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TRUFFLE HUNTERS head out early to get the best chance at bringing home a basket full of the delicacies that give dishes intoxicating flavor.



PHOTOGRAPHY: ENZO FERRI

Gubbio's Diamonds

Meet Italian truffle dogs Lady and Fido, trained to dig for buried treasure. **By Susan Van Allen**

I'm in a meadow on the edge of an oak forest that borders the northern Umbrian town of Gubbio. It's a chilly October morning, the grass is wet with dew and a haze hovers in the sky. Marino Aringoli, who's been a truffle hunter around here for 40 years, unleashes his dogs with a whispered, urgent command: "*Guarda bene, guarda bene!*" ("Look well, look well!") Lady, a black Labrador, and Fido, a tan pointer, bound toward the trees with their noses to the ground. They sniff around and when they start pawing furiously at the dirt, Marino rushes towards them. In seconds, he swiftly grabs treasures from their jaws: black truffles.

Marino hands me the dirt-encrusted, warty, misshapen truffles. It's amazing that such unattractive things are delicacies sought out by cooks all over the world.

The smell of the truffles is intoxicating: earthy and musky, with a hint of sharp garlic. Romans called the scent "vaguely sexual." Apparently the Catholic Church caught on to this and banned truffles in the Middle Ages, believing they were so in-

dulgent, they were surely the sign of the devil.

Marino rewards Lady and Fido for their work with chunks of mortadella. The dogs chomp away, ravenous. Last night they weren't fed dinner in preparation for this hunt, so they'd be primed to dig up anything edible. Now recharged, they wag their tails and rush back to the trees to sniff and dig some more.

My adventure with Marino had begun at dawn, a key time for truffle hunting, as the cold morning air intensifies the truffles' scent and traditionally hunters favor the dim light so they can get to their best spots unseen by competitors.

The secret nature of truffle hunting makes it impossible for a traveler to simply walk into a forest, tap a hunter on the shoulder and ask to tag along. In the northern region of Piedmont, home of Alba's famous white truffles, a cottage industry of hunting tours has been built up, and many are rigged with pre-planted truffles so customers will come away satisfied.

I wanted the real experience and chose to base myself in the

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beautifully preserved medieval town of Gubbio, where black truffles are found all year long in the surrounding forests and white truffles November through January. Still, arrangements had to be made, so I signed up with JDB Hotel's "Gubbio Package," which included a stay at the Relais Ducale Hotel (formerly the 15th century Duke of Montefeltro's guest house) and this morning truffle hunt.

Gubbio is nicknamed, "The City of Silence" and though it's not far from the heavily touristed towns of Perugia and Assisi, it's managed to retain a small town, authentic atmosphere. Locals greeted me with friendly *buon giornos* as I wandered the steep cobblestone streets, peering into antique stores, ceramic shops, and quiet Romanesque churches.

Restaurant menus reflected the distinctive cuisine of Umbria, which is called the "Green Heart" of Italy. It's the home of what's considered to be Italy's best olive oil, famous lentils from the town of Castelluccio, and delicious pecorino cheeses. Pork is the region's favored meat, and every part of the animal is used to make exceptional salumi, sausages, and cured meats, which I enjoyed at Osteria dei Re, a folksy Gubbio restaurant, packed with locals.

But Gubbio's black diamonds are its culinary star. At the town's award-winning restaurant, Taverna del Lupo, truffles are featured all over the menu. My extraordinary dinner there included truffles shaved over tagliatelle, complemented by a robust Rosso di Montefalco red wine.

Now, standing in the meadow, I'm holding a baseball cap full of black diamonds Lady and Fido have sniffed out. Some are small as pebbles, others as big as cauliflowers. We head out of the meadow, with Marino patting and congratulating his dogs for a job well done. For all of us, it's been an excellent morning.

If you can't indulge in fresh truffles, they can be bought at specialty food stores or through online vendors, and are available at upscale Italian restaurants throughout the fall season. The simple recipes below, that feature ingredients more readily available, can bring

the flavors of Umbrian cuisine to your autumn dining table.

If you're planning a trip to Gubbio and want to experience a truffle hunt, contact jdbhotels.com or the Italian Government Tourism Board at www.italiantourism.com.

Tagliatelle with Black Truffles

- 1 pound tagliatelle
- 8 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1/2 cup grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese
- 1 black truffle (2 ounces)
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Cook the tagliatelle in 6 quarts of boiling water until al dente. Clean the truffle with a mushroom brush, do not use water. Melt the butter in a saucepan that will be large enough to hold the cooked pasta. When pasta is done, drain and transfer to the saucepan with the melted butter and mix together well. Mix cheese, salt and pepper with the pasta. Divide pasta evenly into four warmed serving bowls. At the table, shave the truffle over each portion, using a truffle shaver or swiveled vegetable peeler.

Makes 4 servings.

Grilled Eggplant with Truffle Oil and Goat Cheese

- 2 large eggplants, sliced into 3/8-inch disks
- 1/3 cup truffle oil*
- Kosher salt, to taste
- Pepper, to taste
- Soft goat cheese

Lightly brush both sides of the eggplant slices with oil, and sprinkle both sides with salt and pepper. Place slices on grill and grill on medium high heat until slightly charred on both sides and flesh softens.

Remove from grill. Drizzle with remaining oil and spread a dollop of goat cheese on each.

Makes 8 servings.

*Can be found at most quality kitchen stores, such as Williams Sonoma.



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