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Truffle Industry Under Threat

By JENNY BARCHFIELD – 21 hours ago

AUPS, France (AP) — Philippe Daniel opens a slim briefcase so buyers can glimpse his wares, then snaps it shut with a wary glance over his shoulder.

Daniel is not dealing in contraband but in truffles — tubers prized for their heady fragrance and rich, earthy flavor. One of the world's most sought-after gastronomical treasures, truffles fetch astronomical prices, and sellers like Daniel are always alert for spying competitors.

Daniel used to deal in big quantities. But for the past five years, drought has been parching the Var region of southeast France as well as truffle-producing regions in Italy and Spain — and today he can fit his entire weekly harvest in a single plastic bag.

He's not the only one.

Organizers at the market in the Var village of Aups, where Daniel plies his wares, have had to suspend the weekly wholesale auction, where middlemen used to bid tens of thousands of dollars for mounds of truffles. The reason: these days there simply aren't enough of the fragrant fungi.

Now, foodies and tourists buying truffles by the piece have replaced the bulk-buying middlemen, and most transactions at the once-bustling market are measured in grams. At the Aups market, the black truffle's price has more than doubled over the past five years, to about \$560 a pound.

Farmers say production is down by 50-75 percent this winter season and they blame global warming, warning that if thermometers keep rising — as many scientists predict they could — France's black truffle will one day be just a memory.

This is not the first time weather has caused a dramatic downturn in French truffle production. A severe drought in the early '60s more than halved the harvest, bringing it down to about 50 tons. But the trufficulteurs, as truffle farmers are known, contend this current dry spell is longer and more acute.

"Climate change has got the seasons out of whack, it's hotter than it used to be and it rains lots less," said Jean Montesano, 76, a trufficulteur for more than half a century. "I want my grandson to take over, but if things continue like this, who knows if there will be anything left."

Production in France has been in slow decline for 100 years — from 1,000 tons a year to just 50 tons, according to the Agriculture Ministry — under the march of urban sprawl into the fungus' forest habitat and the migration of farming folk to cities.

Truffles grow underground, in the root systems of host trees. Shriveled, black-skinned and egg-shaped, they are hard to distinguish from clods of dirt.

Specially trained dogs sniff and dig them out, and are rewarded with doggy treats. Pigs — bigger, hungrier and harder to manage — have largely fallen out of favor.

Families jealously guard the whereabouts of the richest corners of the forest. Wealthier producers electric-fence their plantations to discourage wild boars and poachers.

Chefs have for centuries used truffles to dress up all sorts of dishes, from creamy sauces to mashed potatoes and scrambled eggs. The 18th and 19th century French epicurean Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin famously called the truffle the "diamond of the kitchen," and hailed it as an aphrodisiac that "makes women more tender and men more amiable."

Legend has it that Napoleon went on a diet of truffle-stuffed turkey and champagne in a desperate attempt to conceive a male heir. A son, Napoleon Francois-Joseph Charles, was born March 20, 1811.

Truffles need just the right amount of rain at just the right time to thrive: Too little desiccates them; too much drowns them.

With annual rainfall in the Var down from around 40 inches in 1996 to under half that last year, Aups' once-abundant wild truffles have all but disappeared. Only one of the market's sellers, Jean Paul, still strikes out into the hardy oak forests that surround the village to hunt wild truffles. The few he finds are puny, he said.

The drought has also hit production elsewhere in France and in Europe's other main truffle producing regions, in Spain and Italy. Croatia and Belgium also produce truffles in smaller quantities, as do North Carolina and Oregon.

Last year, the harvest of Italy's prized white truffle was down as much as 75 percent from 2006, according to Andrea Rosin, the head of truffle export company Tartufingros. Spain's 2007 black truffle harvest was down more than half from five years earlier, said Daniel Oliach, of a growers' association in the northeastern region of Catalonia.

In Italy, white truffle prices were up about 60 percent in 2007 from the previous year, and one white truffle, a giant weighing about 3 pounds, 4 ounces, fetched a record \$330,000 at auction.

Stanley Ho, the East Asian gambling king, placed the winning bid for the truffle which had been dug up in Tuscany, in central Italy.

Hong Kong's South China Morning Post reported it was eaten days later, prepared by two high-caliber chefs for a 200-guest banquet. Ho reportedly missed the feast because of poor health.

Nowadays, say the trufficulteurs, only truffles cultivated in irrigated plantations have much of a chance of surviving the sunbaked summers.

"Anyone who doesn't irrigate will not have a single truffle, not a single one," said veteran Montesano, whose face is as deeply etched as the wind-blown hills around Aups. Montesano waters his 25-acre plantation of French oaks, the black truffle's preferred host, with groundwater pumped from deep-lying aquifers.

Climate scientists say it is too early to link the drought to global warming, but point to computer models that suggest the entire Mediterranean basin is getting warmer and dryer.

The Met Office, Britain's weather agency, says that by 2030, Mediterranean rainfall is expected to be down by one-quarter, and annual average air temperatures are likely to be up in Europe by as much as 6 degrees Centigrade by 2080.

Changing climate could mean changing truffle terrain. Already, producers in the southern hemisphere and in China are making inroads.

France imported 33 tons of fresh or frozen truffles from China in 2007, overtaking French production for the first time. At under \$20 a pound, the Chinese variety is far cheaper than European truffles, but Aups trufficulteur Lucien Barbaroux, 60, says he's sure his customers can tell the difference in quality.

"Our clients here are now connoisseurs and they're not about to be duped," he said. "They know how to recognize the real stuff."

Australia and New Zealand, which introduced truffles from Europe about 20 years ago, now produce a half ton of the fungus annually — mostly for domestic consumption, said Ian Hill, the New Zealand-based author of "Taming the Truffle" and other books on fungi.

"If Europe's catastrophic decline continues, it could well be that the Southern Hemisphere will overtake production in the north," Hill said in a telephone interview.

Associated Press writer Natacha Rios in Paris contributed to this report.