

The Mysterious Truffle - Dymystified



From mid-November through Valentine's Day each year, and sometimes even into early March, a variety of pigs and truffle-sniffing canines throughout Europe will be rooting up truffles, many of which will be headed immediately to Market Hall Foods. Truffles have one of the most seductive, enigmatic and coveted flavors on earth. They are one food that has always been dear in price due to a limited area of growth and the difficulty in harvesting them. Each year the haunting flavors of the *Tuber melanosporum* (black truffle) *Tuber magnatum* (white truffle) and other varieties inspire countless truffle dinners and a host of truffle products that can be enjoyed all year long. But what exactly are these mysterious tubers, where do they come from and how are they best used? We'll try to answer these questions and more below.

What are truffles?

Truffles are a fungus closely related to mushrooms. They are actually parasites that usually form several inches underground at the base of certain types of trees, mainly oak and chestnut, and are typically rooted out with the help of truffle-sniffing pigs or dogs. Just flown in! Although truffles grow around the world, they grow best inside a band around the globe stretching from the 40th to the 47th parallel. In Europe, this represents a swath that extends from just south of Madrid to about the center of France and includes some of the famous truffle regions in both France and Italy. Truffles begin to form in the spring and are fully formed by around June. They continue to mature through the summer and into the fall. Most truffles are harvested between mid-November and the beginning of March.



How do I use them?

Black truffles and white truffles are almost opposite in terms of how they are used in cooking and at the table, but in general they are best paired with fats (think cheese, butter, cream, olive oil and meat) and starchy foods (pasta, rice/risotto, polenta, bread and potatoes), preferably both, and they are shaved very thin so as not to waste them. To slice them, you can use a very sharp knife, but a truffle shaver (great for chocolate, too) is a tool made specifically for this purpose and makes the task easier and more efficient.

Black Truffles

Mellower than the white varieties, black truffles release their flavor through heat and marinating. Some suggested uses:

- Fresh egg pasta drenched in French Normandy Butter with fleur de sel.
- Stuff thin slices of black truffle between the skin and meat of any game bird, bake and baste.
- Classic salad of arugula, Parmigiano Reggiano, thinly sliced bresaola, and topped with sliced black truffle in a light vinaigrette.
- Butternut Squash & Chestnut ravioli (from Market Hall Foods) topped with butter and truffle.
- Mashed potatoes with butter, cream, Beaufort and black truffle.
- Creamy Polenta finished off with Taleggio for flavor.
- Grilled Pork Chop – butterflied and stuffed with black truffles.

White Truffles

These truffles are all about the nose, or aroma. Don't 'cook with the white truffle. Instead, slice thinly at tableside over hot food before eating. Again, the white truffle is best paired with a carbohydrate and a fat. Serving ideas:



- Fresh egg pasta drenched in goat butter.
- Braised or Roasted Belgian Endive with Parmesan Sauce – warm up the crème and reduce by 1/2, add parmesan and/or Fontina Val d'Aosta to bring up flavor and texture. Finish with salt, pepper and nutmeg if desired.
- Scrambled eggs with antique gruyere finished off with white truffle
- Carpaccio of Veal, Meyer lemon, Italian parsley, Parmigiano Reggiano, extra virgin olive oil – marinate overnight and top with white truffle.
- Grilled levain bread rubbed with fresh garlic and olive oil...Top with Fresh Truffle
- Salad of Radicchio, endive, thinly sliced crimini mushrooms, and fennel root dress with light vinaigrette, top with white truffle.

How do I store truffles before use?

