

a golf ball. He examines it under the light and motions for me to join him. The tawny tuber is still damp, but its bouquet, already spreading throughout the woods, announces a successful hunt. “*Tartufo bianco pregiato*,” Romagnolo pronounces: the precious white truffle. He dabs delicately to brush off the mud, folds the truffle into a clean white handkerchief, and tucks it into his vest pocket.

THE WHITE TRUFFLE (*Tuber magnatum Pico* in Latin) is by far the rarest and most pungent of underground mushrooms. Even the scent of the storied black truffles of Périgord in France seems coarse and insipid compared to the complex, ethereal aroma of the Piedmont whites. Alba, about 40 miles southeast of Turin, is the principal marketplace for the fungus, and the town has been synonymous with white truffles ever since Pliny the Elder praised the wines and truffles of Alba Pompeia (as the Romans called

their outpost) in the first century.

Alba and its surroundings abound with gastronomic delights. The vineyards of Barolo and Barbaresco produce Italy's greatest red wines from the Nebbiolo grape, named for the clouds of morning fog that cling to the vines and keep the first frosts of autumn at bay. The region's hillsides yield sweet hazelnuts, spicy mountain honey, and wild porcini mushrooms, and the marshlands are fertile ground for Carnaroli rice, which is used for risottos. In the city, on cool evenings in the fall, a mist laden with aromas of chocolate and hazelnuts permeates the air as fumes from the Nutella factory condense into clouds.

But all appetites in Alba turn to the exalted tubers during the peak of the truffle harvest season in October, when the city hosts the Fiera Nazionale del Tartufo Bianco d'Alba (Alba White Truffle Festival). The celebration includes a vigorous truffle market in the courtyard of a medieval

cloister, and throughout the city, the tubers' pungent musk beckons from the beaded doorways of shops with all the subtlety of a courtesan. Unlike other harvest festivals, the Alba event is devoid of beauty contests (Miss Fungus? Not likely), children in colorful costumes, folk music, and other ancillary traditions. Yes, there is a donkey race, and politicians give speeches wherever a crowd gathers, but the focus remains on white truffles.

The white truffle is as perishable as a cut flower, and it begins to lose its mysterious pungency the moment it leaves the ground. Even chilled and wrapped in absorbent cloth, the fungus keeps for no more than 10 days. Climate-controlled air-shipping brings white truffles to the United States, Japan, Saudi Arabia, and other distant markets—where the tubers command thousands of dollars per pound—but distance and time exact a toll. The white truffle tastes best close to its home.



During the peak of harvest season, all appetites in Alba turn to the beloved tartufo bianco, or white truffle.