

Great Truffles . . .

... are the most precious culinary treasure Mother Earth has to offer. **Jill James**, former food editor of the Financial Times, embarks on a worthwhile search for the finest truffles.

N Magazine invites you to delight in her findings..



CULINARY GEMS

PHOTOGRAPHER: ULRIKE HOLSTEN

Some years ago I was at the great Michel Bourdain's kitchen in London's Connaught hotel having lunch. It was a special occasion – the first of the season's truffles was to be put on the menu.

On the table was a bowl of the most unlovely looking food imaginable – round, warty, misshapen lumps. How could something so unattractive in appearance taste so divine? That bowl of truffles was worth a mere £50,000 (over \$87,000) chef Bourdain assured me. When they were taken away and put under lock and key for the later delectation of The Connaught's clients it was an emotional moment. I was reminded of the composer Rossini's experience: "I admit weeping three times in my life. Once when my first opera failed. Once again, the first time I heard Paganini play the violin. And once when a truffled turkey fell overboard at a boating picnic." (In Paris, Rossini never missed an opportunity to savour turkey stuffed with truffles, which, according to Brillat-Savarin, France's greatest gastronome, was the rage at the time). Happily, I was eventually able to enjoy some of Monsieur Bourdain's truffles. Rarity and expense largely account for the great mystique attached to them – a cachet that eager sellers are always ready to exploit. Whether buying the fresh product at a market or ordering a dish in a top restaurant, even the most well-heeled consumers will find that it pays to be properly informed when the product in question costs as much as £550 (over \$959) per kilo. The term truffle is used to describe what are basically subterranean mushrooms. They vary in size from a walnut to a tennis ball and grow among the roots of certain trees, oaks in particular. They live in symbiosis with the host tree and are rumoured impossible to cultivate. But truffles can and are cultivated. The French have a word for it – trufficulture – and a very lucrative industry it is. In the early 19th century in France there were a number of successful attempts to produce them, notably in Apt, in the Vaucluse, where they had the idea of sowing acorns collected at the foot of trees known to host the fungi. This proved a success and large harvests were obtained. The French, knowing a good thing when they see it, greeted these attempts enthusiastically. Acres of land were set free for cultivation and thousands of truffle-producing trees planted. Production peaked at hundreds of tons at the end of the 19th century when there were 180,000 acres (750



MARKETS

In France the official season is from mid-November to mid-March. Italy's festivals are usually in November.

SOUTH-EAST FRANCE Mondays: Chamaret 10am–12 noon. **Tuesdays:** St Paul-Trois-Châteaux 10am–12 noon; Grignan 10am–12 noon; Vaison la romaine 9am–11am. **Wednesdays:** Valreas 9am–12 noon; Bagnol sur Ceze 8am–12 noon; Riez 9am–11am.

Thursdays: Montsegur 10am–12 noon; Nyons 9am–12am; Anduze 2pm–6pm; Aups 9am–12 noon. **Fridays:** Carpentras 9am–11am; Suze la rousse 10am–12 noon; Dieulefit 10am–12 noon. **Saturdays:** Richerense 10am–1pm (largest truffle market in France). **Sundays:** last Sunday of December in Ménerbes; third Sunday of December in Rognes; every Sunday in St Paul Trois Châteaux (TBC).

SOUTH-WEST FRANCE Mondays: Caussade and St Alvere (morning). **Tuesdays:** Lalbenque (morning). **Thursdays:** Gramat from 9am; Excideuil (morning). **Fridays:** Limogne en Quercy, Brantome, Vergt and Ribercac (morning). **Saturdays:** Martel, Cordes-sur-ciel, Brives, Perigueux and Bergerac (morning), Thiviers from 9am. **Sunday:** second Sunday of December in Issoudun (in Limousin) and third Sunday of January in Sorges (in Perigord).

ITALY The National Truffle Market takes place at the Centro Fieristico Borgosole near Fabro every November. It is an event for connoisseurs, as well as the general public. San Miniato market is also one of the most famous names associated with Italian truffles. Again, November is the time to be there. The town's wholesale truffle market is also open to the public during the annual truffle festival in October, when you can view award winning truffles or buy directly from the wholesalers. Truffle festival hotlines: Alba Tel: + 39 0173/362 807; Asti Tel: + 39 0141/399 482 or + 39 399 399; Canelli Tel: + 39 0141/823 685 or + 39 820-111; Moncalvo Tel: + 39 0141/917 505.

CELEBRATING THE TRUFFLE ...

France: The Truffle Mass in Richerenches is held every year on the third Sunday in January. Saint Antoine, the patron saint of truffle cultivators, has been celebrated for over a quarter of a century in this small village in the Valréas enclave. The ceremony begins with the parade of the Brotherhood of the Knights of the Black Diamond in their ceremonial robes. The scent of truffle fills the church. During Mass, growers give a truffle, carefully selected from the best beds, as their offering. After Mass, in the neighbouring village hall, truffles will be weighed for trade and, presumably, the parish priest can enjoy the fruit of the collection. The National Council for the Culinary Arts and the Minister of Culture have designated the Truffle Mass as one of the 100 Remarkable Good Taste Sites, selected from all of France for their cultural, touristic and gastronomic quality.

