

Truffles for all

This season the mighty white truffle is more plentiful than ever. Celebrate by shaving it all over your fried eggs, says *Tony Turnbull*



THE WHITE TRUFFLE season is here again and, thanks to the perfect combination of sunshine, rain and cold nights across northern Italy, it promises to be one of the best ever for the elusive fungus. That, of course, means lower prices for all, so let us pause a moment to commiserate with those show-offs whose main autumnal pleasure is to insist the waiter keeps showering their plate with white gold until his arm aches, as the less financially

watertight look on with envy. This year every Tom, Dick and Harry can get in on the act.

Don't get me wrong: the Alba white truffle is still a luxury – its Latin name, *tuber magnatum*, is derived from the word that gives us “magnate”. Right now, though, you don't have to be rich as Croesus to indulge. Last year a dry autumn meant the season was short (over by mid-December), yield was down 90 per cent and prices were correspondingly

stratospheric (as much as £7,500 a kilo, which meant a truffle not much larger than a golf ball could easily set you back £350). This year prices are half that – and given that chefs suggest about three to five grams per serving, you should be able to elevate a humble plate of pasta for as little as £15.

Although, for the aficionado, any price is worth paying. The white truffle's heavy, pungent, earthy smell is a siren call to gourmands and, to their minds, is as superior to the black Périgord truffle as Chassagne-Montrachet is to Piat d'Or. Those reaching to describe its appeal often say it smells like sex. But only if you are doing it very, very wrong. I prefer the description from Alexis Gauthier, the chef patron of Gauthier Soho, who says the first time he came across white truffle, he “thought there was a gas leak in the kitchen”.

There's no shortage of restaurants that will ply you with truffle for a price, from Asian (at Sexy Fish, Bjoern Weissgerber likes to shave it over white miso and black cod, or scallop nigiri) to French (Hélène Darroze pairs it with poulet de Bresse at the Connaught). However, if you want the most traditional match, you need to ask an Italian.

You won't have a better truffle dinner than at Francesco Mazzei's Sartoria on Savile Row. He likes it on carpaccio of venison, on tagliarini cacio e pepe, on risotto, on tortellini in brodo, on roast turbot with a truffled hollandaise... on pretty much anything. He even makes an incredible zabaglione and ice cream made with truffle-infused eggs. “There is just something about the white truffle that gets chefs so excited,” he says. “For me, the best dish is zucchini fritti with lots of white truffle shaved on top. It's a luxury, but why not? It makes people happy.” At home he'll have it on fried eggs as a treat. “It's the best thing you can have.”

At Bocca di Lupo in Soho, Jacob Kenedy pairs it with pasta, with polenta and, surprisingly, with roast partridge and anchovy. “It's best on buttery, bland dishes – any combination of cheesy, rich or eggy. The exception is anchovy. Don't ask me why, but truffles are great with anchovy.” At his restaurant they let you bring your own truffle (which can also be bought from his gelateria, Gelupo, across the road) for the chefs to clean and slice over your chosen dish.

As for home use, freshness is all. Truffles will keep perhaps three days in the lower part of the fridge (ideally in a sealed container with eggs or rice, which will absorb the flavour). If in doubt, the most reliable source this year will be Harrods, which has started working with Urbani, a sixth-generation family company that controls about 70 per cent of the market. It processes roughly 200 tonnes of truffles a year – about a tenth of which are white truffles. “The scent must be intense and persistent, the surface predominantly smooth and the texture neither soft nor too dry,” says the company's Giorgio Federici. His favourite match? Like Mazzei, it's fried eggs. Sometimes simple really is the best.