

Truffles: The Precious Mushroom

Enrico Vidale

Known as the “diamond of the kitchen” and one of the world’s most expensive foods, truffles are a gourmet delicacy. This culinary treasure is found and harvested only a few months in a year and, Italy is known as where the best truffles are found. This rare edible fungus (ectomycorrhizal fungi) grows mainly underneath hazel, poplar and oak tree in a symbiotic relationship with their roots. With a garlic like flavour and musky aroma, restaurants buy black truffles at a price of 35–90€ and white truffles (which are rarer) at around 800–1800€ per kilogram from the hunters. But when they sell it to the end user, it is usually more than twice the price bought from truffle hunter. In Italy, truffles are in high demand in restaurants and consequently there are many who take the trouble to harvest truffles in the forests to benefit from the handsome remuneration. This is the case study of a retired woman from northern Italy who picks truffles to supplement her pension. What started off as a hobby for Claudia (not her real name¹), became a substantial source of income for her

and she now harvests truffles every year to supply to restaurants.

Piedmont, Emilia Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria, Marche and Abruzzo are the most important region for truffle production and truffle hunting tours are popular amongst tourists. Truffle hunters have organized themselves into associations and individuals can get certified to operate hunting tours for tourists. The truffle hunter who leads the tour shows tourists how to find truffles while walking through the woods and how to use them in the best way for cooking. The truffle hunter is often accompanied by their dog. Frequently, these hunts are combined with wine tasting tours, which usually culminate in a cooking lesson and a decadent meal. Many chefs say that the truffle is one of the best condiments which can be used in the kitchen. It is advisable to use it fresh, as when fully ripe, it best displays its qualities. Each specie of truffle has its own particular, typical aroma, which is suitable for specific culinary uses (Fig. 1).

In Italy, truffle hunters use breed dogs to find truffles following the strong smell of mature truffles underneath the surface of the ground. Black truffles are more plentiful, but they cannot be cultivated. Claudia took a lot of effort to train her dog “Bella” to find truffles based on its smell.

I remember when I took “Bella”, my small little dog from the pet shop. It was the last dog in a box and nobody wanted it because she was too small. So I decided to take her and after nine years I may say it was good choice. “Bella” had all the characteristic of a good truffle dog that I read in some

¹Claudia preferred that her identity be not revealed.

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books; she was very shy but at the same time very active. Well to be honest, nine years ago I trained my dog to search for truffles, but at the same time, she trained me to find the best place for truffle hunting. I trained her as a daughter, but only after one year of the truffle hunting I could see “Bella” was perfectly trained.

You should start training the dog very early in its life, roughly speaking, when the dog starts to walk. First you start to play with a truffle so that the dog will associate the truffle with play time. Then you can add tasks day by day, for instance you can throw the truffle and train the dog to fetch it. This has to be done every day, otherwise the dog will forget everything. Then you start to play with the truffle in the high grass, forcing the dog to use its nose and not its eyes to search for the truffles. Once the dog brings back the truffle from the high grass, it is ready for digging out the truffles from the ground. This is the most important part, because it must follow the smell of truffle and not your scent. Therefore, you need to hide the truffle the day before and let the dog search the day after. Initially, the truffle should be hidden half inside and half outside the ground. Then, gradually, you hide the truffles until it is all inside the ground. A few days after the dog does this exercise correctly, you can take it to the forest and start to search for truffles. The dog should never be stressed or tired when it searches truffles, otherwise it gets annoyed.

Truffle hunting has become more and more popular, according to Claudia, as more and more

people are joining this line of activity. She sells the truffles to both restaurants and middlemen.

At the beginning it was quite easy and I was almost alone to go inside some forests, but now it is incredibly crowded at every hour of the day and night. The economic crisis boosted truffle hunting as an alternative source of income for many and this lead to decreases in prices. I am a bit scared about the future of truffle hunting, but probably it is a simple impression I have on the scarcity. I think too much competition would mean that I will find less and less truffles in the forest.

Claudia has been observing changes in climate and truffle productivity in the forest. She feels that the quantity of truffles have not changed much from one season to another. Rather, she feels that the problem of scarcity is related to abandonment of land.

Ten years ago, there were a lot of people going in the forest to cut trees for firewood, but now the land owners prefer to buy ready firewood delivered at home by companies. The land was actively managed and now there are only small parcels of forest that are actively managed. Changes in climate affect truffle size and more truffle pickers, which means more competition. But forest abandonment remains the core problem affecting truffles productivity. In these last two years, there is a new phenomena in which the timber companies



Fig. 1 White (left) and black (right) truffles found in whitish



Fig. 2 Whitish truffle (left) and “Summer” truffle (right)

clear large areas of forests. This makes the truffles disappear.

The white truffles fetch a better value in the market than black truffles (Fig. 2). Finding the right type of truffles depends on how frequently one goes hunting and which forest is visited.

Personally I prefer summer black truffle, because you find them abundantly and you enjoy to see the dog digging it for you. Of course, the prices are very different. For example if you harvest half a kilogram of white truffle, it is comparable to 10 kilograms of black truffles in terms of prices. The price gives you just an indication of rarity but if you collect for commercial purposes, you should look just at the quantity you can get. White truffles are rare and if you are lucky you can collect 200 grams, while you could even harvest 15 kilograms of summer black truffles in a day.

Claudia was a self-employed truck driver and had contributed 10% of her annual income to her pension fund for 42 years. Upon retirement, she began receiving the pension, which is paltry and barely meets her needs.

You know the pension of a self-employed person is practically zero, and I was struggling to cover

my costs and that of my extended family. At the beginning, I started to think which “remunerative hobby” could take me out of the house while gaining some money for my family; so almost 9 years ago I started to collect truffles.

Through truffle hunting, Claudia derives an income which is nearly half of her pension. This income is used by Claudia to buy food, fuel for her car, and to go for an outing with her family once a month. She notes that her pension is inadequate for her to afford these expenses. Occasionally, Claudia’s nephews follow her to learn about truffle hunting. She feels that truffle hunting should be exempt from tax, so that those who hunt may declare their income. There are many who hunt truffles, but do not declare this income to avoid taxation. Claudia is 70 years old and wonders how long she can continue collecting truffles. “Bella” is getting old and in a few years when Bella is too old to hunt for truffles, Claudia will end her lucrative forest activity. But, Italian truffles will continue to be a celebrated culinary item as the demand for this precious mushroom does not seem to wane.