For more information: Richerenches town hall, Tel: +33 (0)4 90 28 02 00.

France: The Truffle Trade Salon, in Carpentras, January 25th 2006. The truffle will be the honoured feature of a daylong trade fair, displayed in all its forms among other regional food and crafts products. There will be a truffle market, a demonstration of truffle "hunting" by dogs and pigs, entertainment of all kinds, many kinds of recipes based solely on the "rabasse" and tasting under the careful eye of experienced chefs – an experience which is highly original, congenial, gastronomic... and educational!

Information: Tourist Office, Tel: +33 (0)4 90 63 00 78.

sq km) of these trees. The rot set in during the 20th century. Industrialisation and rural exodus meant many of these truffle fields (champs truffiers) returned to wilderness. The First World War and its decimation of the male workforce dealt a serious blow to swathes of countryside. Newly acquired techniques were lost. Old truffle fields became unproductive. The rest, as they say, is history. Prices rocketed as production fell and demand increased.

Today, along with saffron, truffles are one of the most expensive foods per gram in the world. However, demand has also prompted fresh efforts for producing truffles en masse. For example, in Tasmania, Australians have been busy inoculating trees with the truffle fungus and a small industry is developing.

Truffles have been found in Europe, Asia, North Africa and North America but commercially only two or three species really matter. The black truffle (*Tuber melanosporum*) is the one connoisseurs consider the best. It is found all over Europe – in Italy, Spain, Sweden, Slovenia and Croatia – but France claims the lion's share of production with about 22 tons a year. Eighty per cent is from south-eastern France and 20 per cent from the south-west, notably Quercy and Perigord. The Middle Eastern food writer Anissa Helou says: "I love the fragrant, heady scent of European truffles. They are wonderful. Those sold in Lebanon and throughout the Middle East – and which come from the desert – are not as fine."

Personally, I really like the milder white truffles (*Tuber magnatum*) from Piedmont in northern Italy. Like the black truffles of Perigord, which seem to get scarcer every year, they are highly prized. I know of no successful attempt to cultivate them and only the very best Italian restaurants will have them. Do not be tempted to pay top dollar for Chinese truffles (*Tuber sinensis*). They are mass harvested, look like *T. melanosporum* but, alas, do not taste like them. There's a scam involving these truffles, which consists of unscrupulous dealers introducing extracts of the real black truffle and passing them off as the real thing. If you decide to go truffle hunting on your own account be careful – and not only because of the law of trespass. As with all fungi there are poisonous and non-edible varieties. You really need to go out with someone who knows what they are doing. And if you know someone who is prepared to show you where truffles can be gleaned then you have a true, lifelong friend. Much is made of the use of pigs for sniffing out truffles.

But pigs are greedy beasts, which will eat anything that comes their way, never mind precious fungi, so dogs are more commonly used.

Frankly if I cannot have a good helping of truffles I'd rather not bother. If you have but one good truffle do not tell a soul. Make an omelette with the finest and freshest of eggs, slice the truffle into it and eat it alone with a good glass of vintage Champagne. A truffle cooked within hours of picking is a special pleasure. Once you have tasted really fresh, high-quality truffles you will instantly know good from bad. Scraping one bottled or preserved truffle over the plates of 10 or 12 dinner party guests is in my view a waste. Some won't know what the flavour is and aficionados will be appalled that you have been so mean. Better to insert paper-thin slices in meats or under the skin of a chicken – or indeed any roast bird – so that the flavours can suffuse the meat. Pâtés and stuffings are also good ways of maximising the use of fairly small amounts. Truffle oil is an economically better way of enjoying the flavour. If you have never tried a real, fresh truffle then dress a simple salad in truffle oil and, only then, if you are certain that you like that very particular flavour, take out your second mortgage. As to the aphrodisiac qualities these appear to have no scientific basis. However, if your dinner date is preparing to surprise you with a meal at a top restaurant I daresay you would be inclined to look on them with a more than kindly eye if a large dish of truffles was the order of the day.

As Paris restaurants go they don't get better than Restaurant Alain Ducasse at the Hôtel Plaza Athénée. This year Ducasse is planning a white truffle menu for autumn and a black truffles one for winter. For example, from mid-October three dishes that are likely to be on menu are Noix de Saint-Jacques, cèpes et tartufi di Alba, Volaille de Bresse sauce Albufera and tartufi di Alba. Winter plans include: Homard de Bretagne et truffe noire au sautoir, pommes caramélisées and Volaille de Bresse sauce Albufera truffée. *Hôtel Plaza-Athénée, 25 avenue Montaigne, F-75008 Paris. Tel: + 33 (0)1 53 67 65 62.*

In London this autumn the places for truffle lovers to dine include: *The Boxwood Café at The Berkeley, Wilton Place, Knightsbridge, SW1, Tel: + 44 (0)20 7235 1010; Gordon Ramsay at Claridge's, 55 Brook Street, W1, Tel: + 44 (0)20 7499 0099 and The Savoy Grill, Savoy, Strand, WC2, Tel: + 44 (0)20 7235 1600.*

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