

For wine lovers around the world who enjoy  
wine and the good life

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# Sommelier INDIA

## THE WINE MAGAZINE

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# A taste of heaven dug out of the earth

Michèle Shah delves into the mystique surrounding the world's most tantalising tuber: the truffle



Highly prized by chefs, the truffle is a fleshy tuber, whose colour varies from white to grey to brown, depending on where it originates

There is something about the nature of truffles that has captivated people for over a thousand years. Its pungent, irresistible aroma is what intrigues haute cuisine chefs and challenges them to dedicate menus and dishes entirely crafted around truffles and matched perfectly to fine wines.

The truffle is a hypogeous fungus, which grows underground closely linked to certain kinds of plants such as chestnut, oak, hazel and beech trees from which it absorbs nutrition by means of its extensive root system. The fruit is in the form of a tuber and consists of a fleshy mass, whose colour varies from white to grey, tending towards brown, depending on the plant on which it lives and grows. Its form, usually round, depends on the nature of the soil. If the soil is soft it will be smoother; if the soil is compact it will have more difficulty growing and therefore tend to be more protuberant and lumpy.

The word truffle comes from the Latin word “tuber”, which means outgrowth. It dates back to as early as the ancient Egyptians, who held truffles in high esteem and ate them coated in goose fat. The Greeks and Romans used them for therapeutic purposes, believing that they gave eternal health to the body and soul. Truffles were also seen to have exotic qualities in their aroma and flavour, making them popular among the noble classes, while some believed they were aphrodisiacs.

Throughout the Middle Ages, truffles virtually disappeared from sight. This is because the church felt that because of their exotic aroma, truffles were the creation of the devil. They were sometimes known as the “witches’ fare”, and for centuries few people ate or sold them. However, during the Renaissance truffles made a comeback through the reign of Louis XIV of France, who pushed them into the forefront of one of Europe’s most respected cuisines. King Louis XIV (1643 - 1715), known as Louis the Great or the Sun King, was fascinated by the nature of truffles and

**The Greeks and Romans used truffles for therapeutic purposes, believing that they gave eternal health to the body and soul**

set out to cultivate them, an effort that proved to be unsuccessful because truffles cannot be cultivated. By the mid-1800s, the truffle reached its largest production to date. Over 2,000 tons of truffles appeared throughout Europe. At the royal court of Savoy in Turin, Italy, hunting for truffles became court entertainment. Royal guests and foreign ambassadors were invited to participate, using hounds instead of pigs, as were common in France. The royal house of Savoy, with its roots in Piedmont, was assiduous in truffle hunting.

This age of abundance and wealth did not last long. After World War I, many of the rural lands were destroyed and the growth of truffles decreased dramatically. It reached its nadir by the 1960s, with a production figure of less than 400 tons per annum. Today, truffles are still a rare delicacy, reserved for the most special of occasions.

Hunting the truffle is the most exciting experience for a truffle lover and his dog. The truffle hunter is guided only by the hound’s nose and by an insightfulness gained through years of experience. Ermanno Scaglione and his dog Mara are an experienced team of hunters of white Alba truffles, said to be

## Highly prized truffles

There are many kinds of truffles. The most precious are the following:

### White truffle

Tuber Magnatum Pico known as the white truffle from Alba – Tartufo Bianco d’Alba

### Black winter truffle

Tuber Melanosporum Vitt also known as winter black truffle

### Black summer truffle

Tuber Aestivum Vitt known as Scorzone truffle

### Bianchetto truffle

Tuber Albidum

among the rarest and therefore highly sought after. Scaglione organises truffle hunts for visitors who are interested in how the mystery of finding a truffle can unveil itself. “What makes it so special is that it’s a spontaneous fungus. At present, there are no cultivation techniques,” explains Scaglione. Truffle hunters are ferociously protective about their boundaries and it is dangerous to trespass on other hunters’ land. “They would go so far as to poison your dog,” warns Scaglione.

Italy boasts a number of regions where you can find both the black and white truffle, such as Marche, Molise, Tuscany and Emilia Romagna. White truffles are mainly harvested in Lombardy, Liguria (Ligurian Langhe and Alta Val Bormida), Umbria, Lazio, Abruzzo (Val di Sangro), some valleys of Basilicata and along the coastal pinewoods in Calabria. However, the best ones undoubtedly come from the area of the Langhe and Monferrato hills in Piedmont.

