

Travel

HUNTING BURIED TREASURE

A FOOD AND WINE TOUR OF THE ITALIAN PIEDMONT

By Susan Croce Kelly

SUSAN CROCE KELLY



Country landscape of Monferrato.

Two hundred years ago, the French epicure and gastronome Jean Brillat-Savarin wrote that truffles were such a rare and valuable delicacy that they were only to be found on the tables of rich men and kept women. We are neither rich nor kept, but we've had opportunities to eat shaved bits of dark, earthy truffles on top of buttery pasta, and we were ready for another taste.

It was the chance to go on an actual Italian truffle hunt in the prime white truffle area of the world, along with the prospect of many other good things to eat and drink, that took my husband and me to Northern Italy last fall for a food and wine tour of the Italian state of Piemonte. It's home to not only of black and white truffles, but also risotto, polenta, and barbera and barolo, two of Italy's best known red wines.

We signed on with a group led by Daniela Cavallero, a professor of Italian at Chicago's DePaul University. She, in turn, took us to Casale, the small city in Piedmont's Monferrato region (about 65 miles southwest of Milan), where she had grown up. There, we spent 10 days eating, drinking, watching and learning as much as we could cram in about Northern Italian gastronomy.

Only hours after checking into the Hotel Candiani, where manager Giovanna Ceccerini welcomed us with glasses of sparkling wine and platters of Italian sweets, we changed into jeans, boots and light jackets, and our adventures began. With about 10 others, we boarded a small van and rode off to find what could well be

considered bona fide buried treasure.

Truffles are probably the most expensive food in the world. They are also dark, wrinkly, mushy things, generally about the size of walnuts, that grow underground near hazelnut and oak trees. Typically, they are treasured for their rich, earthy aroma and taste, and most often served shaved raw onto the top of simple pasta in brown butter sauce, or scrambled eggs.



As long ago as 3,000 years before Christ, the tubers were considered a delicacy. The Romans loved 'em, they were highly prized in Paris markets in the 1700s, and today truffles are big business. Black truffles, which are more common, sell retail for about \$150 - \$200 per pound, though most never approach that size. The more sought-after and harder-to-find white truffles (tartufi bianchi) typically retail for \$2,000-\$3,500 per pound. To put it in perspective, a few shavings of truffles on a plate of pasta during truffle season could set a diner back an extra \$50 - or more.

And while enterprising farmers like the one we were going to visit have begun inoculating the ground with truffle spores, finding truffles is still not a sure thing. White truffles, especially, tend to be hunted in the wild, sniffed out in Italy by dogs that have been carefully trained

for the search. We were anxious to meet our first truffle dog.

After a short ride through Monferrato's vineyard-covered hills, we arrived at a stone farmhouse set among a copse of oak and hazelnut trees. A pair of schoolteachers and a brown-eared hound that was probably some type of pointer, greeted us with welcoming smiles and a friendly wag of a brown pointed tail.

Our host, Georgio, was dressed in jeans and a plaid shirt. He carried a leather satchel slung over his shoulder, a heavy hiking stick in his right hand and a thick rope in his left, which he looped through the dog's collar.

Georgio's dog takes truffle hunting as seriously as any of Georgio's customers — and the dog's gourmet taste means that he is forced to wear a muzzle when he hunts or he would gobble up the yield. The hound does receive a reward when he noses a truffle out of the ground, but it's usually a piece of steak and not a sublimely scented black fungus.

Given that it was mid-October, and we were in the midst of an oak "orchard," the area had a look and feel of the Ozarks, with lots of crunchy brown leaves underfoot. The hilly ground where we were standing, our host told us, had been "seeded" with spores that should produce black truffles. The grassy bottomland near the creek at the foot of the hill was where he and the dog hunted white truffles.

As soon as the hound was muzzled, he and Georgio head off through the trees, with a dozen of us trailing close behind.



Georgio and his dog took us truffle hunting.



Nose to the ground, tail in the air, the dog soon stopped and began to roll his head in the leaves. It looked for all the world like he was trying to get the muzzle off, but he was actually “on point” — he’d smelled out a truffle. Georgio knelt in the leaves, tightened up on the rope and together he and the dog cleared the leaves away from about a square foot of ground. Next, Georgio elbowed the dog back a bit and pulled a silver L-shaped implement out of his pocket. With a bit of careful digging and scraping of the dark soil, he unearthed a small muddy knob — a black truffle. As predicted, it was about the size of a walnut.

Georgio passed the truffle around for



us to feel (dryish and muddy) and smell — earthy, densely mushroomy and oh, so rich — then deposited it into his leather satchel. Over the course of an hour, we watched the dog sniff out about eight truffles. The largest one was about half the size of a baseball.

Having solved the mystery of black truffles, we followed Georgio down a long hill toward the creek. Again, the dog showed his worth; within a few minutes our host was able to v-e-r-y c-a-r-e-f-u-l-l-y dig up a white truffle. It was about half the size of a golf ball and had its own kind of lumpy underground look. It also bore more of a resemblance to a mushroom or even a potato than its darker cousins. A few white truffles, even this size, would bring a nice addition to Georgio’s teacher’s salary at one of the region’s many fall and winter truffle auctions.

Prize taken, our guide led us back up the hill to his home where an outside table was waiting with plates, wine glasses, and bottles of Piedmontese wine. Even better, Georgio’s wife had prepared squares of buttered toast topped with bits of the black truffles we had watched come out of the ground.

