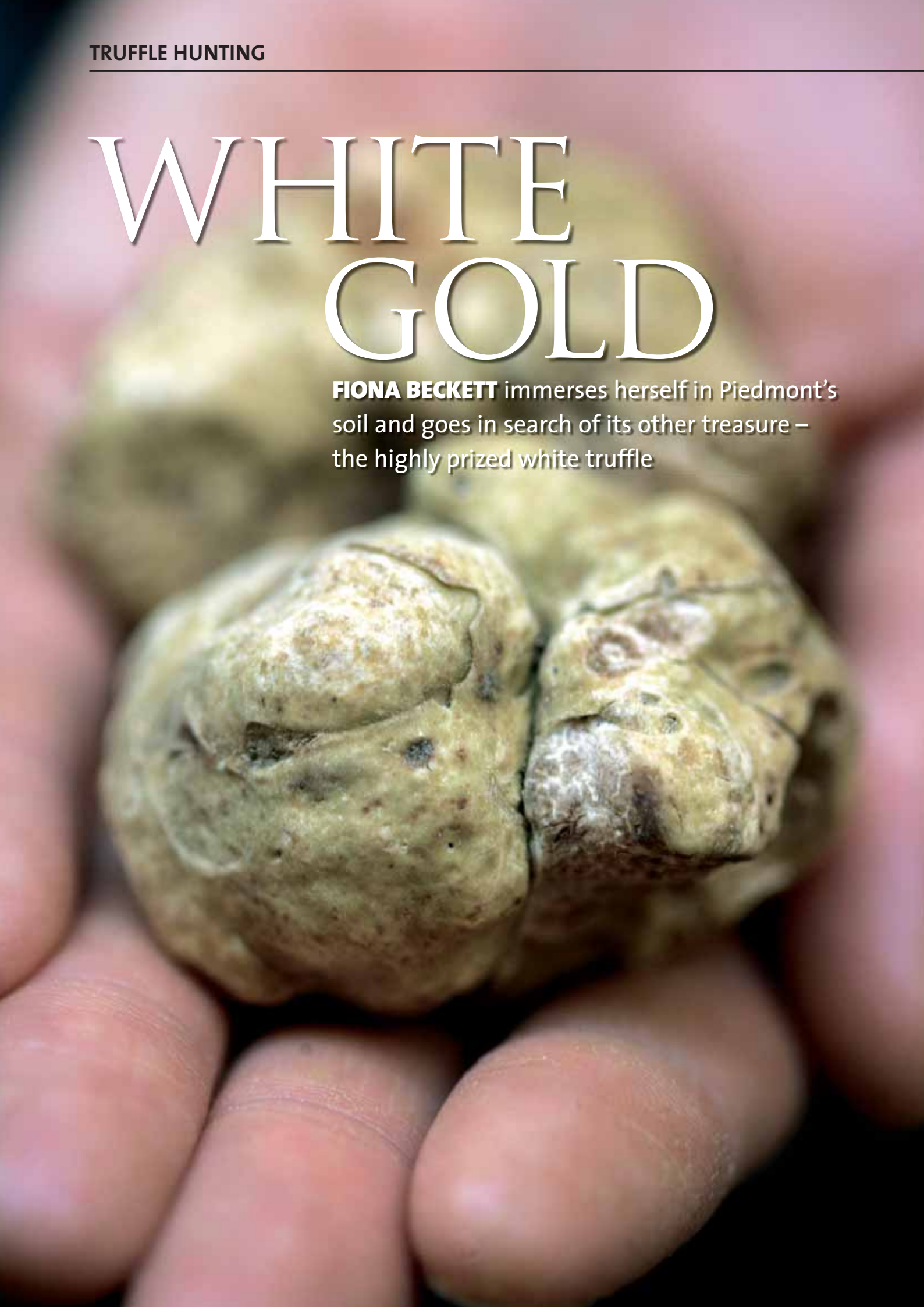


TRUFFLE HUNTING

WHITE GOLD

FIONA BECKETT immerses herself in Piedmont's soil and goes in search of its other treasure – the highly prized white truffle





Above: there may be truffle ahead. Fourth generation *trifolao* (truffle hunter) Gianni Monchiero, with his specially trained terrier, Lady

There's one food that never fails to excite the world-weary gourmet who has eaten everything and everywhere: the much-prized white truffle of Alba, an unprepossessing earth-clad nugget that tastes of heaven, and costs, weight for weight, almost as much as gold.

