

HAPPY HUNTING: ON THE TRUFFLE TRAIL IN ITALY

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TRAVEL / INTERNATIONAL

Truffle hunting is an ancient cultural tradition in parts of Italy, still often shrouded in mystery and villainy. Luxury London travels to two of the country's most popular culinary regions, Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna, to uncover some truths and hopefully, some truffles too

In his epicurean bible published in 1825, *The Physiology of Taste*, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin defined truffles as "the diamond of the art of cookery".

Brillat-Savarin's deduction of the rarest member of the fungus family still rings true almost two centuries later. Even in today's technologically and scientifically advanced world, the elusive truffle still resists mass cultivation. This stubbornness could be attributed to its dependence on tree roots (they can only grow in a symbiotic relationship with certain species), its fussiness when it comes to the conditions of its subterranean dwelling, or its rare mode of dispersal – via the insects and mammals who devour it.



Even if you do chance upon one of these precious nuggets, they will only stay fresh for around 20 days and need to be carefully cared for. Ideally, they should be cleaned with a toothbrush and then kept loosely wrapped in newspaper and put in a glass jar in the fridge.

In Britain, we have two main species: the black summer truffle and the autumn burgundy truffle. The most highly valued black type however, the perigord, is usually found across in France. And when it comes to the mythical white ones (if we're still talking about diamonds, then these are the sparkliest), the majority of *Tuber magnatum*, better known as Piedmont truffles, are found in northern Italy – particularly the regions of Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna.

Tuscany

When one imagines a trip to Tuscany, it is often visualised as a sun-drenched, high summer affair. Yet, the autumn and winter months are ripe for harvesting – and consuming – the area's gastronomic riches: olive oil, Chianti, wild boar, and of course, the truffle.



The Tuscan landscape is diverse, with coastal assets as well as the Apennine Mountains. It also boasts the most woodland of all the Italian regions, resulting in six thriving spots where truffle hunting is most concentrated. I visit one of the most prolific, San Miniato, a town that holds a festival on four weekends in November and December solely to celebrate the tartufo bianco.

The Camugliano estate, belonging to an old Florentine family, has villas available to rent, a private chapel and offers guided tours and pheasant hunting. It is also where truffle hunter Cesare Profeti and his canine companion, Gina, lead hunting expeditions for specialist business Savitar Tartufi.

While pigs are most commonly associated with sniffing out truffles, dogs are now preferred as they are easier to train and handle – and less likely to scoff the treasure. Truffles smell like male pig saliva, which more often than not renders the females helpless to resist.



Using dogs still comes with its fair share of problems, though: they can often be stolen and used by unlicensed hunters, and in some extreme cases, tricked into eating poisoned meat to eliminate them as competition.

We're only a few minutes into the trek when Gina is suddenly distracted. She hurries to a spot at the base of a Linden tree – one of the truffle's preferred partners – and digs furiously before Cesare restrains her and finishes the job with his special long-handled tool, revealing a waxy white truffle around the size of a marble.

As the search goes on, we have less luck and it becomes clear just how scarce this unassuming yet €4,000-per-kilogram gourmet mushroom really is – we come away with just one more conker-sized find.



Our meagre haul is put into perspective when we are served a five-course lunch at Locanda di Camugliano, one of the villas where chefs are available to hire. Piles of pungent truffle shavings sit atop pasta, are swirled into fondue cheese,

and even used to garnish ice cream.

It makes even the simplest fried egg taste rich and decadent. By the time the coffees arrive we are all giddy, seduced and positively truffle drunk. The words of Brillat-Savarin begin to ring true: "Whosoever says truffle, utters a grand word, which awakens erotic and gastronomic ideas."

The villa I stay at, *Il Borgo di Petroio*, is a renovated stone farmhouse high in the hills above the village of Rufina, yet only a 40-minute drive from Florence. The pool and tennis courts evoke idyllic summer scenes, but the wild, misty hills and dewy greenery make it an enthralling and scenic setting in November too.



