

3 January 2008 12:29

- [Home](#)
- > [News](#)
- > [Europe](#)

The truffle kerfuffle: mystery mushroom vanishes

They are known as the black diamonds of the Perigord – and this year, owing to the scorching summer, they are more precious than ever. Now there are even fears that the French truffle is a dying delicacy.

By John Lichfield

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Dawn is breaking over Carpentras in the foothills of the Alps. France's oldest truffle market, which began nearly 600 years ago, is about to begin. The precious wares, advertised at up to €1,000 (£720) a kilo, are displayed in jam-jars, plastic ice-cream cartons and cheap wicker baskets.

The truffles – the "black diamonds of the Perigord", the "black ladies of the underground" – resemble lumps of earth or dried dog turds. In the freezing morning air, the makeshift stalls generate an intoxicating kaleidoscope of smells: fine wine, ripe cheese, mown lawns, old socks and autumn days.

Customers haggle. "Madame, you've given me only small ones. I'm not paying that price for crumbs." Sellers squabble. Jean, an old man in a flat cap with a face like a beetroot, announces: "The wild truffle tastes much better than the cultivated truffle. Ten times better." Emile, a man in a beret with a face like a century-old potato, says: "You talk nothing but nonsense. I defy anyone to taste any difference."

Mostly, however, there was one topic of conversation at the pre-Christmas truffle market at Carpentras yesterday (the most important market of the November-to-March truffle year). The dominant subject was the woeful shortage of truffles – and the alarmingly high prices – after another disastrous autumn-winter harvest of the mysterious subterranean mushroom in south-eastern France.

After a scorching summer in Provence and the Rhône Valley, in which it failed to rain for three months in some districts, about one tenth of the normal weight of truffles was on offer at the Carpentras market yesterday morning. Prices for the best quality large truffles in the bulk market, open only to professional buyers, reached the almost unheard of peak of €900 a kilo (and an average of €700).

"If it carries on like this, we are all dead," said Jean-Michel Cheilau, a teacher and part-time truffle producer. "You may find you have truffles in England in 10 years' time. If the climate continues to get hotter and drier, we won't have any down here. Truffles need moisture in the summer or they die or never develop. You can water the ground, and we do, but that's somehow not the same as rain."

Next month, the French federation of trufficulteurs, or truffle producers, has convened a conference of experts at Menherbes – near Carpentras – to discuss how to protect the most mythical and mysterious of gastronomic delicacies from becoming a victim of global warming.

The black French truffle, or tuber melanosporum, known in south-east France as the rabasse, has had a reasonable season in the south-west of the country, where it rained copiously last summer. In Provence, Languedoc and the Rhône Valley – source of 90 per cent of French truffles – the harvest has been miserable. The story is the same in northern Italy, whose "white" truffle is even more prized than the black, French truffle. Wholesale prices in Piedmont have already broken the €1,000 barrier.

Jean-François Tourrette, 28, is a truffle producer near Carpentras and technical adviser to the national truffle federation. He has been organising a series of experiments in the Provençal foothills of the Alps – the wonderful rolling hills and plateaux of limestone scrub-land described in Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence* – to find ways of protecting truffles, and truffle-growers, from dry, hot summers.

"The problem is that no one really understands why and how truffles grow," he said. "There are many black holes in our knowledge. When truffles were abundant, that did not matter. If certain conditions existed – the right chalky soil, the right tree roots, the right weather – they sometimes grew and they sometimes didn't but they grew often enough to make everyone happy: the producers, the traders and the customers.

"Now they are not growing and it is vital that we find out more about what makes truffles thrive or fail. Ridiculously high prices are no good to anyone. The producers would rather sell more truffles, for less."

Truffles are underground mushrooms formed by a kind of fungal infection on the root endings of certain trees. In Provence and the Rhône Valley, they mostly attach themselves to the pubescent oak (*Quercus pubescens*) and holm oak (*Quercus ilex*). The infections, or mycorrhizas, create a two-way street of benefits, feeding sugar from the tree to the truffle and channelling minerals through the truffle into the tree.

Traditionally, truffle producers were smallhold hill farmers who gathered truffles in the wild and relied on the extra income to survive. The wild truffle has now virtually disappeared in France. Why? No one knows for sure. Drier summers? Over-exploitation? Chemicals in agriculture? Pollution in the air? The advance of forests, choking the scrubland that truffles adore?

Most truffles are now produced by planting groves of fungus-infected "truffle trees". After waiting for 15 years, the growers usually find that only one tree in 10 produces truffles. That has been enough – until now – to keep the industry alive.