It used to be peasant food, an ingredient to flavour the simple pasta dishes of the Langhe. Today it's so much in demand that a whole tourist industry has grown up around the truffle-hunting season, which runs roughly from the end of October through to December.

What people want to experience most of all is the thrill of discovering a truffle for themselves. Which is why we're standing, huddled in warm jackets and scarves, outside the University of Truffle Dogs in the hill village of Roddi. University? Well that's maybe stretching it a bit. We're talking about what looks like a small outbuilding with a few faded cuttings about truffle hunting and a couple of excitable mongrels straining on their leads. (Mongrels, it turns out, are much easier to train than pure-bred dogs.)

The enterprise is run by 43-year-old Gianni Monchiero, a fourth-generation *trifolao* (truffle hunter) whose great-grandfather founded the university in 1880. He gives us a quick introduction to the art of truffle hunting which, he claims, like biodynamic viticulture, is governed by the phases of the moon. 'The best time to go out is two days before the moon disappears, and the first two days before it starts appearing again. The best truffles are found three moons (88 days) from the first autumn rains which usually occur around the end of August.

Although we're going out in full daylight, the *trifolao* always hunt alone, at night. They cite the superior conditions – the cold, the quiet, the humidity, the fact that the dogs tend to be calmer and it's easier for them to smell the truffles; but the truth is that no self-respecting *trifolao* would reveal his favourite haunts, especially to a bunch of tourists.

One of the dogs, a small cross-bred terrier called Lady, is unceremoniously bundled into the boot of the car and we set off. I half expect to be blindfolded or at the very least driven in circles to disorientate us but Gianni drives a mere 10 minutes from the village to the edge of a small copse in the middle of some neighbouring Barolo vineyards. Is it the

'Like biodynamic viticulture, truffle hunting is governed by the phases of the moon'

calcareous (chalky) soil which makes the Alba truffles so unique, I ask him? Gianni is cannily saying nothing that might give us any hard information. 'It's about nature,' he says mystically. 'It's about the water, the earth and the moon.'

It is true to say that white truffles, a sort of underground mushroom, always grow in proximity to trees, especially oak, willow, poplar, chestnut and hazelnut. Oaks are considered the best hosts. Once established, the truffles tend to come up in the same place year after year.

Lady shoots off, almost immediately stopping to sniff at the roots of a tree. She runs back quivering with excitement

for a titbit then leads Gianni to the spot. He marks it with a walking stick then the dog starts digging, frantically stopping just at the moment when the outline of a truffle appears. Gianni delicately picks round one side of the truffle with a small pick-axe then carefully removes it, leaving the earth intact on the other side.

'You have to leave the spores so a truffle will grow there next year,' he explains. It's a black truffle rather than the white ones we're after, but it's still an exciting moment. Gianni covers up the hole he has excavated with earth and leaves so that no-one would know that we'd been there. Then we're off again.

The key to truffle hunting is the relationship between the *trifolao* and his dog. It takes about four years to train one (Lady is now 10). 'You start when they are 3-4 months old,' explains Gianni. 'Initially you get the dog used to the smell of truffles but you treat it as a game. You take them out to one or two areas where you know there are truffles so the dog knows where to look.'

No particular type of dog is more skilled than another, it seems. It depends on their attitude to truffles – whether they like the scent but can be trained not to eat them (the advantage of using dogs over pigs).

A good dog is beyond price (there have been instances of dogs being stolen or even killed by jealous rivals) but tend to work best for their trainer. You can see how important the relationship is by the way Gianni talks to Lady in the local Piedmontese dialect, giving her instructions in a gentle sing-song voice, urging her down the paths where he suspects the best truffles are to be found. 'Go slowly. Check. Are you sure?...'

