

Love at first bite

WRITER: KIMBERLEY LOVATO

And now, a more personal perspective on the joys of truffling..

It has been said that a way to a man's heart is through his stomach, and that diamonds are a girl's best friend. I hover somewhere in between - it will probably come as no surprise to learn that this writer adores diamonds, but my favourite cut is in fact harvested not by miners, but rather by dogs and hogs.

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We're talking, of course, about the black truffle of Périgord, and it was the famed 19th-century French gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin who first called truffles "the diamond of the kitchen" in his omnipresent food tome *Physiology of Taste*.

been overexposed to it failed dismally, whereas this fund immediately moved to near the top of the league tables, a position it has maintained over the years by pursuing the same cautious strategy.

MIDGET GEMS

Black truffles mature between December and March, and at the famous annual market in Sainte-Alvère (Dordogne), January brings hordes of truffle-growers with their gems carefully wrapped in red and white cloths, hoping to sell their jewels in the ancient hall to worldly gourmands who eagerly snatch up a diminishing supply. Even in years when conditions are perfect, only small quantities of truffles are unearthed. At the beginning of the 20th century, French truffle production reached 1,000 tonnes per year. It's now only around

50 tonnes – the over-use of chemicals and climate change are cited as the top culprits of the decrease.

In Saint-Alvère, I met Hugues Martin, who invited me to his nearby truffle grove, where I followed him and his mangy mutt (in truth, I expected more from a truffle dog) around 30 acres of oak trees.

Expecting to fall into yesteryear's ancient art of truffle hunting I, instead, stumbled into a John Le Carré novel, as Martin regaled me with stories of gun-toting poachers, mysterious buyers in limousines, and the 'disappearances' of well-trained dogs. Fetching prices ranging from 200€ to more than 1,800€ per kilo, depending on the yield and quality, truffles are more valuable than gold, inspiring daring truffle scuffles in the French woods. "Don't worry," Martin reassured me, "my wife is armed too." Great.

OF DOGS AND HOGS

Dogs are the most common 'tool', but farmers also use pigs to sniff out truffles. Risky, warns Martin, since pigs like to eat them. There is a third option: the truffle fly. Martin shows me a miniscule winged creature entombed in a box. According to Martin, this clever mouche smells a perfectly ripened truffle then lays its eggs on the ground above. Hunters twirl a long stick at the base of the trees, like a magic wand, looking for a cloud of disturbed flies. A dog can smell a truffle before it is fully ripe and provoke a premature harvest. "The fly never lies," quipped Martin.

BLACK DIAMONDS: BEST FRIENDS

A fresh truffle should be firm with a good perfume, he says, but has a short shelf life – around three weeks max. In Brussels, fresh and jarred truffles are available in specialty markets such as Rob or at the La Truffe Noire boutique. Fortunately, a little goes a long way when cooking, and it doesn't take much to capture the distinct flavor. At L'Atelier de la Truffe Noire (the establishment's gourmet shop and more casual eatery) in Brussels, I experienced true truffle alchemy - beef carpaccio with slivers of black truffle; scrambled eggs speckled with black truffle; tortellini with shaved black truffle; and finally, a matured

cheese stuffed with, you guessed it, black truffle. It was love at first bite.

There is no question that a certain black diamond is the way to my heart (via my stomach). Perhaps it was also their rumoured aphrodisiac qualities that lured me in, or maybe it's simply that they just taste so good. Whatever the reason, I anxiously await their arrival each winter, with an effervescence that is rivalled only by the anticipation of seeing my best friend after a year's absence.

Kimberley Lovato is the author of *Walnut Wine & Truffle Groves*, which will be released by Running Press in April 2010. Check out her website at www.kimberleylovato.com

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