Club-recognized as a breed here in the United States. But Sanford registers each dog, and the Lagotto Club of America is taking steps with the AKC to eventually gain full recognition for the breed. Blackberry Farm kennels the dogs, and truffle hunters call upon them and Sanford as needed each season.

While Sanford believes most dogs can be trained to sniff out truffles, he prefers to honor the tradition of using the Lagottos and teaching them in Italian. When he wants them to begin searching the grove he says, "Lavora!" and the dogs go to work. When they alert him with a bark that they've found something, he tells them to start digging with "Cerca qui" (check here). After the treasure is unearthed, it's all "Bene, bene!"—good dog. "When I say that, they look at me and go, 'Prego!'"


Truffles are a fickle, unpredictable product of nature. Tom Leonard, the second major commercial black truffle grower in America, knows this all too well. A farmer at heart and a registered nurse by day, he harvested his first commercial batch in 2009. "I nearly gave up because I wasn't sure they would produce," he says, referring to the truffle trees he planted 10 years before. "This year, the trees are producing, but the chipmunks and squirrels are eating them."

One of the largest truffle tree producers in the country, Charles Lefevre of New World Truffieres in Oregon, believes the industry will take off. "We know we can do it and do it well," says Lefevre, referring to the cultivation of the *Tuber melanosporum* in America. "There are a large number of orchards poised to produce and, although we don't know if they will yield for sure, in 20 years I easily can see domestic truffle production meeting or exceeding the amounts we import from Europe."

Truffles fetch \$1,000 a pound for European *Tuber melanosporum* and \$800 a pound for the Tennessee version. Yet to enjoy a fresh truffle is a multisensory experience that transcends the mushroom's aroma and taste. On my honeymoon near Alba many Octobers ago, I first sampled Italian white truffles (*Tuber magnatum*) shaved over a plate of warm gnocchi drenched in cream. It was cold and rainy outside. The room was warm, the wine flowing, and everyone was indulging in the season's "it" ingredient. First came the giddy anticipation of the dish, followed by the drama at the table—the snowfall of truffles floating down over the warm gnocchi, the bewitching scent rising from the plate, and finally the raw moment of gustatory pleasure.

At Hungry Mother, Maiden makes the same sort of truffle fuss. "First we bring it out to let people see it and inhale the aroma," says Maiden, referring to the Tennessee black diamonds he'll soon be serving. "It's an event. Then we grate it over the dish with some ceremony. The dining room is small, and if the customer's neighbors haven't ordered it, they usually say, 'I want that too!' It has a domino effect throughout the whole room."

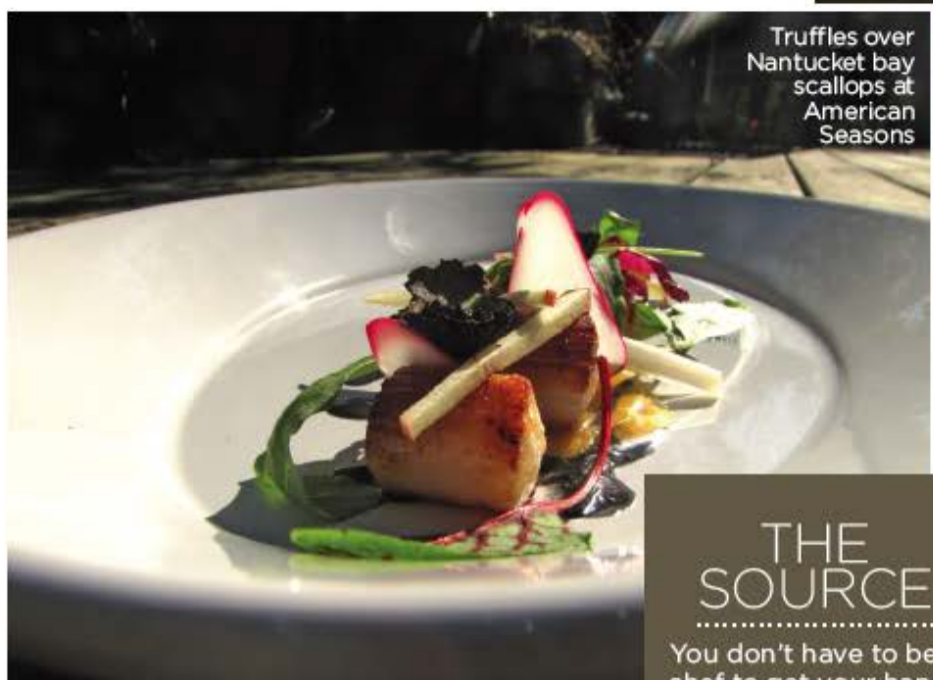
For American chefs eager to offer their diners a more affordable, yet locavore truffle experience, black and white Oregon truffles, another species of the underground fungi, fit the bill. They are delicacies in their own right, yet cost only around \$200 per pound. The Oregon black truffle (*Leucangium carthusianum*) has a tropical fruit



