



ITALY

TRUFFLE HUNTING IN TUSCANY

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Its spores spreading with exploration, trade and war, traversing the continent on its hero's journey and putting down roots along the way.



Dirt was flying everywhere as the hunting dog began digging into the ground. The smell of moist earth permeated the air. He barked excitedly and scampered around as we approached. The hunter pulled his trusty hound back and continued the delicate excavation personally. He gingerly pulled apart the loosened earth with his hands and small shovel before striking gold in the form of the rare white truffle.

From the ancient Egyptians, to the Greeks and Romans, then French and Italians, the truffle tradition passed from civilisation to civilisation. Its spores spreading with exploration, trade and war, traversing the continent on its hero's journey and putting down roots along the way. The fruiting body creating microscopic threads that attached to the roots of trees in a symbiotic relationship that exchanged water and nutrients for nourishment. Giving and taking of the earth. The truffle's little tendrils clinging to the dirt with a devil may care attitude that mimicked the people of this landscape, the robust Italians adhering to tradition, working with their hands in this labour-intensive process that few people continue.

We were on a hunt in the sloping Chianti hills of Italy. The best truffles are found in Alba, where they boast the trifola d'Alba Madonna, or the "truffle of the Madonna from Alba." However, the tartufo bianchetto, "whitish truffles" of the Tuscan region were to be the treasures of our hunt. Though slightly less aromatic than the famous white truffles of the Piedmont region,

the combination of fresh bianchetto truffle and Chianti was a siren song.

Our adventure began the day before, on a midwinter afternoon, as we made our way towards the Tuscan hills and passed imposing medieval ramparts into the sleepy Old Town of San Gimignano. This Tuscan hill town provides glimpses at history with its 13th-century fortifications and skyline of medieval towers. Similar to the pilgrims of yore who used this UNESCO World Heritage Site (a designation it has held since 1990) for a resting point as they made their way to the Holy Land, we rested our heads here for the evening.

We were lost in time as we explored San Gimignano. We wandered through narrow streets that open onto large piazzas and climbed towers to overlook landscapes of terracotta roofs. There are only 13 towers left from the purported 75 that rose at various points since the town's inception. Of the handful of towers that have withstood the test of time and human fickleness, Torre Rognosa and Torre Grossa maintain their imposing stature. Many others have been destroyed or reduced in size and importance with the changing of political and economic powers.

Torre Rognosa was once the highest in the town, at 52 metres. It was nicknamed the Clock Tower, for its bell that warned the inhabitants of encroaching danger and that later chimed the hour. Its fall from political grace came when city officials relocated and the tower attained its current name, Troublesome or Scabby Tower, for its transformation into a prison and confinement of troubled citizens until the 14th century.

Size matters, even in the Middle Ages, so at a relatively impressive 54 metres, Torre Grossa became the town's watchtower and centre of civic duty. Built in the 14th century, the watchtower is the Old Town's best preserved. I was breathless from climbing 218 steps to the lookout. Views over the Tuscan fields, Chianti vineyards, and the Alpuan Alps were also breathtaking.

This living museum which is San Gimignano centres around the Piazza della Cisterna and Piazza del Duomo. Both are the location of festivals, the main marketplaces, public performances, and tournaments. The piazzas were surrounded by medieval houses and towers that likewise withstood the centuries. I found the namesake water cistern still standing alongside l'Arco dei Becci, the Arch of Becci, the gate of bygone San Gimignano. Then the Devil's Tower, its name derived from a sudden and mysterious growth in stature that was attributed to diabolical interference. Another is a former hospital and now the hotel Casa Salvestrini. Torri dei Cugnanesi and Torri dei Becci loomed overhead.

In addition to its carefully maintained architectural uniqueness, San Gimignano was bountiful in its flow of Vernaccia, the famous white wine imbibed by kings, literati, popes, and wealthy merchants of ancient and current times. Plus saffron, the spice worth more than gold. And gelato, the best of which was found at Gelateria Dondoli in the Piazza Della Cisterna. As expected, Gelateria Dondoli served a saffron gelato as a nod to the town's rich and delicious heritage.

There were many boutique hotels in the Old Town and most impressive was Torre

Salvucci Maggiore. The 12th-century tower is a boutique heritage tower-house comprising 11 floors, each furnished in a different aspect of a house. The entire tower is rented as a single unit with 143 steps from top to bottom. When not occupied, non hotel guests can climb its 42 meters to take in the 360-degree view of the town and Tuscan landscape from the terrazza.

CHIANTI, TUSCANY

The hunt began on a brisk winter morning. The crisp, dewy day was slightly overcast and our breaths clouded the chilly air as we made our way along the cobblestone streets of the Old Town. Our rendezvous point was a small café besides Certaldo Basso situated in the shadows of its ancient hilltop commune. True to form, the co-organiser was running on Italian time, which was slightly tardy. However, even at this hour it felt like a reflection of the Italian *la dolce vita*, or "the sweet life," taking life slowly and appreciating the moment.

"Buongiorno," the co-organiser greeted us when he arrived. His name was Luca, a name that easily rolled off his tongue. Luca had the natural confidence of an Italian male, enough to make your heart skip a beat, as delicious and earthy as what we were about to unbury.

