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

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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 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 the 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

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
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 €3,200 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.

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

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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TRUFFLE 101

1. A truffle is an hypogean fungus
2. It can be found only by a truffle-dog or
dog 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

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