

Tuber

Tuberaceae

Tuber is Latin (truffle).

Truffles were not only being eaten in Mesopotamia in 1800 BC but were familiar to the ancient Egyptians, the ancient Greeks and the Romans (the latter imported some from Greece). They not only viewed them as both a delicacy and an aphrodisiac (the Greeks less so than the Romans) but also believed they had healing virtues. It is interesting to note that Juvenal (c.55-c.140) the poor Roman lawyer known for his written satirical attacks on the extravagances of Rome's ruling classes, is said to have declared that the best truffles came from North Africa and recommended that these same profligate socialites prepare them themselves rather than trust them to the mercies of their servants.

Before continuing it might be wise to introduce a word of caution. There are some authorities who think that these 'truffles' may well have been a form of strongly flavoured mushroom – not the rare vegetable recognized today. On the other hand there are others who believe that the truffles in question may have been the desert truffle which was much sought after at that time by the Arabs themselves. Since that period however the desert truffle's general desirability has gradually dwindled and today beyond its natural habitat (particularly the Persian Gulf and Kuwait) it would be unsaleable as a truffle. Food historians have suggested that one of its major drawbacks is the fact that once dug up it is excessively difficult to clean free of sand.

Whatever the facts may be it seems that truffles fell from grace in Europe during the Middle Ages when many people were led to believe that they were a manifestation of the devil. The Renaissance period saw the truffles as they are known today (to those fortunate enough to be able to sample them) 'return' to favour and records show that they were fashionable at the French court of Charles VI (1368-1422), otherwise known as Charles the Foolish who reigned from 1380 to 1422. They appeared on the menu for his wedding banquet at his marriage in 1385. After a further but shorter spell in the wilderness their promotion in France particularly was then encouraged by the Sun King, Louis XIV (1638-1715).

During the 17th Century muzzled pigs were the normal hunters of the truffle. Dogs were being used too in the 18th Century. Foxes, badgers and even ferrets have also been co-opted at various times. The animals (which will have been trained to recognize the smell of truffles) can snuffle the earth more easily than man – for a start their noses are nearer the ground. Over the centuries however there have always been some people who know their locality well and are adept in truffle hunting without animal support. Today trained dogs (and occasionally pigs) can still be used – in conjunction with the handler's experience and his good eyesight.

Signs of truffles nestling beneath include a 'scorched earth' appearance to the ground, and the presence of the truffle fly (preferably flies) drawn by the smell of the truffle below ground that they, not the hunter, have identified and which permeates the surrounding soil. Extremely careful and practised excavation must then follow.

Although as much as 1,800 tons of black truffles were harvested annually in October and November in one region of France before 1914, only 200 tons are found annually in the whole of France now. This and the fact that successful truffle cultivation has as yet

proved elusive goes some way to explaining the almost hysterical rapture in which truffles can be enveloped.

But contrary to the belief of many, truffles are not the preserve of the French. They are also produced by Italy and Spain - and all three disdain the others' aspirations for perfection. This exclusivity however is not confined to nations. Among both the truffle gourmets and the local communities that produce the delicacy a particular region can in the eyes of an expert be the **only** possible source of a true truffle. Apart from France, Italy and Spain truffles are found in Portugal, Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Germany, Switzerland and the old Yugoslavian area. They have also been found in other countries such as Iraq. There are no American species that are considered edible apart from, just possibly, *Tuber texense* which is a white truffle.

Even today truffles also provide an excuse for fairs. In France for instance large commercial gatherings are held annually in such places as Périguet, Thiviers or Alba. Although at these fairs the smell of truffles permeates the air, a truffle is rarely seen as transactions are understood to be carried out with an astounding amount of discretion and almost reverential awe.

In the language of flowers the truffle is said to be a symbol of surprise.