

## French turn from tradition to technology to clone the truffle

[Print](#)

By Scheherazade Daneshkhu in Paris

Published: December 4 2008 02:00 | Last updated: December 4 2008 02:00

The black truffle, emblem of France's gastronomic exceptionalism, could soon start life in a test tube instead of under the roots of ageing oak and hazelnut trees.

French scientists are planning to clone Périgord truffles, the pungent fungus known to connoisseurs as "black diamonds" because the best examples fetch up to €1,000 (\$1,265) a kilo.

To mark the beginning of the truffle season, the French region of Corrèze will today launch a three-year project to revolutionise the truffle industry along with Delpéyrat, which has been making truffle preserves since the 19th century, and STEF-TFE, a food transport company.

Their goal is to unlock the secrets of black truffle production - the soil, climate or the trees - and hopefully revive an endangered industry by producing a more consistent crop.

The project will involve culturing cloned truffles together with tree saplings in rows of sterile test tubes until they form their crucial symbiotic relationship, a process that can take up to a year. Once the pair is established they will be planted out to mature naturally.

Jacques Pebeyre, an octogenarian author and truffier known as France's "truffle king", supports the initiative. With fewer and fewer people willing to produce the fungus, the industry was in peril, he said.

"I am not against helping nature," he said. But "we need to know how good these [cloned] truffles will be. In the end it all depends on that."

France produced 1,000 tons a year of black truffles at the beginning of the 20th century, but the figure has fallen to 40-50 tons.

Almost all of the production is consumed domestically, along with imports of much cheaper truffles from China.

Their increasing rarity reflects the decline of agriculture in France as well as the mysterious growth pattern of truffles. Most truffles are found under trees that are at least 20 years old.

Hervé Covès, manager of the fruits and vegetables department of the Corrèze chamber of agriculture, admitted that the idea of cloning truffles sounded frightening, especially to consumers in a country famed for its deep-seated opposition to so-called "Frankenfoods".

But cloning was an ancient agricultural method that had nothing to do with genetic modification, he argued.

Without new production methods, the French truffle industry would be dead by the end of the century, he warned.

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2008