

ISTRIA: GOING FOR GOLD

Worldly Delights

Mary Luz Mejia



Mary Luz Mejia is on the hunt for truffles, one of the world's most sought-after ingredients, in the interior of Croatian Istria

Truffles – a gourmet ingredient that sends chefs and food cognoscenti alike into culinary euphoria. Those who enjoy them get almost misty-eyed at the thought of the tubers that grow among tree roots five to 20 centimeters underground, being shaved in paper-thin slices atop their favourite dish. How sought-after are these 'earth apples,' as they are sometimes called? In 2007, Stanley Ho, a casino owner in Macau, paid U.S.\$330,000 for a 1.5-kilogram truffle. Today, fresh white truffles can fetch up to \$10,000 per kilo and diners hungry to savour that mysterious, earthy, mushroom-like nuance are willing to pay the price.

Italy and France are the usual hunting grounds for world-class truffles, but it's on Croatia's Istrian peninsula where some of the world's finest white truffles (*Tuber Magnatum Pico*) are found. I stumbled onto this fact when my husband and I drove into Buzet and read a sign proclaiming it 'The City of Truffles.' Being fans of the tuber, we felt as though we'd won the culinary lottery! What we unearthed was the region's rich tradition of truffle hunting and gastronomic history dating back to Roman times.

It's plain to see why the interior of Istria is often compared to Italy's Tuscany (but at a

fraction of the price, I might add). Rolling, verdant hills with fortified medieval towns might easily be Tuscany's filmic body double. It's here, in the valley's damp **Motovun forest**, kept moist by the flowing **Mirna river**, that truffles grow under oaks, willows, poplars and lime trees. Once they emit their scent, trained dogs sniff out the precious loot hidden beneath the forest floor.

Truffle season can start in late summer, peaking in autumn and continuing through till early winter. It's mid-autumn in Istria, so we're in truffle heaven. We head to the nearby town of **Livadine** (close to where the largest truffle on record was found in 1999), where an inn called **Konoba Dolina** serves delicious, hearty Istrian fare with fresh ingredients. *Konobas* (traditional restaurants), by the way, are a fantastic way to enjoy local, authentic fare at reasonable prices. We order Istrian *pršut* (local prosciutto to rival any cured by the northern *bura* wind), cheese from the isle of Pag and *fuzi*, hand-rolled, tube-like pasta covered in *vrhnje* (cream with a *crème fraîche* tang) and a cloud of local black truffle slivers. Gloriously simple and absolutely delicious, this is food that lingers in the senses long after you've savoured the last bite!

Truffles are best enjoyed raw – shaved atop pasta, eggs and some meat dishes. What makes this region's truffles unique, according to Wanda Srdoc, a Canadian truffle importer with family ties in Istria, is the combination of several factors. "In Alba, it's primarily the oak tree that produces the prized white truffle," says Srdoc. "In Istria, the Motovun forest's rich diversity of trees is above and beyond what's available in Alba or Piedmont. This diversity, along with our climate and soil, produces truffles with unique flavours, textures and character that remind me of fine wine."

Istrian truffle expert Radmila Karlič adds, "Istrian truffles are heavier in structure, richer and have a much stronger scent. In fact, they probably have the strongest scent of any truffles in the world." Purists and fans of the tuber might want to note that for years Croatians sold their truffles to Italy, where they were repackaged as Italian truffles for sale on the international market. While Italy and France's well-oiled marketing machine has boosted their truffle industry, Croatia is now embracing its 'Istrian gold.' Yearly festivals highlighting the truffles' quality and versatility are attracting gastro-tourists with a taste for the good life.

If you happen to be in Buzet on the second weekend of November, bring your stretch pants and get ready to dig in because the town makes an omelet, or *fritaja*, of note. In 2012, it will be made with 2,012 eggs and you guessed it, a whole lot of truffles! For a full listing of truffle festivals, restaurants and culinary experiences, go to istria-gourmet.com for details. And should you miss truffle season altogether, worry not. Srdoc's family offers locals and visitors alike the opportunity to savour the flavour of the region's bounty through their **Natura Tartufi** (naturatartufi.com) line of products, some of which I picked up in Motovun in the form of *crema* – a mushroom and truffle paste, and truffle honey. As they say in Croatia, *dobar tek – bon appétit* – and don't forget to sample a glass of the local white Malvasia wine to fully engage in Istria's culture of living and eating well.