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## All about truffles

By Kat Tancock

Learn more about these coveted culinary delights, and find out how to [incorporate](#) truffles into your own cooking.

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Photography by Kat Tancock

I'm sitting at a table at Konoba Mondo, a renowned restaurant in the medieval hilltop town of Motovun, Croatia, that specializes in dishes made with local truffles. A white-gloved waiter sets down a serving dish of two **pasta dishes** and a red wine and radicchio risotto, then pulls out a white truffle a little under an inch in diameter and proceeds to shave slices of it across the plate.

I watch with anticipation, inhaling the earthy aroma, then eagerly serve myself as the proprietor, Klaudio Ivašić, shares the philosophy of his establishment, rooted in **local ingredients**, but with flair and technique brought in by the chef, his brother-in-law, who hails from Sicily.

I take a bite and close my eyes to fully experience the flavour. Truth? This might be the best meal I've ever had – and there's still a white truffle panna cotta with honey to enjoy. As I savour every mouthful, I'm pondering the

eternal question asked by **food-loving travellers**: Can I recreate this at home? Or is the perfection of this meal as much due to time and place as it is to the ingredients that were used?

### What is a truffle, anyway?

Put simply, a truffle is a fungus, made slightly sexier than plain old mushrooms because it is formed underground. Evocative of rural Frenchmen in berets following pigs through oak forests as they scent out these valuable gems, truffles include hundreds of species, some of which are highly valued as gourmet foods. Harvested in the wild across Europe, where the culture of eating truffles originated, a few varieties can and are being cultivated both there and in places abroad such as Oregon and Australia.

Truffles emit a strong odour when they are ripe, which is what those famed pigs are naturally attracted to and what dogs, nowadays, are trained to seek out (mostly because they're easier to handle than a full-grown pig who wants a bite of the sweet fungus). And it's the scent of the truffles – more than the flavour – that makes them attractive to people, too. This is what makes truffles such an ephemeral crop, as they lose their scent rather quickly and are best eaten fresh, which is the reason a meal containing

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fresh European truffles costs so much in North America.

Truffles are a big [moneymaker](#) or those who know how to seek them out and market them. The Croatian region of Istria alone, among the lesser known truffle-growing regions, produces seven or eight tonnes of truffles a year: 30 per cent the more common black truffle, which grows all year round; and 70 per cent the seasonal white truffle, which can be found from September to December and fetches much higher



Photography by Kat Tancock

shaved white truffles."

It's not easy to find fresh, good-quality truffles for sale in North America. What we can find, however, is products that are made from truffles – usually truffle oil and truffle salt. But there's a catch: Many of these products are made from a synthetic source that imitates the primary scent compound that is present in truffles, but misses the subtleties.

They're not a bad place to start, though. Truffle salt is particularly good sprinkled on popcorn or soft scrambled eggs – but it's not the real deal, says Barry, who recommends looking for truffle products that contain only natural ingredients. Even natural truffle oils fail to capture the full scent profile of the real deal, though, "and I do not like to buy olive oil truffle products as **olive oil** has quite an aroma itself," adds Barry.

#### The last word on truffles

There are purists who believe that the only truffle dishes worth eating use only freshly shaved truffles. Still, there are others who say that truffle oils, salts, jams and the like are good – delicious even – just different. The secret is to use a light touch and to not expect these products to taste the same as fresh truffles. Then – when you can – splurge on a night out or a trip to the source to sample the real thing.

"When it comes to white truffles, nothing can mimic the aroma," says Barry. "If you want to understand truffles, you have to pay for a dish at a reputable restaurant. It will cost a lot, but then you will know."

Here are some of our favourite recipes featuring truffle oil:

[Celery Root and Potato Puree with Truffle Oil](#)

[Truffle-Scented Goat Cheese Tartlets](#)

[Mushroom Salad with Truffle Oil](#)

[Gorgonzola Polenta](#)

#### How to use truffles

"When you shave white truffles on top of a freshly made tagliatelle and the aroma hits your nose it takes over all of your senses," says Victor Barry, chef and proprietor of Splendido in Toronto, which frequently serves truffle dishes. "Nothing else in food does that. Maybe wine, but not food."

Because truffles are so prized, it makes sense that they're best combined with basic dishes. Marko Marković of the [Istria Tourist Board](#) prefers them "in the simplest way possible" – with eggs, **mashed potatoes** or pasta.

Barry, who was on **vacation in Italy** at the time of this interview, raved about two white truffle dishes he had sampled on the trip: fried eggs and risotto. "But my favourite way to enjoy them is served with a ravioli of spinach, ricotta and egg yolk," he says, plus "brown butter, Parmigiano-Reggiano, a touch of nutmeg and

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