Truffled rice
pudding at Clink

“The best truffle
dishes are simple,
where the
truffle is the star.”

—JOSEPH MARGATE,
CLINK AT THE LIBERTY



Truffles over Nantucket bay scallops at American Seasons



Margate layers truffles over hamachi at Clink.

THE SOURCE

You don't have to be a chef to get your hands on domestic truffles—these companies will ship to you. All three sell black Périgords, and P.A.Q. also carries Oregon white and black truffles.

Tennessee Truffle
P.O. Box 252,
Limestone, TN
423-747-2939
tennesseetruffle.com

Garland Truffles
3020 Ode Turner Road
Hillsborough, NC
919-732-3041
garlandtruffles.com

P.A.Q.
38 Jackson St.
Hoboken, NJ
347-310-6657
paqny.com

scent with a delicate pineapple essence, while the Oregon white truffle (*Tuber oregonense*) bears a gamey, garlicky smell and taste.

Joseph Margate, executive chef at The Liberty Hotel's restaurant Clink, discovered Northwest truffles while working in Seattle. He loves their gamier, more aggressive flavor. The first year he used them happened to be a bumper crop, so he had enough to create a sandwich of truffles, butter, and sea salt on brown bread. "The best truffle dishes are simple," he says, "where the truffle is the star. There's nothing better than a truffle risotto. Pastas and starches are the perfect background."

His inclination to use Oregon truffles isn't just for the flavor, though. Margate hates the disappointment of a batch of truffles coming in from overseas that lasts for only a day or two, because the time between picking and arrival can be so prolonged.

"It's exciting that we're starting to grow truffles here in the US," he says. "We're growing and making other Old World culinary products here, such as cheeses like burrata or olive oils. Why not truffles? If they can produce great wines on Long Island, we should be able to grow great truffles in America."

Margate sources his Northwest truffles through Foraged & Found Edibles in Seattle. And while the crops vary from year to year, he still relishes the arrival of the first batches each fall. He buys them with other mushrooms, so they arrive packaged in their FedEx box in a brown paper bag, like some kind of illicit hooch, surrounded by the more humble fungi. "That smell of truffles and mushrooms when I

To enjoy a truffle is a multisensory experience that transcends the mushroom's aroma and taste.

open the box—that's what it's all about," he says. "You can almost taste it."

Michael LaScola, from American Seasons on Nantucket, has also fallen in love with the Oregon truffle. "They have a great aroma and almost sweet taste. They're also really reasonably priced, which is appealing—I can go crazy with them and shave a lot over the plate."

With the Tennessee black truffles, however, a little bit goes a long way, thanks in part to

that sumptuous aroma soon to rise from the roots of Michaels's oak and hazelnut trees. With his Lagotto Romagnolo dogs—the ideal breed to use because of their history as truffle-hunters—Michaels will head to his groves, where he'll unearth his coveted black diamonds and fly them overnight to Maiden and Maws, so they can treat their guests to the Old World flavor of this small, dark treasure now gaining a foothold in America. **BC**