

STALKING THE WHITE DIAMOND

THE TRUFFLES OF NORTHERN ITALY ARE AS SOUGHT-AFTER AS PRECIOUS JEWELS



With his trusty dogs Lilla and Pulin, Gianni Monchiero combs the forests of Piedmont for buried treasure.

MAURIZIO CAMERNA

‘TRUFFLES ARE LIKE WINE. EVERY AREA CONFERS ITS DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS’

The mist of an autumn morning shields Gianni Monchiero as he moves purposefully among the greens and browns of a thick wood in Piedmont, about an hour southeast of Turin. Monchiero, whose nickname, “Barot,” refers to the stick he’s holding, is accompanied by a nine-year-old Breton spaniel-pointer mix. The two are hunting for game far more valuable than rabbits or birds — they are on the trail of the *Tuber magnatum pico*, or white truffle.

Diamond of the soil. King of mushrooms. Aphrodisiac par excellence. Source of artistic inspiration for poets, writers and musicians as well as chefs. Created by lightning (wrote Plutarch) or crafted by moonbeams (claims local folklore). The mystique surrounding this unassuming tuber (not a mushroom at all) is as rich as its appearance is modest.

The white truffle, one of 10 varieties of truffle, is by far the most valuable. It is a homely fungus, slightly creamy in color, found only in symbiosis with a few types of trees, including oak, hazel, poplar and beech. It thrives in soft, wet soil rich in calcium, predominantly in north and central Italy and — to a lesser extent — in certain areas of Croatia and France. It is far more fragrant than its famous French cousin, the black Périgord, and has a more distinctive flavor.

“Truffles are like wine,” explains Monchiero, a fourth-generation *trifulau*, or truffle hunter. “Every area confers its own distinctive characteristics, whether hill or valley, sandy soil or clay, an abundance of sun or rain. The perfume of the truffle, its shape, its color, are all determined by these factors.”

His dog Lilla is indifferent to these matters, concentrating solely on smell. She circles methodically in the 4 a.m. vapors, clambering over the exposed roots of oaks, her nose at a 45-degree angle, her dappled orange tail straight out behind her. When her tail begins to beat rhythmically, her owner knows she is close to a find.

Italians may endlessly debate the qualities of the best truffle dog — male or female, mixed breed or purebred — but no one suggests that a pig might be better. This notion has no currency in Italy, where pigs have been banned from truffle hunting since 1985. Pigs, it is said, are heavier



and less agile than dogs, and are — how to put it? — more piggish in their treatment of a treasure once found.

“I would never trust a pig with a truffle in its mouth,” states Riccardo Germani, president of the Associazione Nazionale Tartufai Italiani (National Association of Italian Truffle Sellers), dog trainer and *trifulau* since childhood.

Affirms Monchiero: “The only pigs used for truffle hunting today are those on show as tourist attractions. Otherwise, the French use dogs, as we do. Pigs don’t navigate the deep woods as well as dogs and, let’s face it, they are much bigger, so it’s harder to transport them.”

Truffles, on the other hand, are very easy to move. Even a small tuber is worth a morning’s exertions. White truffles in 2012 commanded up to \$8,000 a pound, the exact price depending on size, shape, quality and vendor. This makes them one of the world’s most expensive foods, as demonstrated by the record-breaking pair of white truffles (about three pounds’ worth) sold at auction in 2010 for \$330,000.

Every autumn, during the height of truffle season, well-heeled diners flock to temples of haute cuisine in the world’s major cities, where a shaving of truffle over pasta or salad can add \$75 or more to the bill. (When the 18th-century French gourmand Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin called truffles “the diamonds of the kitchen,” his description was as accurate economically as it was gastronomically.)

Locals prefer the *trattoria dietro l’angolo* (around the corner) or, even better, their own kitchen. They insist that white truffles should always be served raw, shaved over traditional dishes like *tajarin* (egg noodles from Piedmont), for example, and never cooked or glazed in aspic, as in the Périgord. Unlike black truffles, *Tuber magnatum pico* is resistant to industrial farming methods. Threatened by climate change and impatient commercial interests, it is an increasingly rare and costly commodity.

