



**BLACK GOLD**  
An Antipodean truffle; below: black truffles with crème caramel at Grace Restaurant

# THEY COME FROM A LAND DOWN UNDER

*Of all the unexpected places to find black truffles, Australia might be the strangest*

BY AMBER GIBSON

**IN AN OASIS OF** softly rolling farmland dotted with oak and hazelnut trees, the Labradors are at work. Snuffling through an orchard, they diligently scour the ground for delicious morsels they won't even get to eat. Human harvesters follow close behind, gently unearthing truffles from cracks near the roots of trees and determining by aroma if they are ready for harvest. These will sell internationally—sometimes for thousands of dollars—to some of the most important chefs and food purveyors on Earth. It's a saga that's been going on in Europe since at least the days of the Roman Empire. And that's what makes it so surprising that this particular orchard, belonging to the Truffle & Wine Co., is located in Western Australia.

Opened in 1997, the Truffle & Wine Co. is capitalizing on Europe's misfortune: Black truffle production has decreased there over the past few decades due to climate change and pollution. In France, truffles are mixed grade and traded through a secretive system, which makes it easy for unscrupulous dealers to sneak lesser-quality truffles from other countries into the pantries of top chefs.



Western Australia, meanwhile, is home to the same species of truffle found in France, the Périgord, or black truffle, plus rich red soil and a sunny Mediterranean climate that's ideal for growing them. More than 50 truffle orchards have popped up there in the last decade, and so far, chefs are impressed.

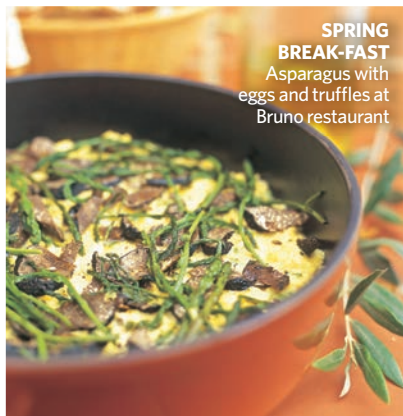
"The consistent quality coming out of Australia is nearly perfect. The perfume is astounding," says chef Ken Frank, of Napa Valley's La Toque, who has been serving a black truffle menu for 32 years. "They were every bit as good as the best European truffles that we get."

What's more, because French Périgord season runs from December to March, while in Australia it's late May through August, Australian truffles extend the season for freshness, offering Northern Hemisphere chefs more pairing opportunities. Top toques like Thomas Keller (of French Laundry fame) and Umberto Bombana (of Hong Kong's 8½ Otto e Mezzo Bombana) have started pairing truffles with a bounty of summer produce, including sweet corn, ramps and asparagus. ➤

CRAIG KINDER (TRUFFLES); COURTESY OF GRACE RESTAURANT (DISH)

➤ “Usually, when you’re pairing something with truffles, you think of dark, rich flavors,” says Curtis Duffy, chef at Chicago’s Grace restaurant. “Now, for the first time, we can pair a truffle with a green flavor profile, like asparagus fresh out of the ground. That opens a whole area of creative use.” One of Duffy’s most popular dishes last summer, for instance, featured Australian black truffle with green strawberries and sorrel. “We paired something very dirty on the palate with clean, bright, fruity flavors,” he says.

Duffy says he has been using Aussie truffles for several years and that the flavor and aroma just keep getting better. “Now they surpass the French truffles,” he says. In fact, French chefs themselves have started to order Australian Périgords. France is Australia’s third largest truffle export market, after the United States and Japan, and chefs like Benjamin Bruno at truffle-centric Restaurant Bruno in Lorgues have been willing to shell out twice the price for delicacies from Down Under. Says the Truffle & Wine Co. CEO Gavin Booth, “It’s like selling ice to Eskimos.”



**SPRING BREAK-FAST**  
Asparagus with eggs and truffles at Bruno restaurant

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**CACTUS COCKTAIL**  
Colin’s Collins, made with a desert-inspired gin

## GIN BLOSSOMS

The popular spirit evolves

The makers of some hot new gins have four words for spirits purists: Let them drink Tanqueray. These folks, you see, are boldly going where few have gone before, creating gins flavored with local herbs, flowers and tree bits to capture the local flavors of their respective distilleries. These new gins still contain juniper, of course, but it’s the other flavors that make them exciting. Take Terroir Gin by St. George Spirits, which evokes the coastal forest near San Francisco by adding sage, Douglas fir needles and bay laurel leaves, or Spy Hop Gin, from San Juan Island Distillery in the Pacific Northwest, which incorporates blackberries, wild roses and foraged tree barks. Thirty locally sourced desert botanicals, including white sage, osha root and cholla cactus flowers, go into Wheeler’s Gin, from Santa Fe Spirits in New Mexico. “People call us when the cactuses bloom,” says owner Colin Keegan. Here, he offers a recipe for his very own cocktail. —ELAINE GLUSAC

### Colin’s Collins

- › 2 oz. Wheeler’s gin
- › 4 oz. Soda water
- › ½ oz. Rose’s lime juice
- › ¼ oz. Luxardo cherry juice

Pour all ingredients into a Collins glass with ice. Stir. Garnish with a Luxardo cherry and a lime wheel.