The villa sleeps up to 14, and there is even an industrial kitchen to accommodate professional cooks. During my stay, I am lucky enough to have Michelin-starred chef Tom Aikens rustle up dinner; he incorporates some of the wild boar hunted that morning on the 900-acre grounds.

All this, combined with the fresh Tuscan air, the finest of wines and cosy quarters makes for three nights of blissful sleep.

Tuscany Now & More offers seven nights self-catering in Il Borgo di Petroio from £5,074 per week, based on 14 people sharing, and truffle hunting from £400 per group, www.tuscanynowandmore.com

Local Legends

Antica Macelleria Cecchini



On a side street in Panzano, Chianti, Dario Cecchini blasts AC/DC and serves red wine inside his raucous butcher's shop, which buzzes with chatter and excitement as people spill out onto the street, usually heading straight across the road to his legendary restaurant.

www.darioceccchini.com

The Frescobaldi estates

The majestic Castello Nipozzano and Castello Pomino are part of the Frescobaldi family estate. You can take a tour of the vast cellars, enjoy various vintages with traditional Tuscan food, and even stay the night.

www.frescobaldi.com

Emilia-Romagna

This is a foodie's hidden paradise, quietly producing some of the finest cured meats, stone fruits, parmesan cheese and egg pasta in the world. I taste delicacies in this area that I've never experienced before, including sparkling red wine, passatelli (pasta formed of bread crumbs, eggs and parmesan cheese), and zuppa inglese – an unusual cake made using English trifle ingredients.



I join Sauro, a tartufo hunter with around three decades of experience, and his springer spaniel, Kiko, on one of their expeditions in some woodland near the small medieval town of Sant'Agata Feltria in Montefeltro.

When Kiko follows a scent he scrabbles at the earth excitedly, with Sauro standing close, encouraging him until just before the truffle is unearthed. Sauro then takes over in the more delicate final stages, passing Kiko a well-deserved treat.

We find a couple of black truffles: there is less demand for these and they're sold for around £25 per kilogram. Dark, mottled and covered in soil, one could easily dismiss them as chunks of earth or stones.



Curiously, Sauro tells us, if a white truffle is found in a certain place one year, exactly a year later to the day, there will be another in the same spot. It is also believed certain moon phases can affect the fungi's development – the most prosperous period is when the moon is waxing.

Every October, Sant'Agata Feltria holds truffle festivals on Sundays. When I visit, the picturesque cobbled streets are teeming with people buying fresh truffles and Porcini mushrooms. The truffle's aroma naturally overpowers that of any other product, and wherever you go its sharp earthiness fills the nostrils.

In *Time* magazine, the late food writer Josh Ozersky once described it as: "a combination of newly plowed soil, fall rain, burrowing earthworms and the pungent memory of lost youth and old love affairs". It is true: once the scent is associated with a specific time it will forever inspire nostalgia, and I will always think of last autumn in northern Italy.

Food in Tour truffle hunting tours from €100pp, foodintour.com; for more on what to do in the area visit: www.emiliaromagnaturismo.it & www.emiliaromagnavelcome.com &

The rest of the region

Castello Estense, Ferrara

Ferrara's castle cuts a statuesque figure against the skyline, even 600 years after it was built. The interior is impressive too, despite suffering some damage during the 2012 earthquakes. It is worth taking an afternoon to marvel at its intricately

the 2012 earthquakes. It is worth taking an afternoon to marvel at its intricately painted ceilings and explore the impressive orangerie.

www.castelloestense.it

Mosaics, Ravenna



The octagonal Basilica of San Vitale and the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia are home to incredible mosaics from the fifth and sixth centuries, which have inspired fashion collections from designers such as Dolce & Gabbana.

Cookery classes, Collina dei Poeti

Learn how to make traditional Piadina flatbread and filled egg pasta at the rustic villa Collina dei Poeti with the rosy-cheeked Marina, who claims that "Piadina is like love, every woman makes it differently..."

From €90pp, www.foodintour.com; www.collinadeipoeti.it



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Hero image: Il Borgo di Petroio