

# **The Truffle Book**



**Gareth Renowden**

**FOREWORD BY ANTONIO CARLUCCIO**

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Front cover: truffle harvested at John & Iris Burn's truffière in Ashburton, New Zealand in July, 2005. It weighed 30 g and is shown at about twice actual size.

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For Camille

# FOREWORD

**T**HANKS TO THE obsession of people like Gareth Renowden, the author of this book who I know personally and by name, I am glad to have “infected” others with the compulsive love of the fungi world and especially truffles. As a user of truffles for the last 50 years I can say that this is either an object of total love or in a minority of cases hate, but for certain there is no indifference about it.



***Antonio Carluccio  
cooks porcini in  
the kitchen at  
Limestone Hills,  
May 2003***

For someone to inject the spores of a variety of truffles in the roots of 200 trees is certainly the work of a fungi lover, because after having planted these trees there is still between 8 and 10 years of patient waiting time for nature to provide the rest.

In 50 years I must have dealt with about 1.5 tonnes of this tuber, which has delighted me, thousands of friends and customers of The Neal Street Restaurant in London.

I do hope that Gareth’s project in New Zealand will be very successful and help spread the gospel in the Southern Hemisphere with the knowledge that should the fungus not find its popularity there, it can always be shipped to London!

Truffles are called black gold or diamonds and are the favourite food of gods, kings and pigs. Let’s be piggish! Buona Fortuna.

Antonio Carluccio  
*Neal Street, London 2005*

# Introduction

**I**t's Camille's fault, this preoccupation of mine with truffles and mushrooms. If she'd been any sort of cook, then after our marriage I might not have become an untrained but enthusiastic chef, and I might not have slipped down the mossy bank of fungal obsession.

It's Antonio Carluccio's fault too. If the first recipe book Camille bought me after the wedding hadn't been his *Introduction To Italian Cooking*, larded with references to the joys of picking and eating wild mushrooms, then I might not have been tempted out into the woods of South West London in search of porcini and chanterelles. Without Antonio's glowing descriptions of their effects on food, I wouldn't have known about truffles.

It's also Mike Dash's fault, though he won't know it until he reads this introduction. If he hadn't taken his trying-too-hard-to-be-controversial trade paper columnist out to lunch in a Teddington restaurant that just happened to have a scribbled sign on the door that said "fresh truffles from Italy", then I wouldn't have ordered the risotto with truffle shavings on top, and I wouldn't have decided on the spot that this was one of the world's great tastes.

It's New Zealand's fault. The whole nation must bear its share of the blame. If Camille hadn't wanted to return to her birthplace, and I hadn't caved in so easily, then my transition from keen amateur mushroom hunter to hopeful professional truffle grower might never have happened. I wouldn't have stumbled on the property advertisement for a house with truffle plantation attached, and I wouldn't have phoned Camille to tell her that my whole life had been leading up to this.

And it's Ian Hall's fault, beyond any shadow of doubt. If I hadn't rung him up to ask for advice about truffle growing – Ian being the scientist who introduced truffles to New Zealand – then I wouldn't have driven out to Waipara to talk to a pioneering grower, and I

wouldn't have stumbled on the old farmhouse with spectacular views and perfect soil where we have now put down roots, both literally and metaphorically. Ian hasn't exactly discouraged me in my obsession. Quite the opposite: he's encouraged me to add two more truffle species to my plantations, and a trial patch of pines infected with saffron milk cap mushrooms. He even brings people to see me and talk truffles.

Of course, blaming all these friends is the easy way out. I should really blame my genes. Those complicated twists of DNA hold the blueprint for the man I have become. Gifted from my parents come odd traits (like my father's ears) and strengths, and – if we are to believe current research – many of the characteristics of personality that make us who we are. I am obsessed with truffles because I am genetically predisposed to be obsessive. When humans lived in hunter-gatherer groups, there was probably some advantage in having old men around who knew a lot of obscure stuff, like which mushrooms were good to eat and which ones would kill you. These days that obsessiveness looks for an outlet wherever it can find one. Some men worship old cars; others collect Led Zeppelin concert bootlegs, neither of which would help much in the great outdoors. I grow ectomycorrhizal fungi. It's entirely natural, not at all eccentric, and has some survival value. More survival value than a Jimmy Page solo (unless you're Jimmy Page, of course).

