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Truffles: the new smoked salmon?

A bumper truffle crop should be good news for lovers of the elusive fungus, but we must be careful not to ruin the magic

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A truffle dog with a white truffle in Piedmont, Italy. Photograph: Murdo Macleod

If, as is reported in today's Guardian, truffles are becoming increasingly prevalent in Britain (I mean in a growing, not simply eating, sense), then I must admit to having mixed feelings.

On the one hand, I adore truffles, and instinctively welcome any enlargement of the opportunity to get my hands on the things. But at the same time I keep thinking about what happened to smoked salmon.

Let me explain. When I was growing up, in the 1980s, smoked salmon was still a comparatively rare, and undeniably glamorous, food. If you served it at a party, people would most likely be impressed, and make comments along the lines of, "Gosh, smoked salmon, you *are* spoiling us". But so ubiquitous – and, thanks to the mass farming of fish, cheap – has the stuff become that these days there is nothing remotely glamorous about smoked salmon. It has become so run-of-the-mill, in fact, that I'd almost feel embarrassed to serve it at a party, for fear of people remarking on my lack of originality.

No doubt I'm exaggerating the threat, but I can't help worrying about something similar happening to truffles. One moment, a few turn up in a wood in Wiltshire; the next, who knows? The things will start appearing on the shelves of Tesco, mixed in among the garlic and shallots, with union flags displayed on the label. Truffle oil will become the new balsamic vinegar, with every two-bit restaurant drizzling copious amounts of the stuff on their salads. Perhaps even McDonald's will get in on the act, and introduce a McTruffle burger.

My point is that truffles are best kept as a rare and special treat. Their whole point is their scarcity. Everything about them – from their dank, protracted, subterranean development to the heady pungency of their aroma – is shrouded in mystery. They are the most furtive of foods, thriving in the unlikeliest of places (one recent cache was unearthed in Plymouth city centre), and requiring the olfactory powers of animals to detect them. Given all this, it is only right and proper that a certain air of secrecy, a certain ceremony, should attend to their distribution and consumption. This isn't about snobbishness – about wanting to reserve the pleasures of truffles for the few – it is about respecting the nature of this strange, wondrous food and not wanting it to be destroyed.

The Italians understand this perfectly. Like drug aficionados, most truffle-addicts have one formative experience, one moment when the scales drop from their eyes and they properly understand what truffles are about. Mine occurred a few years ago in a small town close to Turin. I was there for Slow Food's bi-annual festival of producers, the Salone del Gusto, and it happened to coincide (a canny trick this, I felt, on the part of the festival's organisers) with the height of the white truffle season. White truffles are truffle royalty. Their aroma if far more intense, far richer and all-encompassing than that of their black counterparts. They are priced accordingly, costing as much as £2,500 a kilo.

Accompanied by a wine producer friend (who clearly had inside knowledge), we drove out of Turin, and reached the restaurant in half an hour. It was an ordinary-looking place: the kind you find in any Italian town. We were handed menus, but we barely looked at them; we knew what we were here for. The maitre d' approached the table, bearing a small padlocked wooden box, which he made a show of unlocking. Inside were perhaps a dozen white truffles, ranging from hazelnut to golf ball-sized. The box was passed around the table like a vintage port, everyone taking a turn to sniff. The wine producer (who was paying for the meal) made his selection, and the box was whisked away.

Ten minutes later, we were presented with plates of fresh, butter-drenched pasta. The maitre d' reappeared, truffle in hand, and proceeded to grate slivers of the stuff over each plate. I wolfed the pasta down in a sort of truffle-drunk stupor; I'll never forget the pleasure that simple dish gave me. Forget the creations of Michelin-starred chefs; this was what true gastronomic enjoyment was about. If, thanks to the new craze for truffle-hunting, this kind of experience becomes possible in Britain, that will be a good thing. But will it? I wonder ...

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