

The spore

Feasted on by the pharaohs, banned by the church, and simmered in wine for Louis XIV, the sinfully delicious truffle grows wild in Italy. All you need to devour one is a fistful of cash or an introduction to a very special dog named Max

BY JAY CHESHES

PHOTOGRAPH BY JENS MORTENSEN

Unlike golfers and anglers, I am the sort of hedonist who does not get up before dawn on a vacation. Yet first light on this cold November morning finds me trussed up like the Michelin Man in four bulky layers, with only a caffè macchiato in my gut. What has lured me out of bed at this ungodly hour? The promise of a life-altering breakfast: fried eggs showered in slivers shaved from fresh white truffles. But first we need to find some.

Our hunt begins at a secret spot in the low hills of Piedmont, in northwestern Italy, as Sandrino Romanelli, a truffle hunter in his early 40s, unlocks the back of the van we'd been riding in and two scruffy mutts leap out, tails wagging. Birba (Italian for *mischief*), is the second-string pooch. A mangy creature covered in salt-and-pepper fuzz, he's the bumbling decoy—a distraction for competing hunters from Max, literally the top dog.

"*Che cosa, Max?*" Sandrino yells out in Italian as the brown-and-white dog scampers up a hill and begins scraping at the earth near the base of an oak. When we finally catch up, Sandrino pushes Max's head away from the hole that he has started digging. With a flat metal tool, the truffle hunter then gingerly scrapes away layers of dirt, and as he does so, a faint aroma creeps out from beneath the damp carpet of leaves. The more Sandrino digs, the more intense the smell gets, like sweaty socks and overly ripe cheese. And then he spots it—an ugly beige nub two fists wide. "Good boy, Max! Good boy, Max!" Sandrino says as he tosses the dog a treat and then brings the prize truffle up to his nose. He takes a deep breath and says, "*Ah, che buono!*"

With prices sometimes exceeding \$5,000 a pound, the white truffle of Alba—*Tuber magnatum* Pico, to be more precise—is *che buono* indeed. Although there are 70 different varieties of truffle, connoisseurs care only about two types: French black truffles and Italian white ones. Both are the fruiting buds of an underground fungus whose weblike strands develop in symbiosis with the roots of trees. Black truffles can be planted, while white truffles rarely sprout in the same place twice, though they favor oak and hazelnut trees. Their scarcity only adds to their mystique. >



of kings



FUNGAL FEVER White truffles, like these from Italy, can sell for \$5,000 per pound.

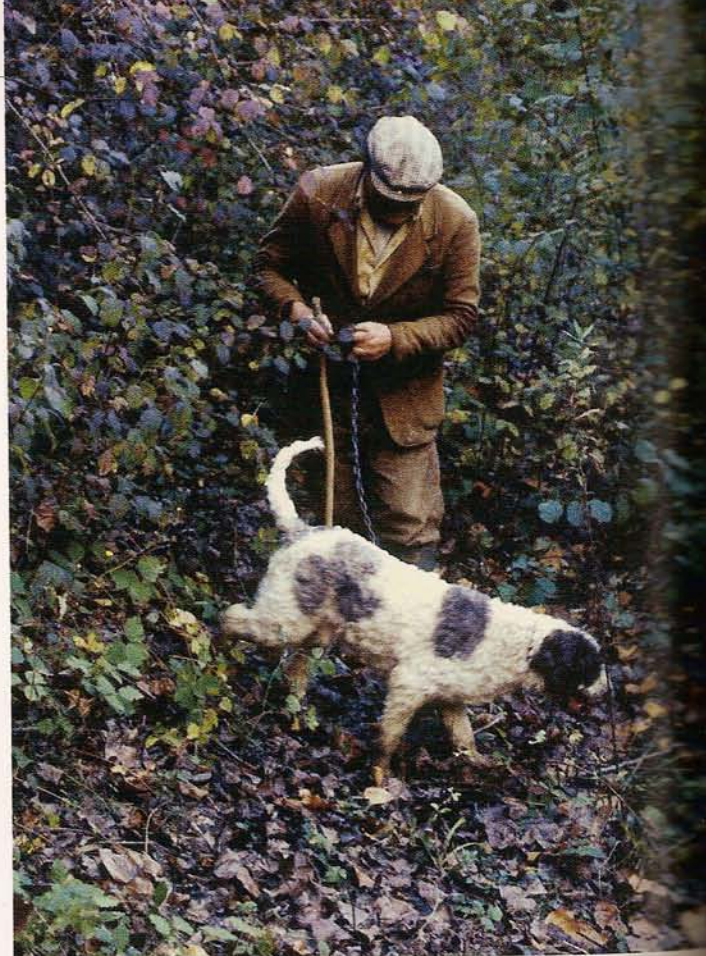
The most delicate, intoxicating, and rare of the whites sprout in the foothills of the Italian Alps near Langhe and Monferrato (though there are also fine specimens in neighboring Tuscany and Umbria). Every autumn, truffle hunters, or *trifolau*, accompanied by their trusty dogs, enter the woods en masse to begin the short-lived annual pursuit of a mushroom that's literally worth several times its own weight in gold. Hunting truffles is imprecise and often frustrating, dependent as it is on the fine-tuned proboscis of a well-trained pooch. By January, winter frost has settled in and the season is over.

