



IN SEARCH OF THE BLACK DIAMOND

Join the hunt and
discover the mysteries of an
exclusive gourmet delicacy with
Château de La Redorte



appreciate that the truffle's very nature of existence is what makes it so fascinating. (For the more squeamish, it is worth bearing in mind that the ascomycete group to which the truffle belongs also contains the source for brewer's yeast and antibiotics.) The black truffle's mycelia - the branching vegetative part - reaches out and forms a symbiotic relationships with the roots of trees, in particular the mighty oak. It is only after at least seven years of mycorrhizal network development that the fruit body i.e. the truffle itself, comes into production. Black truffles are also notoriously picky, preferring a certain type of soil within a particular pH range.

TRUFFLES THROUGH THE CENTURIES

The history of the truffle reveals peaks and troughs in its popularity. Truffles have been consumed for thousands of years with mentions in Akkadian literature from 2000 BC. The Romans in particular were partial to the taste. The medieval period however, saw a significant dip in their culinary use and it wasn't until the start of the Renais-

great word...A sauté of truffles is a dish the honours of which the mistress of the house reserves to herself; in fine, the truffle is the diamond of the kitchen." Fast-forward from this point in history, where truffles are relatively commonplace, to their modern-day reputation as a rare delicacy and we see the significant impact of industrialisation, two world wars and a fall in productivity of the specially planted truffle fields.

TRUFFLE HUNTS IN THE SOUTH

Nowadays, especially in France, a large proportion of the truffles harvested are from groves specially planted for production. Fortunately, a number of these offer hands on experiences of truffle hunting for those intrigued enough by the process.

Luxury property developers Propriétés & Co. provide such an opportunity through their château and vineyard estate located on the beautiful Canal du Midi near Carcassonne. The 19th century Château de La Redorte, once occupied by five generations of the Artois family, has been bought back from a state of decay with care and

THE BLACK TRUFFLE, LIKE CHAMPAGNE AND CAVIAR, IS A SYMBOL OF LUXURY.

As an ingredient favoured by chefs in some of the world's most upmarket establishments, it can be found shaved atop risottos or infused into oils splashed liberally over gastronomic creations. Furthermore, it is, like most lavish items of reputation, reassuringly expensive.

But what makes this so? Fortunately, there is a way to delve into the world of the prized *truffe noir* to learn the secrets behind its cultivation and the techniques involved in its rather unusual harvest.

WHAT EXACTLY IS A TRUFFLE?

Truffles are the fruit body of an ectomycorrhizal ascomycete fungus. Admittedly, not a great start. So let's put Latin classifications and talk of fungi aside and learn to

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sauce in the 14th century that the truffle once again re-established its place on the plates of enthusiasts. The 18th and 19th centuries in France saw a move towards trufficulture and the planting of oak trees for the specific purpose of cultivating truffles. In 1825, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin published his famous *Physiologie du goût* (The Physiology of Taste), a collection of gastronomic discourses in which he dedicated an entire section to the consumption of truffles. At this time the origin of the truffle was still a mystery and attempts to seed the highly sought after tuber had all but failed. In his writing, Brillat-Savarin left no doubts as to his feelings for the fungus, declaring that "who ever says truffle, pronounces a

attention to its history and transformed into refined suites and villas. There is even a recently restored private wine tasting tunnel and a restaurant that serves truffle themed dinners for gastronomes wanting to indulge. Guests can also enjoy the pool and spa before exploring local culture with an experience day. This is not the first development by Miguel Espada, founder of Propriétés & Co. Having always been enamored with the property world from his early years spent on building sites, he chose to follow this passion after a career in the financial sector. His latest project, La Barquette is a Mediterranean seafront vineyard estate where his teams are hard at work attaining the high quality he aims for in all his

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developments (for more information visit the website at www.la-baraquette.com). Back at Château de La Redorte, however, winter guests are whisked away to discover first-hand how the mighty truffle is grown and harvested.

At Le Mas d'Antonin, on an estate planted with olives groves and oak trees, Elena Anton-Marty welcomes visitors to join her in the thrilling hunt for the black truffle. Located in the Aude, 150 kilometres east of Toulouse but only a 25 minute drive from Château de La Redorte, the estate offers the perfect opportunity to discover the methods involved in the rather unusual harvest of this sought after delicacy. Elena returned to tend to the lands of her great grandfather Antonin but subsequently developed them into an agricultural estate which draws in those fascinated by the mysteries of the terroir in this part of France. It is her passion for the truffle that resulted in her purchasing of extra land and planting in the soil of Argeliers the mycorrhized oak trees with which the black truffle forms its symbiotic relationship. Elena now takes guest out into these fields alongside Sammy, her truffle dog, in search of the famous black diamond.

Dogs are not natural truffle hunters; Elena has had to train Sammy to sniff out the elusive *Tuber melanosporum* but he is less likely to eat it once found than the traditionally used, but hard to control, truffle pig. Sammy is released amongst the mighty oaks and sniffs around until his sensitive nose picks up the scent of truffle. Elena pulls him back, allowing the guest hunters to finish the excavation and hopefully reward patience with a gastronomic prize. Digging into the soil reveals a round, firm and knobby truffle which Elena will examine for quality and ripeness. The rich earthy aroma of the truffle is unmistakable and truly unforgettable for those experiencing it for the first time.



The diamonds of the day are then collected and prepared for an unbeatable culinary education. The humbly harvested truffle is scrubbed clean revealing an ingredient of extraordinary aroma and flavour. At the nearby estate of Seigneurie de Peyrat, home of Miguel and his wife Cécile, Elena produces truffle toast, truffle enriched scrambled eggs and cheese crowned with glorious slices of the intricately patterned truffe noir. All washed down with red, white and rosé wine from the estate's vineyard. The region, known for Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Grenache grape varieties, produces wines that complement the truffle flavour perfectly. The cookery course takes place in the scullery in the delightful and knowledgeable company of Cécile. There is no need for pomp and ceremony here; the setting is simple and the atmosphere mellow allowing the truffle to take centre stage. However, relocating to the formal dining room to enjoy the eggs and stuffed brie, enables the architectural grandeur of Seigneurie de Peyrat to be fully appreciated. Once sated by the truffe extravaganza, there is only one legitimate conclusion; experiences don't come better tasting than this.

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