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Fiona Beckett at work in the kitchen of Michelin-starred delle Antiche Contrade

We end up with four small black truffles, better than I had anticipated but of no great value to Gianni, it's clear. Is this an average haul? He shrugs noncommittally. 'You can go out for three to four hours and find nothing then on the way home you'll find a huge one. It depends on which way the wind is blowing. The dog may not always pick up the scent.'

For the much-prized white truffles we visit the truffle market in Alba, which runs from the end of September to the end of the first week in November. As we walk through the entrance we're hit by their unmistakable heady, musky scent. The *trifolao* are lined up in the centre displaying their wares like gems in a jeweller's window – and at similar prices. I spot a walnut-sized one for €140 and two pea-sized ones for €76. Which is the better buy?

Size isn't everything, apparently. Big truffles are not necessarily better in taste, informs our guide. You need to know how to recognise a good one. The smell should be intense and lingering. It shouldn't smell of earth. It should have an even colour and a firm texture. You can take your truffle to be weighed and checked before and after purchase by the Centro Nazionale Studi Tartufo – clearly there is some sharp practice around.

Prices are high this year because the autumn was so dry – and are artificially inflated by the fair in November, which attracts truffle lovers from all over Europe. The best time to buy, say the locals, is after the fair. The truffles are better quality and cheaper. Even so, demand keeps prices high. 'A few years ago I paid €250 per 100g,' a collector told me disconsolately. 'Now it's more like €600 per 100g for a good one.'

The following morning, another truffle-related treat. The hotel we were staying at, Palazzo Lovera in Cuneo, has organised a cooking class in the kitchens of its >



The classic Piedmontese pasta tajarin, lavishly smothered with white truffle shavings

HOW TO STORE AND SERVE TRUFFLES



White truffles are 70–80% water and need to be kept cool and moist. They should be gently brushed (never washed) to remove excess soil, wrapped individually in paper towel and kept in an airtight box in the fridge at 3–4° C (otherwise their smell will permeate everything). You can, however, use truffles to flavour flour (for pasta) or rice (for risottos) by putting the wrapped truffle in a jar with the flour or rice for 1–2 days.

Before serving you should brush the truffle again, trimming off any rough edges. They should be shaved raw onto a dish just before serving. They go particularly well with eggs (soft boiled or lightly fried in butter); fine egg-based pasta such as tajarin; risotto; and fondue made with Italian cheeses such as Fontina, Taleggio and Castelmagno.



Michelin-starred restaurant delle Antiche Contrade for us to learn how to make the classic egg-enriched Piedmontese pasta *tajarin* (pronounced thai-ya-rin).

'There are about a thousand recipes for this but this is the one we use,' says Micky, the young chef assigned to us on the basis that having worked in London for a year, his English is a great deal better than our Italian. 'For half a kilo of 00 flour we use 16 egg yolks. You can put a truffle in the flour overnight for extra flavour if you like.'

He makes a dip in the centre of the flour then tips in the yolks. They are a vivid, eye-popping orange – just ordinary free-range eggs, Micky says. Why so many though? 'To begin with it was a question of nutrition rather than taste. It was an inexpensive way to get some protein. A long time ago eggs were pretty well all the farmers had to hand.'

He flicks in the flour and pulls the pasta together, pushing and kneading the dough. When it turns into a golden ball he rests it for two hours then kneads it again. 'You have to dry it a little before cutting it.' Deftly he rolls it out then folds and slices it with a sharp knife, making the whole process look ridiculously easy. 'You can always tell when pasta is freshly made,' he says. 'It's much lighter than pasta that has been pre-prepared.'

Finally it's time to put the dish together. 'Look at these!' says Micky, reverentially unwrapping the kitchen's store of white truffles – €3,000 worth, I would guess – from a plastic box. The pasta is cooked for a minute in boiling water until just soft rather than *al dente* – the way they like it in Piedmont. Meanwhile Micky puts a small pan on the hob and drops in a large slice of butter – about 50g. He adds a few truffle peelings then tips in the drained pasta and flips it over deftly in the butter. A splash of the cooking water is added to loosen the sauce then the pasta is ready.

Micky smothers the surface with shavings of white truffle, the sommelier appears as if by magic with a glass of Gaja Chardonnay and we're ready to eat. Truffle heaven...