Like gold prospectors, *trifolau* are a secretive and competitive bunch, lying to one another about their favorite spots and even going so far as to take out the competition by poisoning rivals' dogs—which helps explain the ungodly hour when our search began and the presence of a decoy dog. The *trifolau* sell their wares to restaurants, where they are sliced raw into paper-thin slivers. A few months a year, from New York City to Milan to Tokyo, gastronomes line up to pay through the nose for plates of risotto and pasta—humble dishes transformed into entrées fit for an emperor by the mere addition of these spores. (Truffles grow in Oregon, Texas, and Georgia, but they are a bland, cardboard-tasting shadow of their Continental cousins.)

If elusiveness partially explains the truffle's cultlike following, its taste—pungent, musky, and redolent of a vigorous one-night stand—explains the response it provokes in man and beast. Wild

boars have been known to go mad rooting for truffles, as have domesticated female pigs, once the favored beast on the truffle trail. According to one theory, the pigs are captivated by *testosterone*, the scent of which seeps from the ground and is similar to that of testosterone. These pigs become so enamored of truffles that they must be muzzled when used on the hunt, lest they devour their treasure the moment they find it. This is why the Italians prefer dogs. They too have a highly trained sense of smell, but they are far more manageable than 300-pound swine.

In Italy, the most prodigious dogs are as coveted as Thoroughbred stallions and as well trained at sniffing out product as a DEA canine greeting a flight from Bogotá at JFK. But unlike his drug-dog counterpart, a mutt like Max must actually yearn for the substance he sniffs out. "When the dog is still a puppy, a year old, you deprive him of food," Sandrino explained over lunch the day before we would set out on our hunt. "You bury a truffle. When he finds it, you feed it to him as a reward. If he doesn't eat it, he's not a truffle dog."



BEST IN SCENT The French use pigs to sniff out black truffles, but the Italian *trifolau* ("truffle hunter") trains his dog (above) to find white ones.

Max has made Sandrino one of the most successful hunters in all of Piedmont and has helped line his pockets with plenty of truffle-infused cash. As with another commodity you consume with your nose, truffle transactions are often off-the-books, back-alley deals. Some hunters unload their aromatic nuggets through middlemen, while others, like Sandrino—who has his own little restaurant and truffle-themed shop—maintain control over all that they find

HOW TO MAKE A \$1,000 ROAST CHICKEN

Truffled Chicken à la Périgourdine* SERVES 6

INGREDIENTS

Stuffing

2¼ pounds black truffles
½ pound chicken fat
½ pound unsmoked bacon
Half of a bay leaf
1 sprig of thyme
Pinch of freshly grated nutmeg
Salt and pepper to taste

Chicken

7½- to 8-pound
roasting chicken, rinsed,
giblets removed
2 tablespoons butter
1 medium onion, chopped
1 medium carrot, chopped
4 sprigs of parsley
8 strips of
unsmoked bacon

A MEAL FIT FOR A HEDGE-FUND MANAGER

To prepare stuffing

- 1 Wash and peel truffles, reserving outer skins. Trim to size of small eggs and chop trimmings finely.
- 2 In a saucepan, melt the fat and bacon over low heat. Strain through a sieve, pressing down well to extract as much flavor as possible.
- 3 Pour the fat into a saucepan containing truffles, trimmings, bay leaf, thyme, nutmeg, salt, and pepper.
- 4 Simmer, covered, for 15 minutes. Remove from heat and let cool.
- 5 Stuff chicken with truffle mixture.
- 6 Truss chicken, making sure all openings are completely closed.
- 7 Place chicken in a terrine and cover it with truffles skins. Refrigerate for 3 days.

To cook chicken

- 1 Preheat oven to 375°F.
- 2 Remove truffle skins from chicken. Melt butter in a saucepan over medium heat. Add truffle skins, onion, carrot, and parsley, and cook until vegetables are soft.
- 3 Place chicken in a roasting pan. Cover with bacon strips and vegetable mixture.
- 4 Place pan on middle rack in oven. Baste chicken regularly with drippings.
- 5 Roast chicken until skin is golden brown and thermometer inserted into thickest part of thigh registers 170°F, about 1 hour 45 minutes.
- 6 Let chicken rest for 15 minutes. Carve and serve.

*Adapted from Larousse Gastronomique

As with another commodity you consume with your nose, truffle transactions are off the books.



WHITE GOLD Skip the rest—the black from Périgord and the white from Piedmont are the best.

