



THE PRIX DE PRIX

We follow Ian R Hall on the trail through forests for gnarled, aromatic yet prized truffles.

It is early on a grey December morning and here and there across Europe lights burn in cottages. Men (mostly) pull on their boots, don warm coats, store tasty morsels in rough earthy sacks for their four-footed partners and head for the back door. There is a chill in the air and an expectancy that this morning could return the prix de prix they always hope for. The dogs are released from their kennels and the hunt begins for that most elusive of foods – the truffle. Despite the advent

of electricity, computers and even visits to the planets the harvest has remained unchanged for centuries. The partnership between man and dog is like the partnership truffle fungi have with the roots of their host trees.

Not any dog will do. It has to be one passionate about the hunt, the chance to play with a favourite toy, or the need to please the master. One more interested in a pheasant, rabbit, or the neighbour's cat will not do. Pigs can be used too but they are

driven by a lust for truffles and are just as likely to scoff the find during a moment's inattention.

A good dog will gently mark the ground and point its nose above the subterranean prize. The master will then carefully scratch away the soil above the truffle. This might be just the removal of one or two centimetres of soil, but for the precious Italian white truffle, it could mean a careful dig to a depth of half a metre or more, lasting half an >>





hour to unearth the treasure. Marking the truffle with a paw or spade will reduce the value, so care is needed. After an hour or so of heavy hunting, the truffles are wrapped in a cloth and either reburied in the back garden or stored covered in soil in the fridge, to extend their shelf life. There is then a patient wait for a day or so for the truffle aroma to gradually reach its peak.

The truffles may be offered for sale by a well-worn face and gnarled hand at the rear of a restaurant or in the local pub, or to a wholesaler like Pierre-Jean Pebeyre in Cahors whose family have been in the business for more than a century.

For the explorer of the industry nothing beats the truffle markets of France. Once a week, during the truffle season in the southern towns like Lalbenque, benches and trestle tables are set up in market places. Ropes are strung out between the sellers keen to sell their finds to buyers hoping for a bargain. The

happy banter between the sellers, across their ropes, disguises the intensity of the valuation. At precisely 2.00pm, the ropes are lowered and heads buried in baskets to sniff their worth, before the bargaining begins.

As the afternoon wears on the bidding becomes increasingly frenetic. Buyers fret that they may not have enough truffles to sell for gourmet dinners. Sellers anxious that their truffles will not survive a further seven days in the fridge, losing size and value daily, yet knowing the drive across France to sell their truffles at another market would not be an economic venture. The long day finally comes to a close. For the sellers, it is all over for another week. For the buyers, chefs and gourmets, the best is yet to come.

Sadly, the golden age of the truffle in the latter half of the 1800s, a time when Mrs Beaton could recommend “take one good sized turkey and stuff with 8 good sized truffles”, are long since gone. With the price of

the Périgord black truffle and Italian white truffle retailing for well in excess of €1000 per kilogram, such extravagance would now grace the tables of only the very rich. Truffle production in France is less than a tenth of what it was in 1900 and harvests in Italy and Spain are less than healthy. All eyes and noses have turned to European scientists to solve the problem. Down under in the Southern Hemisphere scientists are passionate about the supply of truffles for European off season markets – but that is another story!

Ian Hall, Gordon Brown and Alessandra Zambonelli are the authors of the book *Taming the Truffle*, which reveals a fascinating account of the history, lore and cultivation of these princes of the table.

Taming the Truffle is published by Timber Press and available directly from them or online from Amazon. It is also available in English or Spanish.

www.trufflesandmushrooms.co.nz