We arranged ourselves around the long table. We poured and drank the lovely local wine. We tasted — and tasted again. To me, the flavor of a truffle is unique and unforgettable — smoky, musky, dark, mysterious. (If you’ve had truffle oil, or truffle-flavored anything, it’s not the same.)

As we sat there in the fall Italian sunshine, drinking local red wine and savoring our aromatic nibbles, I was certain that if this was only the beginning, the rest of our trip would be delicious. The only question was how much weight I would gain?

As it turned out, every day brought new tastes, new sights, and way too much food. But neither my husband nor I gained weight, thanks to the walks around Casale and hikes through vineyards, castles, and even once into the mouth of a cave for antipasto before a traditional dinner (above ground). We ate in excellent restaurants, visited wineries, learned to cook Italian, toured a rice plantation — think risotto — and spent a fascinating afternoon in a grappa factory.

Grappa, a popular heavy-duty Italian

brandy not to everyone's (i.e. mine) taste, is the ultimate sustainable drink. Made from the distilled grape skins, seeds, pulp and stems leftover from winemaking, grappa is generally a clear liquid — aged grappas take on a golden tint — that is served as a digestif after dinner drink.

One of the bonuses of this particular tour was that we headquartered comfortably at our hotel in Casale making day- or half-day-trips to food producers and restaurants nearby. This meant there was no packing and unpacking required, and we had a chance to really learn about where we were. For our purposes, Casale was perfectly situated: on the banks of the Po River in the region long touted as a center for food and wine in this food- and wine-centric country. The city was founded long before the Romans arrived, and from the hotel we were within easy walking distance of Roman ruins, a historic cathedral, a university and market square. The big surprise was a small museum dedicated to Sergio Leone and the "spaghetti westerns."

Giovanna, our smiling hotel manager,

was wonderfully welcoming and helpful. She was front and center at our cooking class in La Torre, the elegant restaurant attached to the hotel, and over the course of our stay she went out of her way to be helpful, arranging transportation for a family group to visit distant cousins in a nearby small town, and helping one of the men on the tour go through the difficulties associated with a lost passport.

The other great thing about our experience was that while we were with a group, next time it would be simple to do our own Foodie Tour from the Candiani Hotel. The



Truffles can fetch as much as \$150 to \$3,500 per pound. We were served truffles on toast.

website offers opportunities to hunt truffles with Georgio, visit the rice plantation, and also visit a local cheese maker.

And if all else fails, there is Giovanna. Besides being friendly and helpful, she is committed to welcoming visitors to her hotel and to her city. "I want to make people fall in love with Monferrato," she says, "the wines, the food, the hills, the nature, and the villages."

With us, at least, she succeeded.



~~There~~ sooner. Home faster.
Work

American Airlines
COLUMBIA
Regional Airport

flycou.com



Pictured above, an Italian market offers fresh local produce. At left, cooking classes give visitors the chance to learn how to make authentic Italian cuisine from the experts.

Cooking Italian

Besides eating and drinking, I spent two mornings with my sleeves rolled up learning to cook Italian. I found the first class online. It was in Milan before we joined up with our group. The other class was in the kitchen of Ristorante La Torre, which conveniently was attached to Hotel Candiani in Casale.

In two mornings, I learned to roll out pasta dough until it is "as soft as a baby's bottom," and to pinch it around small mounds of meat filling to make agnolotti, the small ravioli of the Piedmont region. We sautéed veal, prosciutto, and sage to make saltimbocca, and mixed tuna and homemade mayonnaise to create the unbelievably rich and creamy sauce for vitello tonnato, a cold veal dish. For dessert we whipped cream so stiff it wouldn't drip out of an upended bowl, and learned to make a chocolate Caprese tart (as they eat on the Isle of Capri) and a hazelnut cake. And we learned that when making pesto, the green rich basil sauce that is typical of Genoa, tradition calls for adding three almonds.

After both cooking classes, one in Milan and the other in Casale, we gathered around and ate the fruits of our labors.

In Casale

HOTEL CANDIANI

Besides hotel amenities, the website offers trips to find truffles, visit a rice plantation and a cheese maker, plus cooking classes at Ristorante La Torre (www.Hotelcandiani.com).

RISTORANTE LA TORRE

This elegant restaurant on the grounds of the Hotel Candiani specializes in traditional Piedmontese dishes. (www.Ristorante-latorre.it) *Be sure and click the British flag in the upper right corner of the home page to get an English version.*

COOKING CLASSES

In Casale: Check out offers at www.hotelcandiani.com

In Milan: Classes are held in the chef's home. www.Cookinmilano.com



"I want to make people fall in love with Monferrato — the wines, the food, the hills, the nature, and the villages."

Providing a holistic approach to the female body focusing on deep, lasting health through physical & emotional wellness.



From Left: Rachel Tripp, Sonja Williams, D.O., OB/Gyn, Nicki Calvert, Smitha Shamel.

Services include:

- Bio-Identical Hormone Therapy
- Birth Control
- Postpartum Care
- Infertility
- Cervical Dysplasia
- Menopause
- Endometriosis
- Urinary Incontinence
- Menstrual Disorders
- Ovarian Cysts
- Fibroids
- Wellness Exams
- Weight Management
- Therapeutic Massage



Women's
Functional Health™

www.womensfunctionalhealth.com

1055 Ozark Care Drive,
Osage Beach, MO 65065
573-693-1516

