



WILLAMETTE VALLEY, OREGON
Epicentre of a revolution in the truffle world?

PRECIOUS *Discovery*

Sequestered in Oregon's picturesque Willamette Valley, could American Charlie Lefevre be about to change the face of the global truffle industry?

Truffles are buried in mystery. Want a straight answer or scientific certainty? This is not the field. Ask an expert on where to go truffle hunting and the response will be like asking a fisherman to divulge their favourite fishing area. Ask to accompany them on a hunt and they'll give you 1,000 reasons why they can't meet you or they'll just laugh in your face.

It's not hard to understand why – a handful of Italian white truffles from Alba or French black truffles from the Périgord

can fetch several thousand dollars a kilogram. Unique in the food kingdom, a perfect truffle can reach past the sense of smell, through the taste buds, to a point where they brush up against your soul.

American truffle-lover Charlie Lefevre never got the secrecy message. He is at the forefront of the burgeoning truffle industry in the USA, a doctor in mycology, the founder of Oregon's "truffle cultivation specialists", New World Truffieres, and, as far as some of his European ►

PHOTOS: JOE RAY, STOCKFOOD



THE MYSTIQUE of truffles has fascinated many for hundreds of years

Truffles

WILL BE



colleagues are concerned, *persona non grata*.

"They hissed at me," says Lefevre, recounting an international truffle conference where he gave a speech about his work inoculating trees with the spores of French black, Italian white and Oregon white truffles. "I was trying to present the story that raking is a terrible practice [he uses a truffle dog whenever he can], but they didn't let me get that far."

I ask Lefevre if I can join him on an Oregon truffle hunt. Instead of balking, he gives me an enthusiastic "yes," even guaranteeing that we'll strike gold.

I hang up and wonder if the Europeans aren't right.

Two weeks later, I meet Lefevre at the Willamette Valley Vineyards, about 100km north of Eugene, Oregon ('Truffletown'), USA. The winery shares an exit off Interstate 5 with Enchanted Forest – a 1970s-era amusement park featuring a giant troll statue – along with a Kampgrounds of America camping site, a Buddhist retreat and a religious school with a large white cross with an upper arm that doubles as a mobile phone relay tower. It's an arm-in-arm fit for the area and its budding truffle industry – a mix of trippy-dippy with business, beauty and austerity – with a 'who-knows-if-it-will-work-but-let's-have-fun-trying' feel.

Lefevre takes me to meet winemaker Don Crank and we walk to a deck overlooking the valley, where Lefevre points to a break in the trees next to a Christmas tree farm. "There's some," he says, smiling. "Ready?"

As we begin to walk in the direction indicated, Lefevre explains his attraction to this area: "When I came here the first time, I could tell that there were truffles here," he states simply.



DIGGING FOR VICTORY? Charlie Lefevre on the truffle trail

"WHEN I CAME HERE THE FIRST TIME, I COULD TELL THAT THERE WERE TRUFFLES HERE"

(*leucangium carthusianum*) and the Oregon winter white truffle (provisionally named *tuber oregonense*) are the three main varieties of more than 300 found in the state.

"Truffles have only been used in food here [in the USA] since the 1970s," says Lefevre. Despite the apparent abundance, they have still not caught on like they have in Europe.

Lefevre is now cultivating a small but fanatic fan base, stoking the fire by both organising the Oregon Truffle Festival and, with New World Truffieres, has started a programme to inoculate hazelnut and oak saplings with truffle spores so that – in theory – people can grow their own truffles. Is the project, which Lefevre started in 2003, now selling about 30,000 saplings a year, actually working?

His planted trees and truffles, partners in a symbiotic and mysterious relationship, need up to ten years before bearing

"Right after he left, we ran out and started digging," says Crank, a devoted foodie, "Sure enough..."

Before long we pass through a break in the fence onto property that may or may not belong to the winery. "Most of truffle hunting is people sneaking around on other peoples' land," says Lefevre, adding a non-reassuring chuckle.

