

# Simply Truffles

By Patricia Wells

Morrow Cookbooks/ 9780061915192/Hardcover

**On Sale November 8, 2011**

## TRUFFLE FACTS

A truffle is a fungus that is closely related to mushrooms and grows in symbiosis with certain types of trees, mainly oak and hazelnut, near their roots.

Found largely in France and in smaller quantities in Italy and Spain, truffles are harvested from November to March, reaching their peak flavor during the month of January.

A truffle is a rather inelegant, wrinkled black nugget generally the size of a walnut shell, although it can be as small as a pea and as large as an apple or orange. The mature truffle is firm, has wart-like bumps, and is a clean, jet black in color, and the flesh is black with distinctive white veins. The truffle is 73 percent water, losing 5 percent of its weight each day in evaporation.

The subtle but powerful aroma of a fresh truffle is truly distinctive. It is earthy, with the scent of freshly turned soil or autumnal woods, with hints of other mushroom varieties. To the nose, the perfume of a truffle resembles a dry mushroom, humus, and wet forests. In the mouth, it has a distinctive crunch, with an earthy, hazelnut flavor, as well as a touch of bitterness.

There are more than 100 varieties of truffles, but only about a few that are used in cooking. The best known are the winter black truffle, the summer “white” truffles, Burgundy truffles, and Italian white truffles.

Truffles are extremely rare, and getting rarer: In 1892, the French recorded a harvest of 2,200 tons of fresh truffles. Current annual yields come in at about 31 tons, with retail prices topping \$2,000 a pound.

A common serving of truffle is about 20 grams per person, and is often added to eggs, potatoes, pasta, polenta, and grains.

In the triumvirate of luxury foods – caviar, foie gras, and truffles – truffles turn out to be the eco good guy. Unlike deciding to ban caviar on ecological grounds, or dealing with the animal rights issue on foie gras, truffles remain 100 percent natural, a product that comes simply from the soil.

Truffles are enveloped in secrecy: Even today much of the trading of truffles – changing hands from the farmers to brokers or (often unwary) individuals and always paid for in cash -- is done out of open car trunks, where pillowcases bulge with truffles.

While pigs have been traditionally used to sniff out the fragrant fungus, dogs have become more common, primarily because pigs root to live, and they often ingest the truffle before the master can pry it loose. Also, a dog will be less likely to be noticed if one is out poaching truffles.

Man has not been able to capture the essence of the truffle artificially. Virtually all truffle products – oils, mustards, creams, pastas, butters, polentas, and risottos – have been infused with a chemical whose flavor and aroma are overtly intense, thoroughly objectionable, and not at all like real truffle.