The white truffle season is usually from the end of September to the end of December, hitting its peak in October and November. The season for black, winter truffles is later – from December to February. Other species of black truffles, which are still used in cooking, though thought to be less prestigious, are harvested during the summer.

The Alba White Truffle World Market held annually in the historic centre of Alba is the widest international exhibition of truffles (black and white), all of which originate from the Piedmont hills of Langhe, Roero and Monferrato. The Alba Truffle Show, which is open – on weekends only – from early October to mid-November is a hub of cultural and gastronomic events that celebrate the “white gold” of the Langhe in all its shades. During the weekends of the Fair there will be national and international chefs, locals, tourists and foodies all on the lookout for the best truffle. It’s an intoxicating, full immersion into the culture of the truffle. Before the opening of the



Above: Fresh shavings of white truffles on pasta. Below: Depending on size, weight and availability, the price of fresh truffles can change from day to day



market doors to the public, each single truffle is checked by a special “Quality Commission”, which sets up a Consumer Help Desk that is available to customers over the entire period of the Fair. This is to guarantee quality control of the product. For each truffle above 10g there is a numbered bag bearing an identification code that allows the buyer to exchange the truffle within 48 hours if considered defective in any way.

The price of fresh truffles can change on a daily basis because it depends on the size, the weight and the availability of fresh truffles, factors that make it impossible to set a universal price. As with any harvest, there are good years and lean years. If it has been a very dry year there are usually fewer truffles. 2018 was considered a good year and the price of white truffle was between €3,000 and €3,500 per kg, while the black truffle sold for about €500 to €600 per kg. The price of white truffle in a lean year can levitate to €5,000 per kg.

White truffles, which are immensely fragrant, are rarely cooked and are almost always shaved raw onto pasta, risotto, and other dishes. They are very sensitive to heat and lose their aroma when cooked, but are optimal as a precious finishing touch to garnish a fairly neutral dish. Black truffles have a pronounced but less pungent odour and are usually cooked or added to the dish towards the end, as their flavour is intensified in oil or butter and with a little heat.

Due to gourmet chefs’ growing appetite for white truffles over the last 20 years, Alba and its surrounding territories now feature Italy’s highest concentrations of Michelin-starred restaurants. Whether it’s shaved atop tajarin, Alba’s ubiquitous egg pasta that we know as tagliolini, or crowning meat-filled agnolotti, another native pasta, or presented as garnishing to top the Piedmont style steak tartare (raw meat from the Lessona breed of beef dressed only with olive oil), you’d be hard-pressed to find a respectable local restaurant

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not serving the elusive and pricey tuber. Guido Alciati, founder and owner of the Michelin-starred Guido Ristorante in Serralunga d’Alba, who was recently named by the Italian Truffle Academy as Chef Ambassador to Italian truffles, says, “The truffle is part of Piedmontese tradition. The first recipe with truffles appeared in a Piedmontese cookery book in 1775,” he says. Alciati’s truffle signature dishes include poached egg on a bed of creamed mashed potato with Parmigiano cheese and a shaving of white truffle; Cardoons from Nizza Monferrato with a fondue of white truffle; handmade tagliatelle “ai 30 rossi” (made with 30 yolks of egg per kg) garnished with white truffle and oven roasted guinea fowl with a sauce of black truffle and a shaving of white truffle.

“To complete the gastronomic experience, I find that the combination of wine is absolutely necessary,” concludes Alciati. And being in Piedmont, the most obvious and plentiful choice would be a good Barolo or Barbaresco, both produced from the native, noble Nebbiolo grape. ♦

## TRUFFLE 101

1. A truffle is an hypogaeal fungus
2. It can be found only by a truffle-dog or pig in France
3. It cannot be cultivated
4. It grows from the roots of specific plants
5. Its scent consists of 120 volatile molecules
6. In Piedmont, the hunting season starts on September 21 and ends on January 31
7. It is eaten fresh and can be stored for about a week
8. Before eating, it can be cleaned with a brush under running water; once it’s dry, let it stand for at least 10 minutes
9. It must be kept in the fridge, preferably wrapped in blotting or tissue paper, in a glass container fitted with a lid
10. It doesn’t need cooking, but it must be sliced raw with a specific razor-sharp edged tool: the truffle-slicer