On our back paddock, just beyond the young vineyard, we have a small truffière of a little over 200 trees, a mixture of oaks and hazels that have the Périgord black truffle, *Tuber melanosporum*, on their roots. They are in their eighth year, and should start producing truffles real soon now, as they say in America. Please bear in mind that this is not some capricious hobby. There is something that passes for commercial reasoning behind it all. Last season, black truffles were selling in New Zealand for as much as NZ\$3,750 per kilogram (about US\$2,400 or £1,400). We don't have to produce too many kilos before the income starts to look quite interesting. With the other New Zealand truffle growers, we hope to establish export markets, shipping our wonderfully aromatic produce to the world's finest restaurants during the northern hemisphere summer, when French, Spanish and Italian truffles are out of season.

On the front paddock, before you get to the olive grove, there are a couple of experimental truffle blocks. The smallest has oaks and hazels infected with the Burgundy truffle, *Tuber uncinatum*, and the bigger has oaks, hazels and a couple of pines inoculated with *Tuber borchii*, a white truffle known in Italy as the bianchetto. If we are lucky, and all our truffières bear fruit, then our truffle season will

last six months, starting in autumn with the Burgundy truffle, progressing through winter with the Périgord black, and finishing in late winter with the bianchetto.

The celebration meal when we find our first truffle is already planned: truffled chicken (*en demi deuil*, perhaps), with a salad dressed by our own olive oil, accompanied by a glass of pinot noir from the vineyard. It's a long way from Teddington, but not as far as you may think.

## CHAPTER ONE

**The Truffle**

**I**DREAD THE QUESTION “What’s a truffle?”, not because it’s difficult to answer, but because when I start talking I know that some members of my family are going to begin rolling their eyes. They know the answer as well as I do, and will trot it out perfectly if given half a chance. But I’m not allowed to, unless I write a book about it. Consider this book the answer you’d get if you bought me an extremely expensive truffle dinner (without children present) and then asked me to tell you everything I know about truffles. This chapter is the short answer — a glass of good wine’s worth.

A truffle is a kind of fungus closely related to mushrooms, that grows under the ground. But instead of thrusting a typical mushroom cap up out of the ground to cast its spores to the wind, the truffle is a smelly bag of spores designed to be dug up and eaten by animals, which then scatter the spores around in their dung. The truffle smell that nature has designed to be so attractive to wild boar in the forests of Europe, is also very appealing to gourmets, and so these fungi have become revered in the cuisines of France and Italy.

Truffles appear in the soil around certain kinds of tree, because the fungus grows on and around the roots of those trees. The tree needs the fungus; the fungus needs the tree. Most kinds of truffle mature in autumn and winter. The summer truffle (obviously!) doesn’t. Some truffles are black, some are white; some are nice to eat, others are unexciting or inedible.

The next most obvious question, usually accompanied by a knowing smile, is “Do you use a pig then?” The answer is no. Not



***A ripe Périgord black truffle (Tuber melanosporum) from Tasmania, cut in half. (Tim Terry)***

even the French use pigs to find truffles very often any more, unless there's a TV crew in sight. Dogs are better. They are a wonderful example of biomechanical engineering, equipped with highly discriminatory sensors that make finding truffles rather simple (when they're co-operating), and they're happy with a piece of cheese or sausage or biscuit when they've done the job. A large sow prefers to eat the truffle, and won't fit in the back of a Deux Chevaux.

If your interest is already flagging, then at this point I might start to mention how pervasive the truffle scent can be. That will usually prompt the question "What do they smell like?", and elicit the answer "Old socks and sex." Go and find some unwashed socks – you'll need them for the next chapter. The problem with this explanation is that while I consider it fairly accurate, it isn't all that attractive an image. It doesn't do much to explain why truffles can fetch such high prices in the markets of the world. As an indication of just *how* high, in autumn 2004, a large Italian white truffle was bought by a London restaurant for £28,000/US\$52,000 in a charity auction. Sadly, the customers who'd chipped in to the auction never got to taste it. The chef put it in a locked fridge and then went on holiday with the key. By the time he got back it had gone rotten. The regally-priced truffle was then flown back to Italy and given a royal burial, complete with pomp, ceremony and trumpets. The highest price ever achieved for New Zealand grown black truffles was equivalent to NZ\$9,000/US\$6,300 per kilogram, and we prefer to eat them before they go off.

To be fair, these prices are exceptional, but they do make people sit up and pay attention when I try to explain that truffle growing is a valid farming option in Europe, the USA, South America, Australia and New Zealand, and perhaps South Africa. In New Zealand there are more than 100 truffières, or truffle plantations, the oldest dating back to 1987. Seven of them have produced commercial quantities of truffle, and more are expected to begin production in the next few years. One of them will be mine, I hope. In recent years, new plantings of thousands of truffle-infected trees promise a future where New Zealand will export black truffle to the world. Australians, and Tasmanians in particular, hope to do the same — they have been planting large numbers of inoculated trees since the early 1990s — and there are schemes afoot to introduce truffle growing to South America and Southern Africa.