We fan out under a thick stand of Douglas firs and begin raking (truffle dogs are rare things in the United States), removing a thick top layer of dead pine needles around the base of each tree and scratching into the surface of the dense topsoil beneath. I assume we'll be out here for hours and pray we'll have something to photograph, but after about

30 seconds, Lefevre calls out, "Here's some!" just as Crank, a few trees away, stops and stares at the ground saying "Oooohhh!"

In a matter of minutes, the duo have uncovered two handfuls of Oregon spring white truffle (*tuber gibbosum*), which, along with the Oregon black truffle

UNDER A TREE ONE YEAR AND GONE THE NEXT

fruit. His first – and only – success story is on a farm in Placerville, California, a place he calls "gold-rush country". Meanwhile, Lefevre's competition, Tom Michaels, announced that he harvested Périgord black truffles in Tennessee in 2007 using a similar process.

Lefevre's method, which he's alternatively vague and surprisingly honest about, may be similar to other methods, but it is his own creation. "I produced trees for four years before I saw anything anyone else was doing," he says.

Over the course of his studies, however, he befriended French truffle legends Gérard Chevalier and Jean-Marc Olivier, meeting the two at a mycology conference. "They were sitting at a table by themselves," he says, indicating surprise like he had found Shane Warne and Viv Richards twiddling their thumbs at a cricket fan club meeting.

"It's a very cliquy business," continues Lefevre, but he maintained the contacts, eventually becoming friends with the duo. "Chevalier eventually let me know that I already knew how to inoculate truffles," he says before pausing, "I don't think he intended to let me know that."

So how does Lefevre do it? "Umm ..."

And it's right here that I understand a little more about the man. Among dedicated truffle hunters, the hesitation is normal. There is lore, trade secrets and, potentially, a lot of money to be made. Though Lefevre is not averse to making money, he also has a scientist's need to share his findings with the community. He loves the idea that mycology, particularly the truffle end of the field, is almost an anti-science; truffles will be under a tree one year and gone the next and no one, scientist or soothsayer, can convincingly explain why. Lefevre is fascinated by the questions and the uncertainty.

"It's ephemeral. It's like buried treasure that comes and goes and it's beyond our capacity to find it," he says with reverence



A QUICK DISCOVERY
Oregon spring white truffles



"IT'S NOT A GASTRONOMIC CONNECTION; I'M INTO THE MYSTIQUE"

with this information, some of his French and Italian colleagues might want to teach him a lesson in an alley he wouldn't forget in a hurry.

The question, however, is moot if the truffles are not up to task. "It's not correct to compare Oregon and Alba," says Kevin West, West Coast editor for *W* magazine, who began writing on the subject several years ago and was, as he puts it, "bitten by the truffle bug", becoming something of a truffle historian and eventually speaking at Lefevre's Oregon Truffle Festival in 2009. "Having said that, the Oregon native truffles are very good," West continues. "That stirring essence is powerful and present."

And what about Lefevre's inoculated truffles?

"Truffle cultivation is the Holy Grail of horticulture," says West. And Lefevre, rake or not, is on the trail. *Joe Ray*

when, seemingly, he should be exasperated. "It's not a gastronomic connection," he admits. "I'm into the mystique."

So how does he do it?

There's another pause and chuckle while his inner businessman and evangelist fight it out. "You can use a Petri dish, you can use spores or roots of established trees ..." he says, edging his way along the path of mentioning the various methods, "I don't currently use them all."

He knows he should keep his mouth closed, but he can't.

"It's a matter of controlling parameters for the plant and fungus so that they can both grow ... and keeping competing fungus out so they can dominate the root system," he explains. "We have to grow the trees in a way that allows the tree and the truffle to

grow. [The truffles] need tons of lime so we add phenomenal quantities of chalk like they have in the south of France. It's an extreme environment. The trees would be better off without it."

It's a bit technical, but is more than most are willing to divulge and it's easy to imagine that if he followed the 'rake' talk