

November's Speaker, Charles Lefevre

This month's speaker, Dr. Charles Lefevre journeyed into the realm of truffling (genus *Tuber*), over a period of time, influenced by, in Charles words, "cryptic experiences." Today, with his background in science and his need to make a living, he is in the forefront of helping others to get started in the business of cultivating truffles. In 1999 he founded New World Truffieres, located in the Willamette Valley near Eugene. The nature of his work includes "the biology, ecology and cultivation of edible ectomycorrhizal fungi, particularly matsutake and the culinary truffle," according to Dr. Lefevre's website. He is also President of the North American Truffling Society, "a not-for-profit organization dedicated to research and education on the native North American Truffles."

I spoke briefly with Charles on the phone, and his enthusiasm for his work has me considering becoming a truffle farmer. I have just the right host trees he says, understory hazelnuts (*Corylus cornuta*), Doug firs, not too large in diameter, and a small oak savannah. Truffles develop where they can have an underground symbiotic association with the roots of trees--and they love my tree species. However, since I'm not keen on all the digging that might have to take place, I should follow Charles suggested methods and purchase his inoculated trees, primarily Doug fir, and plant in an already disturbed area. Visit his website (cited below) and learn more about the world of truffles. And for a great insight into Dr. Lefevre and what he will tell us Friday evening, read my interview with him next.

Where did you grow up? "Eugene, Oregon."

Were you interested in nature as a child? "Yes, my fascination with mushrooms began at about age 9, and many other fascinations preceded it."

(His parents helped to cultivate these fascinations through their own enthusiasm. His father was a professor of physics at the U of O, and his mother earned a Masters in bio-geography.)

"I began serious mushroom hunting in high school with an Italian family who had carried on their mushroom hunting tradition from the old country. I learned the Italian names for the edible mushrooms before learning any of the other names. And I had and have all sorts of other nature hobbies as well, although I'm finding it difficult to exercise them at this point while building my truffle cultivation business. At different periods throughout my life I have been obsessed with birds, fish, rocks, trees, stars and planets, bugs, snakes and of course, going back far enough, dinosaurs. As I recall, it first started with a huge gilled salamander in a spring a few miles south of Eugene. The sense of magic in nature has never left me."

"This sense of magic" seems to have pervaded and influenced Charles' life. He mentions, "A ring of oak trees, a basalt throne, cutthroat trout, quartz crystals, a Corn Maiden, ants, a goofy Frenchman, and great good fortune," (the "cryptic experiences" I referred to in the opening), "each is associated with some event or period of change. Some took place in dreams." These magical visions appeared both here and abroad.

Charles travels mainly revolve around his work now: "I have done a fair amount of traveling in Europe and elsewhere in association with my work with truffles. That is among the highlights of the job. Corvallis, Oregon happens to be the most important center for truffle research outside of southern Europe, but it is still necessary to travel to avoid isolation. There are just a handful of truffle specialists in the Americas and my community of colleagues is spread thinly throughout the world. I am working hard in association with my partners in the Oregon Truffle Festival to establish Eugene as a major center of learning and experience in the truffle world. If I have my way, Eugene will come to be perceived widely as the place where the paths are

paved with truffles, and my schedule will relax as more of my colleagues travel here. That is already beginning to happen. This coming January 26th through 28th, the Oregon Truffle Festival will host two different day-long lecture series with speakers from several countries and throughout the U.S." (I'll post more information on this event next month.)

What brought you to Oregon? "A better question would be: What prevented you from leaving? It's unfortunate in a way that the good life was already here; I never had the opportunity to go look for it. I've tried to leave, but not very hard, and with no success."

What will we hear about Friday night? **"There is no place in the world where truffles are common or abundant, but there are a few regions famed as the sources for these grand delicacies. As it happens, Oregon is one of those great regions, though few Oregonians are aware of that particular blessing. The talk I will give tells the tale of the rise and fall of the Oregon truffles and their quest for redemption (with a bit of interesting biology tossed in for this audience). Secrecy pervades the world of truffles, but there is one secret that I will share: though wild, the Oregon truffles live in our backyards."**

Current project/area of special interest? "I am the owner of a company called New World Truffieres specializing in the cultivation of truffles in orchards throughout North America. Truffles are ectomycorrhizal fungi, and as such, form obligate symbioses with the roots of compatible host trees. The difficulty with cultivating truffles is that they require a living, healthy host tree to sustain them, usually hazelnuts and oaks, although we work with many others including Douglas fir, rock roses and pecans. In our laboratory we introduce the truffle fungi to seedlings germinated under controlled conditions, and work very hard to convince them to form their symbiosis before either tree or fungus are exposed to the outside world. Being there first is a major competitive advantage that allows the truffles to thrive in the face of competition from indigenous mycorrhizal fungus species, and it is the secret to successful truffle cultivation. The principal truffle species we work with are the famed European truffles, some of which are successfully cultivated here and there throughout the world. We are also working to develop technologies to produce Douglas fir seedlings inoculated with the native Oregon truffles, and have had preliminary successes with all of our species. A domestic truffle farming industry is on its way, and Eugene is likely to become its center in North America."

After high school Dr. Lefevre first attended Reed College then graduated *Summa Cum Laude* from the U of O in biology. He completed a senior thesis on endophytic fungi of Douglas fir with George Carrol, and took Systematic Botany from David Wagner. He earned his PhD from the OSU Department of Forest Science researching Matsutakes, "Host Associations of *Tricholoma magnivelare*, the American Matsutake."

Taking a peak at some of Dr. Lefevre's achievements, I learned he has earned merit scholarships and monetary awards as well as the following:
Phi Beta Kappa, University of Oregon
Honors in Biology, University of Oregon
Xi Sigma Pi, Oregon State University

There's a lot more to this guy and his world of truffles. Check out his website and bring your friends to this "high end" evening!

www.truffletree.com