Thinking about the experience a few days later I realise a little of the locals' canniness had rubbed off on me. I didn't buy any truffles. I wasn't prepared to pay tourist rates and it seemed just too much of a risk taking such expensive booty back in the car. But I've unfortunately acquired an expensive truffle habit that's going to be impossible to satisfy without returning to Piedmont next autumn. Roll on next November... **D**

Fiona Beckett visited Piedmont with Tastes of Italy (www.tastesofitaly.co.uk), who organise tailor-made holidays in the region, and stayed at Hotel Palazzo Lovera (www.palazzolovera.com). The truffle market in Alba (www.fieradeltartufo.org) is open at weekends from the end of September to the first weekend of November. For a chance to win the same trip as Fiona, see below.

WINE AND TRUFFLES

The classic match for white truffles in Piedmont is, quite understandably, Nebbiolo, especially Barolo. It's true that the elegant dark fruit flavours and lifted acidity of the wine work well, especially with the classic dish of *tajarin* (see main copy) or with *fonduta*, the Piedmontese version of fondue, but not everyone is convinced by the match. Roberto Mostini, sommelier at the Antiche Contrade in Cuneo (see below), favours a Piedmontese Chardonnay such as Gaja's Rossj-Bass, which he argues cuts through the rich flavours of the eggs and butter much more effectively than a red. 'I find the tannins in Nebbiolo overwhelm the delicate taste of truffles,' he says. I've also enjoyed white truffles, especially in a risotto, with mature vintage Champagne such as a 10–12-year-old Dom Pérignon – ultimate luxury!

WIN YOUR OWN TRUFFLE HUNTING TRIP

I'm ashamed to say I'd never heard of Cuneo. Happily, it seems, neither has anyone else. It's the most unspoilt Italian town of its size I've ever come across. What's more, it boasts the smartly turned out Michelin-starred delle Antiche Contrade ('the old quarter').

The restaurant moved to its current premises earlier this year and has been given a facelift, a brand new kitchen run by French chef Marc Lanteri, and a warren of cellars which sommelier Roberto Mostini has filled with an impressive selection of over 1,000 bins.

We ate there twice during our brief stay. Once to consume a disgraceful amount of white truffles under the slender pretext of having a cooking lesson, the other to sample the tasting menu. Except that there wasn't one. Instead they charmingly offered vague suggestions along the lines of, 'Shall we do you a bit of fish, then maybe some veal, some rice and perhaps some pigeon?'

When the fish turned up I nearly choked – it was a seabass tartare and my husband doesn't do raw fish. But he seemed to be feeling unusually mellow, and there was a wonderfully sweet, succulent king prawn to compensate.

The veal turned out to be a cleverly deconstructed *vitello tonnato*: wafer thin slices with a lozenge of tuna pâté at one end and a few salad leaves and

mayo at the other. It went spectacularly well with a richly tropical Gavi Filagnotti from Cascina degli Ulivi that Mostini had unearthed from his cellars.

A risotto of ceps (served daintily with a Morgon) was impossible to fault in everything but quantity. Then it was on to carpaccio-like slices of pigeon breast surrounded by an amazing selection of vegetables. We finished off with a dessert of soft nougat (*torroncino*) and vanilla ice cream. And a graceful honeysuckle-sweet Sardinian Moscato (Moscadeddu Badde Nicolosu), which matched the fresh-tasting strawberry sauce perfectly.

I'm sure you can go to Antiche Contrade and have what's on the menu or the wine list but why would you? Frankly the 'menu surprise' and Mostini's lucky dips are far more entertaining.

delle Antiche Contrade, Via Savigliano 12, 12100 Cuneo. Tel: +39 171 480 488
www.antichecontrade.it

Visit decanter.com/competition to read the full review of delle Antiche Contrade. Then, submit your own review of any restaurant you have visited for a chance to win a long weekend in Piedmont. The best review will be published on decanter.com, and its writer and a guest will fly to Piedmont, stay in the four-star Palazzo Lovera in Cuneo, eat in Antiche Contrade, taste Angelo Gaja's wines and (hopefully) find their very own truffles.