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 News for Santa Fe and New Mexico Thursday, December 27, 2007

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S	M	T	W	T	F	S
25	26	27	28	29	30	01
02	03	04	05	06	07	08
09	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31	01	02	03	04	05

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 Select Directory

Expanding taste for truffles to include tubers

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Everyone loves truffles. The chocolate confections make lovely gifts during the holidays. But if you are looking for something unique for a special friend who enjoys cooking, consider giving the other kind of truffle — the one that gives chocolate truffles their name.

I am referring to the mushroomlike tubers that grow and mature underground. The walnut-size delicacies were at one time as common in the Mediterranean diet as tomatoes. Scarcity in modern times has affected how truffles are grown, harvested, priced and used. But what has not changed is their pungent, earthy aroma and flavor.

Truffles are fungi that grow near the base of trees, much like wild mushrooms. Unlike mushrooms, though, truffles never break the surface of the soil; they flourish in the dark environment that lies beneath fallen leaves and surface soil.

Since there is nothing above ground to indicate where a truffle may lay, truffle gatherers had to come up with a way to determine where to dig. They discovered that pigs — female pigs, to be exact — could lead them to this treasure because the strong aroma of mature truffles is similar to the attractant scent of male pigs. Once the pigs located the truffles, however, the challenge of the gatherer was to get the tubers into his bag before the pigs could eat them.

These days, dogs are used to hunt truffles. With their strong sense of smell, dogs are easily trained to the scent, yet they do not associate the tubers with food — or so the experts say.

But one summer, while visiting our family in Pecos, good friends took Hannah, my new Peek-a-Poo puppy, for a short hike. When they returned I was aghast — Hannah's fluffy white chest and neck were matted in dark dirt. Hannah had found an area of loose soil and dug her nose into it in search of something. My friends reported that it was as though she was a pig hunting truffles.

While it is next to impossible that Hannah was hot on the trail of a gourmet truffle in the Pecos wilderness, she may have been attracted to one of the lesser-known types. There are about 100 varieties, including one that grows at the base of southern New Mexico pecan trees and shows promise as a commercial product.

What distinguishes gourmet truffle varieties from their brethren is a strong, musty aroma and flavor. Those coveted by discriminating chefs include the black truffle — typically from the Périgord region of France — and the more delicate white truffle from north-central Italy. Both types grow in alkaline soil at the base of oak, chestnut, hazelnut and beech trees.

Vanishing truffles

Truffles have become increasingly rare in recent years. Areas where they once grew wild were deforested during the last century. Commercial cultivation — which requires inoculating spores into the soil near the base of trees — accounts

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for 80 percent to 90 percent of all production in France. But trees do not grow forever — a bearing tree will produce for about 15 to 30 years before it must be supplanted by a new tree. Then the grower must wait seven years for truffles to begin to grow again.

Urbanization and the increased popularity of vineyards have also taken a toll on truffle-growing areas. Large parcels are being broken up and sold to small vineyard developers and home builders.

Truffles, which are affected by weather, have also suffered under worldwide warming temperatures. European growing areas received little snow last winter, and the spring of 2007 was unusually dry. According to a recent article in *The New York Times*, this year's production is even worse than that of the last period of high temperatures, which occurred as recently as 2003.

Scarcity, combined with the labor-intensive collection method, has caused the price of gourmet truffles to skyrocket. In late November a record was set when a tycoon from Macau won the bid for a giant 3.3 pound truffle — about the size of a melon — for \$330,000.

While most truffles are not quite so expensive, all fresh gourmet truffles cost more than most people want to spend. Further, fresh winter truffles are only available from fall to midwinter and they lose their flavor within 48 hours of harvest, making timely transport difficult. For these reasons, I have turned to a variety of truffle products that can impart the earthy flavor for which truffles are known without breaking the bank.

Finding truffle flavor

Truffle oils and butters contain small bits of truffles, allowing the characteristic flavor to permeate the suspension agent — usually grape seed or olive oil. Use grape seed oil when you want subtle truffle flavor, and olive oil if you are looking for something heartier; just a few drops will impart truffle flavor into your finished dish. Truffle butter can be used for cooking or added at the last minute.

Truffle powder, which comes from a unique form of cultured truffles, is another easy and inexpensive way to obtain truffle flavor. Cultured truffles are hydroponically grown — in a water solution containing the necessary nutrients for growth — then dried and ground. They are said to be genetically identical to the wild truffle, although their manner of cultivation results in milder truffle flavor.

Truffle powder has a local connection. Moshe Shifrine, the microbiologist who developed and now markets the product under the Truffles International label, lives in Santa Fe. It is no coincidence that Tara's Organic Ice Cream uses the powder for flavoring its black truffle and caramelized pear ice cream or that Ristra restaurant featured cultured truffles on their Santa Fe Wine & Chile Fiesta menu last fall.

Truffle powder must be briefly heated in liquid to reconstitute its flavor. Any liquid called for in your recipe will work, including oil, melted butter, milk or broth.

Recipe

Truffle flavoring, whether in the form of oil, butter or reconstituted powder, is a great last-minute addition to pasta, polenta, risotto and scrambled eggs. That extra, earthy fragrance can lift an everyday dish to one worthy of a New Year's brunch or dinner. Here is a recipe for twice-baked potatoes using Truffle International powdered truffles.

TRUFFLED POTATOES (Serves 6 as a side dish)

6 russet potatoes
3 tablespoons butter
1 teaspoon finely chopped shallots
3 tablespoons half-and-half
1 tablespoon finely chopped fresh parsley
1/4 teaspoon truffle powder, or more to taste
Salt and pepper to taste

Wrap the potatoes in aluminum foil and bake in a preheated 350-degree oven until tender, about 1 hour. Unwrap and let stand until cool.

Meanwhile, sauté the shallots in 2 tablespoons of butter until soft, about 1 to 2 minutes. Add the half-and-half, parsley and truffle powder and simmer 3 to 5 minutes over medium heat.

When the potatoes are cool enough to handle, lay them down on a counter and cut a thin slice off the top so you can scoop out the pulp. Leave enough pulp near the skin for it to hold its shape, about 1/8 to 1/4 inch. Mix the potato pulp with the cream mixture and spoon it into the scooped-out potato skins. Replace the top,

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brush each potato with the remaining 1 tablespoon of butter that has been melted, and place potatoes on a cookie sheet. Bake at 400 degrees for about 20 minutes, or until heated through and golden brown.

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