


 Search

## Archives

- 
- [September 2007](#)
- [July 2007](#)
- [May 2007](#)
- [March 2007](#)
- [January 2007](#)

## Sections

- 
- [24 Hours](#) (8)
- [inside](#) (18)
- [Inside Africa](#) (7)
- [Inside Asia](#) (14)
- [Inside Europe](#) (9)
- [Inside the Middle East](#) (8)
- [regular](#) (50)
- [World Report](#) (9)

## Themes:

- CNN 

## [Earthly delights](#)

September 2007 Posted in [World Report](#)

*As far as business plans go, this one is pretty ambitious – selling Tasmanian-grown black Périgord truffles to, of all places, France. **Matthew Brace** meets the men who have a nose for innovation*



Duncan Garvey's office is no ordinary office. He works in an eight-year-old grove of hazel, evergreen oak and English oak trees in Tasmania. His suit is a standard farmers' issue checked shirt, jeans, work boots and a well-worn straw hat. But then, Garvey is no corporate employee, no city slicker. He and co-chairman Peter Cooper are Australia's pioneering truffle growers and through their company, Perigord Truffles of Tasmania, they are hoping to wow the Northern Hemisphere with their fabulous fungi.

'I was a bit bored with conventional farming and wanted to do something different,' Garvey says, as he falls to his knees and scratches at the ground beneath one of the trees. He brushes aside the fallen leaves, and sniffs for a scent. He has specially trained dogs to help him with this task, their alert, intelligent faces expressive in their quest.



'With any new project you have to look at the market and work backwards,' he says. 'Much of Australia's produce is in season when the Northern Hemisphere's is out of season, and then there's the fact that the climates of Tasmania and the South of France are not that different. So truffles seemed to make sense.'

Compared to French production levels of more than eight tons per year, Australia's annual 50kg is tiny, but the timing is impeccable. As well as crunching the numbers, Garvey has done his research on the ground in Europe, spending season after season in Provence and Périgord – the two truffle regions of France – talking to the locals and finding out how they have nurtured, harvested and prepared truffles for generations. He has lived and eaten with truffle growers and learned their craft. This knowledge has taught him how the delicate little fungi are grown to perfection so they can delight our palettes.

He has also cleverly ingratiated himself with France by becoming a major importer of French truffles to Australia, which gives him an edge when it comes to supply and demand. And, in a patriotic and gastronomic coup, he supplied Tasmanian truffles to a Bastille Day banquet in Sydney in 2000, where the French ambassador and other dignitaries were able to dine on



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- [24 Hours: Stavanger](#)
- [inside: INSIDE THE MIDDLE EAST](#)
- [Inside Africa: Hotel Rwanda!](#)
- [Inside Asia: In from the cold](#)
- [Inside Europe: Rough diamond](#)
- [Inside the Middle East: 'Switzerland of the East'](#)

local truffles. Such a service could be enough to put him in line for a Légion d'honneur, let alone becoming the biggest importer of overseas truffles to France. Garvey's years of yakka are beginning to pay off.



'Hey, here we go. I just found the first truffle,' he shouts. 'Not a lot of perfume but it looks all right.' Surrounding the grove – or the truffière as it is officially known – are acre paddocks of toast-brown land under a grey sky, but the trees are healthy and reminiscent of a Provençal truffière after an autumn of good rain and mellow fruitfulness. A few inches under the soil, where it is cool and vaguely moist, the truffles are coming along nicely. Some, like the one Garvey has found, grow only half submerged below the surface.

'That truffle would have initiated in the spring, around October or November,' Garvey says. 'Then it sits there and doesn't do much for 100 days, and from now on it starts to take its weight in moisture. As the ground temperature starts to dip, it starts to mature. Those that are breaking the surface mature earlier, because it's cooler up there as the temperatures begin to dip in autumn.'

Some of the truffles under our feet will be sent to the finest gastronomic restaurants in Japan and France this coming northern summer. Just as diners in June and July are bemoaning the fact that they will have to wait until December for the next parfum de truffes to excite their nostrils, their waiters will be able to say that, thanks to Australia, truffles are on the menu after all.