A series of dry summers, and dry winters, especially the blazing summer of 2003, has had a devastating effect on even the cultivated truffles. The legally recorded harvest in France will struggle to reach 15 tonnes this year, compared to 50 tonnes a few years ago (and 1,200 tonnes in the 19th century).

"Truffles need moisture but some truffles, in some conditions, seem to thrive even when it is dry. Why? Can we learn from that? Can we learn how to create those conditions? That's what our experiments – and this conference – are trying to discover," said M. Tourrette.

The shortage, and high price, of truffles has generated a wave of truffle-related crime in recent years: midnight raids on truffle plantations; the armed theft of cash from truffle traders; even the rustling of champion truffle-sniffing dogs.

At the Carpentras market yesterday, there was a strange mixture of pre-Christmas festivity and edgy furtiveness. "Don't talk about my dogs," one producer said. Another man boasted that he had received €870 a kilo – almost the market peak – because his truffles were so fine. How many of them did he sell? "No need to say that," he said. "The people of Britain don't need to know that. Not my neighbours either. I don't want to attract attention. Did you know that one in three of all truffles sold in France is stolen?"

From before dawn, there were a dozen stall-holders selling truffles in small quantities to individuals. (Christmas means truffles to the French.) Some of the truffles were as big as a man's fist. Others were no bigger than hazel-nuts. One, the size of a chestnut, was placed with pride in its own basket with an individual price tag: a snip at €23.

At 9am sharp a bell was rung by the "Monsieur Truffe" of Carpentras, the mayor's chief truffle official, André Desserre. This was the sign to begin the real business of the day.

Forty truffle producers lined the outer edges of a square of tables, erected on the terrace of the Restaurant de L'Univers. Before them they cautiously laid out their hoard of truffles, some in elaborate cloth sacks, some in supermarket plastic bags. One woman in her sixties brought a small collection of truffles in her handbag. Some sellers looked embarrassed to have so little. Others looked delighted, or embarrassed, to have so much.

M. Desserre stood beside the only gap in the square of tables, barring entry to anyone but authorised bulk buyers: truffle "courtiers" or traders; owners of truffle conserve factories; and restaurateurs. Seventeen buyers entered the square. A beefy, elderly woman wearing a brown Stetson elbowed younger traders aside to reach her favourite seller. She had earlier introduced herself as the owner of a truffle conserve business. She declined to say more or give her name.

The buyers toured the square, making almost silent deals with the sellers. After each trade, they handed over a kind of cloakroom ticket, on which was scribbled the agreed price and quantity and their name. Within 20 minutes, everything on offer – 130kg, compared to a tonne, or 1,000kg in a "good year" at Carpentras market in the week before Christmas – had been sold. M. Desserre, the officiating Monsieur Truffe, in brown hat and red scarf, then kindly allowed The Independent to enter the square to look into the bags of truffles.

These were an altogether higher class of underground mushroom than those on sale to the general public. Some were as large as cooking apples. Others had achieved fantastic shapes or were in psychedelic whirls of brown and black.

"This market has been here since the early 15th century," said M. Desserre. "How much longer it will survive, I don't know. Some of these truffles are excellent, but the quantity is miserable. This is usually the best-stocked market of the year, because prices reach their peak just before Christmas."

Everyone adjourned to the two neighbouring bars. Here, the cloakroom tickets were handed back to the buyers. Truffles were weighed at the café tables on ancient, hand-held, weighing hooks. Thick wads of €50 notes, and thinner wads of €500 and €100 notes, were passed from hand to hand. Occasionally, a cheque was signed.

The entire bar took on the heady aroma of mingled cigarette smoke and truffles. But what is all the fuss about? Are truffles really worth so much money? Emile Joumand, a 64-year-old estate agent, had driven 40 miles from a town near the mouth of the Rhône to buy a few truffles for his family Christmas dinner. He drove a hard bargain for the tiniest truffle pebbles on offer at the public section of the market and got 300g – almost a third of a kilo – for €85.

"Even that is a lot of money," he said. "But, to the family, Christmas would not be Christmas without truffles. I will make an hors d'oeuvre with truffles and foie gras and vegetables in a pasty crust. It is always exquisite."

Personally, my experience of truffles is limited. I once had a truffle omelette in a small restaurant not far from Carpentras, with copious shavings of a truffle that I was given by a generous producer. Eaten that way, truffles are as different from white button mushrooms as Shakespeare from Jeffrey Archer, or a bottle of €1 plonk from a vintage Burgundy.

On the night before the truffle market, I treated myself to a €28 truffle omelette in a restaurant in Carpentras. Minuscule splinters of truffle were sprinkled over the eggs like pepper from a blocked shaker. I could taste the eggs but not the truffles. That is the price you pay for global warming.

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