First, it's necessary to keep your truffle refrigerated to maintain and stabilize the moisture in the truffle. When you purchase a truffle (black or white) from Market Hall Foods it will be wrapped in cheesecloth to create that stable environment. Like most fresh foods, truffles will lose moisture naturally. The cheese cloth will hold that moisture in, creating a humid environment without allowing the truffle to get too wet. Truffles do not like to get wet – it speeds up and breaks down the texture and body. Neither do truffles like to be too dry. It used to be common (and still is some places) to store truffles submerged in a jar of rice. While this is great for infusing the rice with truffle essence, it ruins the truffle, basically sucking the moisture out of them. Better to keep the cheesecloth-wrapped truffle in a sealed container in the refrigerator.

If you do want to “truffle” other foods – rice, butter, eggs, pasta – to get multiple uses out of your tuber, simply place the items that you want to absorb the truffle essence in an airtight container with the cheesecloth-wrapped truffle nestled on top. Make sure the container is sealed effectively and let sit for a day or two in the refrigerator. Try setting up a “truffle meal kit” consisting of Arborio rice, Normandy butter, farm-fresh eggs, and a fresh, cheesecloth-wrapped black truffle all in a tall glass jar. Simply keep it in the fridge for 2 days and enjoy a sumptuous meal on the third day.

Are there any environmental or animal welfare concerns surrounding truffles as there are with some other luxury foods?

No. Truffles and truffle hunting inflict no damage whatsoever on the environment or on the animals used to find them. Truffles are found, not made, and except for cleaning off the dirt there is no processing involved with the tasty tubers. They form naturally at the base of certain trees in the woods and are sniffed out by specially trained pigs and dogs. Pigs are very good and are the traditional choice but unfortunately they like the truffles too much and are as apt to scarf them down themselves as they are to hand them over. Dogs are good at finding them too but don't care about eating them and have therefore become the animal of choice for truffle hunters. Also, according to Patricia Wells in her excellent book, *Simply Truffles* (Morrow, 2011), dogs are less conspicuous in the car or out hiking in the woods than a pig would be and truffle hunters go to great lengths to conceal their favorite hunting spots. As for the animals themselves, truffle hunting is merely a good romp in the woods with (in the case of dogs anyway) their best friend.

Are truffles good with vegetarian dishes?

Absolutely. Black truffles are delicious with all kinds of vegetables including potatoes, artichokes, pumpkins, celery root and chestnuts. For fish-eating vegetarians ("Pescatarian"), they are also excellent with many kinds of seafood like oysters, scallops and salmon. White truffles are dreamy shaved over piping hot polenta with cheese or creamy pasta.

Know your Tuber

There are over 200 different species of truffles out there and only a handful of them are prized. We have all heard of the Alba Truffle market and the prosperous Perigord truffle producing region in France, but the truth is it is not that simple - white truffles are not all from Alba, and black truffles are not all from the Perigord. The quality of the truffle is always in the aroma – so get your noses ready. Here is a quick breakdown of the varieties that we bring in to Market Hall Foods every year.

Tuber magnatum

Also known as the Italian White Truffle. We sell these from mid-November through mid-January. These are harvested in Northern and Eastern Italy. The aroma is pungent and pleasing – like nothing else you will ever smell – an effervescent combination of garlic and cooked cheese. The price is high, but it is an experience and for some an addiction. They are simply intoxicating.

Tuber melanosporum

Also known as the Perigord Black Truffle (*Black Winter Truffle*). We sell these from mid-December through mid-February. We look for *melanosporum* truffles primarily from the Perigord, although some slip in from Italy and Spain. The aroma is longer and much earthier than the white truffle and therefore can be used in cooking rather than simply shaved over hot food. The pungency of this variety is deep and rich, reminiscent of earth and cocoa. They are one of the earth's true delicacies.

Tuber uncinatum

Also known as the Burgundy Truffle (*Fall Black Truffle*). We sell these from early November through mid-December. These are brought in from different regions in Northern Italy and Southern France. The Burgundy Truffle represents the fall harvest and is delicate with a slight musty nose. It possesses half the aroma of the illustrious *Tuber melanosporum* – although, when cooked with properly, successfully brings out the black truffle flavor and aroma we crave.