He told us to follow him and flashed his easy smile before leading the way through the Tuscan hills and along narrow dirt roads that opened into fertile farmlands. When we reached the mystery destination deep in the Chianti hills, Luca introduced us to his papà, who would be leading the



THE VETERAN HUNTER SWEEPED AWAY THE DEBRIS OF LOOSE ROOTS AND CLUMPS OF DIRT.

hunt. Luigi was a convivial fatherly figure who shared his 30 years of wilderness experience hunting wild rabbits and boars, as well as truffles in the Tuscan region. With him was Ricciolo, his loyal canine assistant, who unlike his porky predecessors of centuries ago, would never greedily gobble up the find.

Similar to the truffle, a symbiotic relationship existed between the hunter and the local landowners, wherein the spoils of the hunt were shared between the two. A giving and taking of the land: the hunter took from the fields and returned to the landowners a fair percentage.

When the hunt was underway, Luca translated Luigi's knowledge. Luigi learnt the art of truffle hunting from the older generation, Luca explained, as Ricciolo ran and sniffed around the field. Much like the old ways of life, truffle hunting was a fading profession. This tuber was exceedingly fickle with short harvesting seasons and an even shorter shelf life. Once the truffle was dug out of the ground it would start to decay. Within five days of being unearthed, half the nutty and musky aroma was lost. With the loss of woodland and climate change, wild truffles were decreasing and could eventually disappear. The truffle was 70-percent water. With shorter rainy periods and longer, more intense, and more frequent ondate di caldo, or heatwaves, the industry might soon be lost. As such, fewer people were taking up the profession.

Ricciolo barked excitedly to signal he had found something. He quickly dug a shallow hole before Luigi intervened. The intoxicating aroma of truffle wafted up from the





**THE PEACEFUL COMMUNE
HOUSED THE OLD HOME
(AND GRAVE) OF WRITER AND
POET GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO,
ONE OF THE FOUNDERS
OF THE RENAISSANCE**

hole, a deep muskiness mixed with the richness of the earth. The veteran hunter swept away the debris of loose roots and clumps of dirt. He lifted up a small handful of earth for us to smell. Luigi and Luca continued to educate: the scent of the earth was paramount in determining whether the tuber was a bianchetto truffle or a lesser quality wild fungus. The lesser quality wild fungus was more pungent and dogs can't differentiate it from a truffle. However, a hunter's well-trained sense of smell would be able to discern the real from the fake. In this instance, the muskiness was unmistakable. Instead of seeing hunter red, we found white gold.

The truffle hunt continued for almost an hour as we criss-crossed a large field. We found five bianchetto truffles. The smaller ones were left to grow for future hunters and to spread their spores. We had a couple of encounters with fool's gold, wild fungi; those were left in the ground as well.

In a normal truffle hunt, Luigi would bring three to four hunting dogs out to the fields, with each alternating every 15 to 30 minutes. If the dogs hunt for longer their senses become fatigued. Luigi petted Ricciolo and fed him treats between each truffle excavation. He had trained his hunting dogs himself. And we could see the unshakable trust between the hunter and his canine assistant.

We bid *arrivederci* to Luigi and Ricciolo, who was already resting by the truck. Luigi turned away from the group to pamper his companion with treats and a bowl of water, while we followed Luca and his charismatic smile to our next destination,

the charming 11th-century hilltop town of Certaldo Alto.

Certaldo Alto shares a similar past to San Gimignano, with medieval buildings dating from 1164. However, its architecture does not stray as much from the Tuscan mould and lacks the towering structures of its neighbour. Certaldo had two parts, the Old Town of Certaldo Alto on the hill and the relatively modern Certaldo Basso at its base. Past and future are connected by the Certaldo Funicular.

Wandering through the timeless hilltop town, Luca explained that the peaceful commune housed the old home (and grave) of writer and poet Giovanni Boccaccio, one of the founders of the Renaissance. We glimpsed where the poet derived his inspiration, from the medieval structures in a town built almost entirely of brick "[w]eaving a web of sunshine and of shade" (Decameron) as we walked along the characteristic narrow stone streets that were dotted with small piazzas.

Luca led us to his family's culinary school *Cucina Giuseppina*, the location of our truffle brunch. In a cooking studio overlooking the Tuscan landscape, Luigi's other son Simone had prepared an Italian brunch for our arrival, paired with vino from the family vineyards.

We dined with the spoils of the hunt heavily shaved atop many of the dishes. Dishes of bruschetta with mushrooms, mascarpone cheese, potage, and scrambled eggs, each with a heavy rain of bianchetto truffle otop. The truffles had a subtle nutty and earthy flavour, which belied its heavy fragrance. The deep musky aroma gent-

ly pumelled our senses as these dishes were laid before us. The aroma of the tuber was stronger than its flavour, so even the hardest of truffles did not overpower other ingredients on the plate.

In addition to the pleasant earthy crunch the fresh truffles provided, a slight herbaceous flavour and punch of umami greatly enhanced each savoury dish. The fickle tuber was especially temperamental when cooked, quickly losing its flavour when heated, so truffles are usually consumed raw, in their most intense state. A garlic and herbaceous tinge was followed by a nuanced mushroom aftertaste that lingered long on the palate. As Simone explained verbally and through his dishes, the tuber is best paired with dishes that are hot and creamy.

The family-style meal also included chicken liver canapé, citrus and endive salad, Italian terrine, mozzarella di bufala salad, sautéed kale, and salami and cheese with homemade jams and rustic Italian pane, as well as panettone, Italian Christmas bread. And the familial setting demonstrated the warmth of Italian hospitality as we truffle hunters ate, drank and were merry. In between bottles of the family's vino, we recounted our exploits in the Tuscan hills, and at the end, we raised our glasses of grappa to the feast and to the successful truffle hunt.