'It was very exciting when we found our first truffle back in 1999,' he says. 'We had done so much work to get to that stage – to introduce the French Tuber melanosporum fungus to the root of the tree and get it to grow – and then planting the trees and hoping that it would work in the soil.' Last year Garvey's operation, which now includes truffières in New South Wales and Victoria, produced 50kg. During the harvest, he has a dozen people with 20 dogs working four or five days a week. 'The beginning to the season is the most difficult time,' he says. 'Do you take the truffles you find or do you leave them a week to mature a little longer? The dogs are the first point of quality control. They might find one and just have a sniff but then move on so you know there's a truffle there but it probably isn't quite ready. A week later the dogs will have a scratch and a sniff in the same spot, and then a few days later they're really scratching – then you know it's time to harvest it.'



While most of Garvey's 2006 crop went to serve the growing Australian market, a few handfuls made up the first export of Australian truffles, to a restaurant in Japan. They were sold to diners as Tasmanian truffles. Tasmania has such a strong reputation in Japan as a clean, green, disease-free island that the brand is a guarantee of flavour and excellence.

Now Garvey has received orders from more chefs in Tokyo, and is working on deals with top eateries in Paris, while there is considerable interest from the US and the UK, and from an importer in Copenhagen hoping to capitalise on the fact that Denmark's beloved Princess Mary is another clean, fresh Tasmanian export. Perigord Truffles are about to go global. But what does it take to get a kilo of truffles from one side of the world to the other? Nowhere near as much effort or expense as you might imagine.

'The shortest time it would take us to get a kilo of truffles from the ground and into a chef's hand in Paris would be two days,' says Garvey. 'Let's say they are picked right here in Tasmania in June. They would be cleaned and graded that night, air freighted out of Hobart in the morning and in Paris in another 36 hours.'



Each truffle is individually wrapped in tissue paper, then put into glass, then high-density foam. Garvey never uses plastic in case it might draw some of the essential perfume from the truffle.

'Getting two to three kilos to Paris in a hurry is really not a problem,' he says. 'There are no customs on truffles into Europe or Japan, and the air freight cost is negligible; it would cost about A\$50-\$60 [US\$40-\$50] per kilo.'

When the Australian ambassador to France was in Tasmania recently, she asked Garvey, 'So Duncan, what's your goal with these truffles then?' Garvey replied: 'We believe our truffles are as good as the French, so our goal is to be Alain Ducasse's first non-European truffle supplier.' Monsieur Ducasse, are you listening?

### **History, myth and legend**

The Greeks and Romans attributed aphrodisiac powers to the truffle, and it has more recently been described as the 'jewel of cookery'. German research has found that the truffle contains a steroid similar to those produced by male pigs during pre-mating behaviour. This steroid acts as a pheromone, attractive to female pigs.

### **Fallen idol**

Towards the end of the last century, France produced up to 1,000 tons of black truffles from more than 20 départements located primarily in the south-east and south-west of the country. Output has fallen and during the 1970s production ranged between 30 and 60 tons.

### **What are truffles?**

Garvey farms French black truffles, the only ones with the perfume required for gastronomy. The French black truffle is the fruiting body of the fungus *Tuber melanosporum*. This fungus forms a symbiotic relationship with the roots of both oak and hazel trees.

### **Natural selection**

The only place the truffle occurs naturally is where the fungus occurs naturally in the soil – southern France and some areas in northern Italy. All other locations have introduced the fungus artificially.



### **Perfect truffle**

Garvey says the perfect truffle is 'between 50g and 80g, a perfect round shape, and no knobs or imperfections – that is very difficult to find. 'Some chefs only look at the shape and reject anything that has bumps or marks on it. Others do it with their eyes closed – they are basically buying a perfume.' This perfume can be as subjective as wine but one thing is certain: fresh is best.

### **Use and taste**

Uses include flavouring myriad dishes including veal, soup, fish, shellfish, game, rice and salads. But what does a truffle taste like? 'There's an earthiness to it, but above all it's the sweetness,' says Garvey. 'I think my eight-year-old son has got the best answer. He says that it tastes "like a truffle".'

<http://www.perigord.com.au/>