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Truffles from down under

In a world where everything has been copied, replicated, cloned and hybridized, there remain only a handful of truly unique foods. At the top of anyone's list sits the pearl of the earth, the truffle.

Truffles are a bizarre form of fungi, sort of an underground mushroom if you will. For centuries, their origins were unknown, shrouded in legends and myths.

Many thought they only grew at the base of trees that had been struck by lightning. Truffle hunting was half-sport and half wizardry, with hunters jealously hiding the location of their favorite grounds and using specially trained dogs or pigs to root out the underground "tubers."

The most pernicious myth was that gourmet-grade truffles could only be harvested in the wild, in the shade of the ancient forests in France and Italy. They defied commercial attempts at being farmed, and due to their scarcity their price continued to skyrocket.

Thus the search for the secret of the truffles became sort of the Holy Grail of the food industry. He, or she, who could unlock their secret would find chefs prostrate at their feet in supplication (and, by the way, command a king's ransom in cashola).

Over the years, I've heard about many attempts to transplant truffles into other regions, including in our own country. And I've heard of other species of truffles, including some wild ones from Oregon, but they never measured up to the Europeans in quality.

A late-night report on the BBC radio news program alerted me to the possibility that a breakthrough had been made in, of all places, Australia. Truffles from Australia?

It's not as farfetched as we might think. Compared to Paris or Milan, it may be thousands of miles away and an incalculable number of light years in terms of style, but it is actually the most logical place to start a truffle farm.

For starters, the land Down Under is already home to around 300 species of different wild truffles. They may lack the culinary appeal of France's Blacks or Piedmont's Whites, but they share some of the same growth patterns.

The native Australian truffles' life is characterized as a symbiotic relationship with their environment, where they act as helpful parasites. One could argue that they give back more than they take.

From the tree roots they are attached to, they take specific elements and minerals while giving others in return. They also act to break up and mix the hard soil, making it more amenable to other life forms.

And while we might envision Australia as a dry and arid land, parts of it are very similar to the areas in Provence and Umbria where their cousins dwell. All these qualities encouraged some Aussie farmers to try inoculating their oak and hazel groves with imported black truffle

spores.

The first farms began in Tasmania and the very first truffles were harvested in 1999. Based on these early successes, almost 50 farms have sprung up there, in New South Wales and in Victoria.

Instead of braving truffle poachers, the Aussies have to contend with other problems, such as wombats and kangaroos sneaking onto their farms. Nevertheless, the initial reports are good.

The quality of the Australian truffles has been hailed as excellent, and the amount that is being dug up is riding steadily. As an added bonus, the timing of their harvest is earlier in the year than the European one, so it dovetails nicely without driving prices down.

In case you are wondering, a kilo (2.2 pounds) of black truffles sells for \$2,300. Don't even ask what the extremely rare Italian white truffles go for; a while back \$3,000 per pound was not unheard of.

What does this buy you? In the case of the black truffles, it buys you what looks like a small hard, black golf ball, a little gnarled and misshapen.

From this sphere, we shave paper-thin slices to drop onto plates of hot pasta or risotto. Every speck or scrap that falls onto the cutting board is saved, maybe to be used to flavor a rich sauce or to be infused into oil.

More than the taste, it's the aroma of truffles that one values the most. It's a pungent and heady smell, a mixture of mushrooms, rotting leaves and the essence of the forest floor in the fall mixed with spices.

It has a hard-to-define quality that is almost sexual in its nature, triggering something in the back of one's brain. This elusiveness is maybe the secret to the truffle's desirability.

How strong is the smell? I once had to transport an ounce – not a pound, an ounce – of fresh black truffles that were sealed in a plastic bag buried under bubble-wrap in a closed cardboard box.

While driving to the restaurant, I stopped to pick up something, maybe a three-minute detour. As soon as I opened the door to the car I nearly fell over.

The entire car was exploding with the overpowering aroma of truffles. It was heady and intoxicating, and I felt like I was high on some strange narcotics during the remainder of the drive.

The easiest, and by far the cheapest, way to enjoy the truffle experience is to use truffle oil. This is an aromatic essence that has been distilled into a clear oil, which can subsequently be added to sauces or dribbled on top of pastas.

They range in price from \$10 to \$40 for a 4-ounce bottle; oil made with the white, instead of the black, truffles is to be preferred, and the more you pay, usually the better it is. Don't worry; you'll only need a few drops for a serving.

The first time, keep it simple. Make an old-fashioned Fettucine Alfredo using the best ingredients, and then once the pasta is on the plate and ready to go to the table, just dribble some of the truffle oil on top.

The heat of the pasta will immediately excite the oil, causing it to release its vapors. Put your face right into the plate and inhale deeply to get the full effect.

I guarantee half of you will try this and shake your heads in disgust. "I don't get what all the

excitement is about?"

The other half will get this glazed look on your eyes, as if you've seen the light. The next thing you know you'll be putting truffle oil on mashed potatoes, cheese ravioli, rice . . .

And maybe in a few years, once the Australians corner the market, we'll be able to eat truffles with every meal. But where's the fun in that?

By the way, the following recipe deserves your best and most aristocratic red wine. No merlots, please; a top shelf Chianti, Barolo, Rioja or Rhone.

FETTUCINE ALFREDO

8 ounces fresh fettucine (not dried)

1½ tablespoon unsalted butter

3-4 tablespoons heavy cream

4-5 tablespoon freshly grated imported Parmigiano Reggiano cheese

1 pinch each salt and pepper

1 bottle white truffle oil

Cook the fettucine according to the package instructions in well-salted water, until it is just done (about 4 minutes). While it is cooking, in a 10- to 12-inch skillet, melt the butter over medium heat. Add the freshly cooked, drained fettucine to the pan, and toss briefly to coat. Add the remaining ingredients, and raise the heat to high. Stir the contents until the noodles are well coated and the excess cream has been absorbed.

Place immediately on a warm plate and garnish with a sprinkling of black pepper and a drizzle of truffle oil. Eat right away, while it's hot.]

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