

# The Mercury News

## Truffle mania — and truffle dogs — comes to Napa Valley

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They're pungent, earthy and downright irresistible. Truffles — the kind that grow underground around oak and hazelnut tree roots, not the chocolate bonbon variety — evoke sensory pleasure and gastronomic delight. That these small, stinky, knobby black fungi command hundreds of dollars per ounce reflects both fervent demand and real scarcity.

This winter, truffle lovers can follow their noses to the seventh annual Napa Truffle Festival, which runs Jan. 13-16. The brainchild of San Mateo resident Robert Chang, who owns the American Truffle Company, this four-day trufflepooza brings together foodies and farmers to learn, taste and enjoy everything truffle-related.

Attendees can learn how to grow their own truffles and take a hands-on truffle session with chef Ken Frank of Napa's Michelin-starred La Toque. There are truffle-filled winery lunches and five-course truffle dinners, and scientific sessions mixed in with the culinary events, "Growing truffles is knowledge intensive, not labor intensive," Chang says. "So you really have to know what to do."

While the best known truffles come from France and Italy, most people don't realize that truffles are being grown in Napa, Sonoma and even in Oregon. But mere mortals can't find them without help. Humans can't smell the truffles growing beneath the ground — but dogs, with their superior noses, can be trained to sniff out these precious fungi.

For the first time, guests will be able to watch a dog-training session during the festival, as Truffle Dog Company trainers demonstrate how they teach their canine scent-detectives to find those buried treasures. We got an informal sneak peek recently, watching as Gig, a well-trained English shepherd, awaited the trainer's command — "Go find truffle!" — before taking off for the trees. A short bark announced success, and we found Gig sitting at attention, waiting for her trainer to retrieve the treasure. Gig's payment? A play break to play ball.

Heading for the festival? There's a field trip available, a trek out to the Robert Sinskey Vineyards' truffle orchard. Winemaker Rob Sinskey had an orchard planted next to his grapevines, and inoculated the tree roots with black Burgundy and Perigord truffle spores five years ago. He's hoping for his first truffle harvest this season. Chang's company planted this orchard, as well as truffle orchards for St. Helena's Peju Province Winery and private growers in Sonoma and soon in Silicon Valley.

**Details:** Find details on the truffle festival (tickets \$60 and up) at [www.napatrufflefestival.com](http://www.napatrufflefestival.com).