(Sandrino also buys from other hunters). And you'd be well advised to sample the product before parting with your euros. Unscrupulous dealers are always on the lookout for suckers who'll buy brittle truffles past their prime or weighted down with rocks, or even lower-quality Croatian truffles masquerading as the real thing.

The surest, and most indulgent, way to get what you pay for is to follow a hunter like Sandrino through the deep dark woods, though you'll need to know a guy who knows a guy. When it comes to white truffles, Manhattan restaurateur Tony May, a Neapolitan by birth, is just that sort of guy. In season, the dining room at San Domenico, his restaurant on Central Park South, is a swanky stink bomb of fungal aromas. Every year, he escorts friends to Asti in Piedmont for an extravagant 4 days spent gorging on truffles.

It was on one of May's trips that I slogged up a dirt road with Sandrino and Max—and May and his pals. By the time the sun had peeked above the horizon, the *trifolau's* pockets were brimming. By 9 A.M., we had retreated to a humble country trattoria to indulge in the world's headiest—and most extravagant—breakfast. We were a group of hearty eaters.

Spread out before us were big platters of cheeses, sausage, bacon, and fried eggs. At the

table, surrounded by free-flowing bottles of Barolo, May doled out truffle slivers with a razor-sharp handheld *mandoline*—hundreds of dollars' worth buried our eggs. The first bite was nutty and musky. The fungi taste best when copiously shaved onto something mild, be it a fresh, buttery pasta or scrambled eggs, that becomes a background to the truffle's pungent aroma.

After breakfast, we went back to the hotel to get ready for lunch. The next few days would be a decathlon of truffle-scented overindulgence as we teetered from one Michelin-starred restaurant to another, with winery stops along the way. At Guido da Costigliole, a venerable hilltop spot hidden in a converted wine cellar, we sunk our forks into miraculous truffle-covered soft-cooked eggs, breaded and fried and still runny inside. At all' Enoteca, a minimally appointed two-star spot in the village of Canale, there was roast baby goat and duck-filled agnolotti bundles. Our ninth, and final, consecutive meal would be the last gluttonous straw.

By the time we sat down to dinner at Vittoria, an old-school restaurant in the country, we'd eaten truffles on eggs, gnocchi, agnolotti, risotto, custard, raw veal, and even salad. We'd had them at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. A mere whiff seemed almost too much to bear. And yet I soldiered on, tackling my puff pastry with lentils swimming in *fonduta* (cheese sauce), my baked eggs with ricotta, my caramel-covered chestnut cream.

After dinner, as we gnawed on Cuban cigars, Sandrino set up his digital scale. From his car emerged the stash, a towel-shrouded basket brimming with gargantuan specimens. We couldn't consider another bite, and yet we lined up to examine the merchandise. Sandrino jotted prices and weights and offered a whiff. I hadn't planned to bring truffles home, but I was suddenly hooked. Sandrino had my sale in his sights. "For you," he said, "a very good price." ■

BLACK, WHITE, OR HONG KONG PHOOEY

A DINER'S GUIDE TO TRUFFLES

Even the mere kiss of a truffle is enough to perfume a gallon of oil or a platter of eggs. Truffle oils, often synthetically flavored, have become a culinary cliché. There are also truffle-infused cheeses, dry pastas, and flours. Here's what to look for when buying them or ordering them in a restaurant.



BLACK

These truffles, from the Périgord region of France, bloom through winter and into spring. They are traditionally sprinkled in sauces, studded into *pâté de foie gras*, or layered under the skin of roast chickens. They're sometimes canned, frozen, preserved in Cognac, or reduced to powders and pastes. You might also spot fresh truffles (black and white) under a glass dome or resting in a bowl on a bed of rice at your local gourmet shop. Caveat emptor: The rice can dry them out. Wegmans supermarkets (wegmans.com) sell fresh black truffles in season for as much as \$999 a pound.



WHITE

White truffles are available in the States from October to New Year's and are best consumed within 10 days of harvest. When ordering, ask your waiter to shave them at the table—when a bowl of pasta costs \$60, you deserve to see and smell what you're getting. The aroma from the slices ought to be funky, not rancid, and should send a tingly shiver up through your nose.

Even if you travel to Piedmont, you might want to leave the truffle importing to the pros because the aroma may catch the attention of a little dog on a leash. (He probably works for the USDA, which prohibits the unlicensed importation of truffles, along with every other agricultural product.) To purchase white truffles in the U.S., contact Urbani, which distributes them through its Web site, urbanitruffles.com.



FUGGEDABOUTIT

Chinese knockoffs, not of Vuitton but of truffles, are a new and pervasive plague on the business. The Himalayan fungi, dirt cheap in China, look and smell a lot like French "black diamonds," as Périgord truffles are sometimes known. But they can be bitter and rubbery and leave a rank petroleum aftertaste on your tongue. That hasn't stopped retail and restaurant scammers in the United States and Europe from passing them off on an unsuspecting public. The best you can do is trust your nose and your taste buds, and stick with places you know.