Why all this southern hemisphere interest? It's because our winter is the northern hemisphere summer. Our truffles are at their peak when the only truffle available to European, American and Asian chefs and gourmets is the preserved kind. Despite the prot-



**Pigs are traditional truffle finders, as celebrated in this painted rock carving from the Musée de la Truffe in Sorges**

estations of those who preserved them, truffles out of a can or jar are but a pale shadow of the fresh fungus. Use preserved truffles in a classic dish and you will wonder what all the fuss is about. And you will have paid through the nose for the privilege.

At this point, a warning for the consumer: look carefully at the label on the jar. Not only will the preserving process have reduced the essential “truffleness” but also, producers often use less aromatic truffles to begin with. Summer truffle (*Tuber aestivum*) is nice when fresh, but a lot more subtle than the Périgord black. The same is true of *Tuber indicum*, the Chinese truffle. And the classic white truffle of Italy, *Tuber magnatum*, is notoriously poor when preserved.

Southern hemisphere truffle growers hope that in the northern hemisphere offseason, their top-quality fresh truffle will find a ready market in top restaurants from Tokyo to L.A., New York to London, perhaps even Paris and Rome. We may even be able to sell them to French and Italian restaurants in the traditional

truffle homelands of Périgord, Provence, Piedmont and Bologna. During the summer tourist boom, when people from all over the world visit these delightful places, the availability of fresh truffle could give the tourist the proper taste of the provincial cuisine, and might even create extra demand for the French, Italian and Spanish product.

In the world beyond Europe, truffles are seen as expensive delicacies. Buying fresh truffle at Fortnum & Mason in London or Dean & DeLuca in New York is not for the faint of wallet, but the farmer or truffle hunter who sold that same truffle in a French village market will have received only a small fraction of the final price. Inevitably, this means that truffle use is confined to restaurants — and then only restaurants that can justify charging high prices. When one of your ingredients is priced in dollars per gram, liberal use is going to cost Conservative cash.

In France and Italy, where truffle hunting, growing and cooking is an important part of regional culture, total truffle production has been declining for years. At the peak of the truffle boom in Périgord in the late nineteenth century, perhaps a thousand tonnes of black truffle were been harvested in France. Today, despite the planting of hundreds of thousands of truffle-infected trees, even in a good season the harvest is likely to be less than a hundred tonnes. That has to feed gourmets throughout the world, not just in Paris and Provence, and so the pressure on prices is considerable.

Of course, if you happen to live in the Périgord, you will be able to find truffles, or know someone who does. Even if you buy in the market, you will not be paying layers of middlemen for the privilege of getting your hands on the smelly fungus. Truffle can be a part of your winter cuisine, one that's welcomed each year with church services and blessings, street parties and fêtes. In countries where the seasonality of fresh food is no longer defined by seasons but by the fluctuations in the price, that may be hard to understand, but truffles are a key part of regional life and self-image in many parts of Europe. Even if the truffle market at Alba in Piedmont is full of wealthy Germans who have driven across the Alps to try and lay their hands on some *Tuber magnatum*, truffle still features on the menu in local restaurants — and not just the ones that cater to tourists.

Down in the southern hemisphere, we have none of that truffle culture to guide us. With our largely Anglo-Saxon heritage, we have a strong hereditary distrust of any kind of mushroom you can't buy in a shop. We don't have the same long culinary traditions that would enable us to get the most out of this scarce resource.

There are a few restaurants, hotels and upmarket lodges that buy everything we can produce, but the populace have yet to learn to welcome the truffle season in the same way that we look forward to the first oysters of the season or fresh asparagus in spring. Frenchmen can emote about the mystique and symbolism of the subterranean black diamond, wax lyrical about the impact of the aroma and the flavour, but in suburban New Zealand truffles are only an expensive mystery. It'll take a long time to change that, but in the meantime there's plenty of demand from overseas. At a time when New Zealand is lucky to produce 20 kg of Périgord black truffle in a season (June–September), one of the leading truffle growers regularly fends off people keen to buy 100 kg every week.

What is it about truffles that provokes all this devotion, that moves people to spend serious money on a taste and a smell? I shall attempt to find an answer in the next chapter...