

# French truffle farmers launch campaign to help consumers tell prized, expensive black Périgourd truffles from cheap Asian impostors they say cheating chefs are spraying with fake scent

By [Henry Samuel](#), Paris

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The financial stakes are high as the knobbly, golf ball-sized fungus, which grows around the roots of oak, hazel and lime trees, is one of the most expensive foods in the world by weight.

Black French truffles, or 'tuber melanosporum', from the southwestern region of Perigord are known as "black diamonds" and sell for 500 euros (£412) per kilogramme (2.2 pounds) on average.

In comparison, the pale tuber indicum variety from China and the Himalayan foothills fetches only 30 euros (£25) a kilogramme.

The black truffle was genetically mapped in 2010 but hopes this could help differentiate it from Asian imports more easily have so far proved unfounded.

“We are in competition with bad chefs who take Chinese truffles and spray them with scents without informing customers,” Michel Santinelli, head of the French truffle growers federation for the Provence Alpes Côte d’Azur region told AFP.

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Last week, the federation signed a protocol with the French government to raise awareness over the scam and the different types of truffle on offer. French trufficulteurs, as the cultivators are known, are also calling for the black truffle to have its own appellation and for Asian impostors to be dubbed “exotic invasive species”.

The finest black truffles have a subtle aroma and an earthy flavour reminiscent of a rich chocolate, experts say.

Only the white Alba truffle from Italy's northern Piedmont region can compete in terms of gastronomic finesse and scarcity.

An inquiry by France’s national consumer fraud body in 2012 found that between 10 and 15 per cent of the samples seized and sold as Perigord truffle were found to be “doped” Chinese fakes.

Experts said it was increasingly easy to fox consumers as the price of black truffles was so high only tiny flecks

were used in food, making it hard to taste the difference.

The other issue for French truffle growers is that production is "structurally deficient".

While Chinese imports to France are now running at around 25 tonnes a year, the French are struggling to maintain annual production of around 50 tonnes – a huge drop from the 800 tons unearthed at the start of the 20th century. A decline in its natural habitat and global warming are often blamed.

As part of last week's protocol, the state will provide a grant of 200,000 euros annually to develop the truffle industry under the seven-year agreement.

The estimated 20,000 French truffle producers have committed to plant between 300,000 and 400,000 trees annually. But these will not produce any new fungi for at least ten years.