The air of luxury that clings to truffles outside Italy bemuses the people of Piedmont. Locals like Monchiero and Germani have grown up with truffles. Germani is from a family of farmers and recalls that his father and grandfather, returning from a day in the fields, would pick up a truffle to garnish the evening meal. He laments that

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Top left: The Università dei Cani da Tartufo was founded in 1880.

Above: Gianni Monchiero proudly displays truffle memorabilia in Roddi.

DOGGED PURSUIT

A truffle-hunting dog is called a *tabui* in Piedmontese dialect, and the breed in vogue at the moment is the woolly-haired *lagotto romagnolo*. Any dog, however, is potentially good, especially one of small to medium size, according to the *trifulau* hunters Gianni Monchiero and Riccardo Germani. “The best dog I ever had was a mongrel found in a vineyard,” recalls Germani.

Germani asserts that females learn faster, but that males can be more persistent in the field. Monchiero emphasizes the importance of inherent ability. He has several ways to determine this — and declines to divulge most of them. He does reveal one test: the way a puppy reacts to the smell of a truffle. “It’s like a person smelling chocolate,” he says. “They may react positively, or be indifferent. If the dog is indifferent it cannot be a good truffle dog, because a truffle dog has to be interested in the smell of truffles. If the puppy reacts positively, that’s a good start.” C.F.

today the truffle has become an elite product: “We need to try to make truffles available for everyone’s kitchen.”

Monchiero’s great-grandfather founded the Università dei Cani da Tartufo (school for truffle-hunting dogs) in Roddi, just outside Alba, in 1880. Like Germani, he cannot recall the first time he ate a truffle because they were always a staple of the family kitchen. “We have never been without truffles or dogs in our house,” he says.

Both men make their living around the truffle mystique — training dogs, selling truffles, explaining local culture, giving presentations about the tubers and how to find them. Monchiero has given demonstrations on four continents and has clients from as far away as Singapore: “They come here in the autumn to buy my truffles and eat in our local restaurants.”

Says Germani: “The truffle exists in symbiosis with the soil and vegetation of this area. We need to teach respect for the territory and pass its secrets on to coming generations. Sadly, much of this fascinating world is being lost, but we are trying to keep its cultural traditions alive.”

As Monchiero reflects, “The white truffle is a quality product, appreciated all over the world. It has certainly brought benefits to people here.” One proof, he notes, is the presence of 4,000 *trifulau* in Piedmont. “It can get pretty crowded during truffle-hunting season,” he admits.

Claudia Flisi



Left: Riccardo Germani with his dog Keira and the traditional barot.

Above, left to right: Lilla and Pulin zero in on a prize. Monchiero praises his canine collaborator. The black truffle, especially favored by the French.

Below: The white truffle, which can command up to \$8,000 a pound.



‘WE NEED TO TEACH RESPECT FOR THE TERRITORY AND PASS ITS SECRETS ON’



ALBA’S TRUFFLE FAIR

Every Saturday and Sunday between Oct. 12 and Nov. 17, 2013, truffle aficionados can see, smell, taste and purchase the object of their passion at the 83rd annual Fiera Internazionale del Tartufo Bianco d’Alba. From 9 a.m. to 8 p.m., truffles are the star attraction in exhibitions, musical events, art shows and food fairs in the center of town.

The real business happens in the weeks before and after the international white truffle fair. The atmosphere at the Maddelena Cortile, an enclosed medieval piazza in the heart of Alba, is a cross between Amsterdam’s diamond market and New York street-corner dealers in contraband. The goods are wrapped in plain paper, discreetly flashed from deep pockets and bartered in low voices. Deals are made with a nod and a handshake. When a particularly beautiful specimen is unwrapped for weighing, the grizzled *trifulau* and well-heeled city customers greet it with an audible gasp of approval. C.F.