

In Alba and its surrounding villages, the humblest cafés and the stuffiest restaurants alike offer truffles in season, usually as an extra. The night before my truffle hunt, I visited the popular *osteria* Vincafé along Alba's main street, via Vittorio Emanuele II (named for the king of Savoy who led the 1861 unification of Italy). The *menù degustazione*—antipasto, pasta, saddle of hare roasted with sweet peppers, dessert—was a modest 21 euros. Ten grams of shaved white truffle boosted the price by another 30.

In typical Albese fashion, the antipasto platter included a mound of *carne cruda* (minced raw veal); a salad of frisée, radicchio, shredded celeriac, and carrot topped with lumps of tuna; thin slices of seared veal drizzled with tuna-caper sauce; and baby artichokes with the region's famous *bagna càdda*, an anchovy-garlic sauce whose recipe dates to the Roman era.

I requested that the truffles accompany my next course, which consisted of *tajarin*—hand-cut tagliatelle made solely with flour and egg yolks—served swimming in the cheeselike local butter. The waiter made no great fuss, but other diners turned to watch as he whipped out a truffle *mandoline*, with its scalloped blade, and proceeded to reduce a small white lump into enough gossamer-thin slices to cover the large bowl of pasta. With a texture akin to shaved almonds, the truffle possessed a flavor I never would have expected of a fungus. The composer Rossini called the white truffle “the Mozart of mushrooms,” and I immediately was convinced of his analogy's accuracy. Did I want cheese with that? No thanks.

WHITE TRUFFLES GROW only on the roots of oak, linden, willow, and poplar trees in the countryside east of Turin and a few other pockets of northern Italy and adjacent Croatia. The fungi reek of pheromones—complex aromatic chemicals that function as sexual signals—which may help explain why they evoke such a gastronomic frenzy. French scientists claim that the black truffle (also found near Alba but accorded little respect) exudes the same pheromone as a boar in rut. The French, therefore, sometimes hunt Périgord truffles with sows instead of dogs, but the system has one major drawback: It is difficult to prevent an amorous 800-pound sow from eating whatever she finds. The white truffle, on the other hand, smells more like the boudoir than the barnyard, and truffle

dogs such as Romagnolo's Diana are far more obedient than pigs.

Romagnolo and his fellow truffle hunters are a vanishing breed. In the late 1960s, the Italian government began to license truffle hunters, establishing a written test and setting limits on the harvest season. License fees since have risen to 140 euros per year, and the government levies taxes on all sales of the fungi. About 1,500 people (fewer than a dozen of whom are women) are licensed to hunt truffles in the hills around Asti and Alba, and many of them undertake the pursuit only a few times annually between late September and early January. During this period, Romagnolo hunts almost nightly—the dogs focus better in the dark, and by day he is busy at his high-tech telecom job.

Truffle hunters claim the harvest declines each year, but they could be crying poor to discourage the tax man. Romagnolo carries a few small truffles with him on every hunt. If he runs into other truffle hunters who inquire about his luck, he shows them the pathetic nubbins. He expects that they do the same.

During the festival, many truffle hunters bring the majority of their finds—ranging from the size of an acorn to that of a Ping-Pong ball and weighing from 15 to 80 grams—to the weekend market in Alba, which is conducted with a minimum of rhapsodic rhetoric. Despite spawning such literary giants as Cesare Pavese, Primo Levi, and Italo Calvino, the Piedmontese remain as grimly Calvinist as their Swiss neighbors. Their favorite aphorism, *Falto due—e cuerpa* (Do your duty—and die), might explain why their Italian countrymen regard the Piedmontese as dour and brooding. And while white truffles may stir chefs and food critics to purple prose, truffle hunters at the Alba market are here strictly for business. Early in the season, a consensus price is established, and each dealer at the market has a scale. In 2004—neither an especially good nor bad year—the going rate was three euros per gram, which translated to about \$100 for a truffle the size of a small walnut.

Prices at the truffle market pale in comparison to figures registered at the month-long Alba festival's culminating event: a charity auction held at a castle above the village of Grinzane Cavour. The heap of Gothic brick, which dates to the 1200s, was the home of the 19th-century gastronome, oenophile, and

statesman Camillo Benso di Cavour, who is revered for two great accomplishments: He brought Burgundian winemaking techniques to Barolo and Barbaresco, and he helped engineer the unification of Italy under the Savoy kings. Cavour's heirs deeded the castle to the City of Alba and the Piedmont region, which promptly installed at the site the Order of the Knights of the Truffle and Wines of Alba—warriors of the truffle shaver and corkscrew. The Alba White Truffle Festival launches here in October with the award of the Grinzane Cavour Prize for Literature (the Italian equivalent of a Pulitzer) and concludes in November with the auctioning of enormous white truffles.

The charity auction is an international event. In 2004, parallel truffle auctions at the Four Seasons Restaurant in New York and the GUM department store in Moscow were linked to Grinzane by satellite, and the giant truffles on the block dwarfed any at the Alba market. The event began with a modest 130-gram truffle, which set off a frenzy of bids before selling for \$4,000. By the time the fourth truffle came to the block, the entire room had transformed into a stock exchange pit of suitors shouting out their bids. The 360-gram tuber sold for \$5,600 to an Armani-clad buyer for Sophia Loren.

At the end of the night, the auctioneer introduced a monstrous, misshapen orb, weighing slightly over a kilogram and resembling a cantaloupe with acne, and passed it around the room on a velvet cushion. The dog and the truffle hunter who found it—Rex and Signor Cerruti, respectively—were introduced to the pop of electronic flash and the glare of television lights. Bidding began at \$19,000 in \$1,000 increments.

Competing bids came in from all three sites. The Italians dropped out at \$34,000, but participants in Russia and the United States continued to spar until New York restaurateur Francesco Giambelli bested all other bids for the giant truffle with an offer of \$41,000. Without delay, Giambelli's pungent, perishable prize was whisked off with an escort to the airport in Milan to catch that night's flight to Kennedy. Within a matter of hours, the truffle would arrive at his East Side eatery, Giambelli 50th, where it was sure to be the focus of another dogged pursuit. ☐