

MUSHROOM NEWSLETTER

6 September 2011

READERS HIT TRUFFLES!

I was both delighted and excited when regular newsletter reader, Rob Bell, e-mailed with almost palpable hysteria to report finding a summer truffle this afternoon in a Gloucestershire wood. I am spitting with jealousy, but bugger it . . . the guy has his black gold!



Unfortunately the pics were taken on a mobile – but they give the general picture

So, obviously we can't tell you where this happened with any precision, but I'll let Rob give you the general picture:

I found it quite by accident. I am a surveyor of trees for the National Grid, and was under an oak in a small strip of woodland on farmland between Stroud and Cirencester, so [it was on] limestone with a clay soil.

As I was checking around the root plate of the tree I noticed that rabbits, or badgers, had been scraping at the soil: something I see all the time. I don't know what made me look closer now, but I did and couldn't believe my eyes! The top had just been exposed enough for me to see & ID it. Must have been my lucky day. I had a scrape around for more, but no luck,

Another regular reader, Lucy Stewart, was (probably) not so lucky. She found a truffle, but while it looked exciting, in the end it proved a damp squib: I can't be certain from a couple of pictures, but I suspect it's one of the two or three non-edible truffles – probably *Tuber excavatum* or *T. meandiformis*.



Probably a non-edible truffle – but just possibly the world's most expensive fungus – *Tuber magnatum*

All this talk of truffles, however, reminds me that it's important – yet again – to dispel some fungal misunderstandings. There is a lot of rubbish bandied around about their value. Certainly they are the fungal equivalent of caviar, but like these fishy diamonds, there are several 'grades'. Just as the real distinctions between 'sevruga', 'beluga', 'Iranian' and 'Russian' are only recognised by gastronomic brand snobs, so most of us could not taste the difference between summer (*Tuber aestivum*), Alba (*T. magnatum*) and black (*T. melanosporum*). Yet there is a world of difference in price between the three species that are, officially, most likely to be encountered in Europe.



Summer truffles might look expensive – yet they are so intense they are extremely affordable

The most expensive is the white or Alba truffle. This generally originates in Piedmont in Northern Italy (although it is also found in small quantities in the Balkans). Predictably, this is the species the Italians rate most highly and at the time of writing it may be worth €2,000 per kilo (as a very rough rule of thumb, that's about the same in pounds or dollars). The French, on the other hand, reckon the black, or Perigord, variety is best. This is currently worth about €1,000 a kilo – which is still a great deal of money for a mushroom.

The commonest variety, however, is the summer truffle which is much less fussy in its habitat and weather requirements. Also, despite the name, it has been found growing from February to November and it is probably there throughout the year. At any rate, this is the one I bought on a Tuscan stall and it also happens to be the one which is happiest growing in Britain. It is far cheaper than the others (€100 a kilo) and, if you buy preserved truffle in any of its forms – be it oil, paté or bottled – at least in theory this is what you are getting.

Predictably, of course, when journalists write on the subject, they group them all together under one price tag, using of course, the Alba variety as a benchmark. To compound the exaggeration, they then announce truffles sell at such outrageous prices they 'are worth more by weight than gold'. Now it is true that fairly recently Michael Pierre White might have spent £6,700 on two Alba truffles totalling 850g, while a Hong Kong cartel paid £62,000 for a 1.2 kg monster at about the same time. This was, however, a high-profile auction for record-breaking specimens. Prices were grossly inflated by the attendant international publicity – and the purchasers were actually motivated more by the marketing boost for their restaurant than in any real desire to

carve up the record-breaker to put it on the menu. In normal circumstances white truffles may certainly be worth a great deal of money, but even so it's been a very long time since you could buy gold at the equivalent of €2,000 per kilo.

A mushroom knife goes to both Rob and Lucy in appreciation. Feedback. The same will apply to any other notable news – so keep it feeding in!

And if anyone fancies a foray over the next few weeks, these are my current one-day dates which includes a foray, three course meal, free drinks and mushroom knife/guide. They cost £50 per adult.

24 September

1, 2, 15 October

I also have three breaks targeted at families. These cost £100 per family of four (further discounts for bigger groups with grandparents) with a child-friendly menu and a level of free childcare. Phone/e-mail for more details.

All the best – and happy hunting!

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