

Tuber Magnatum The White Truffle



By JOE SANO

Phonies, frauds and knockoffs! The finest luxuries tend to bring out the worst in people: high-end handbags are assembled in the poorest nations, the art world is rife with frauds, and the less said about the diamond trade, the better.

The food world's most luxurious products are no different: *Tuber magnatum (Italy)* and *Tuber melanosporum (France)* — *white and black truffles*, respectively.

The focus here will be on the *Tuber magnatum* of Italy, the high-value white truffle or trifola d'Alba Madonna (Truffle of the White Madonna). It is found mainly in the Langhe and Montferrat areas in the Piedmont region in northern Italy and, most famously, in the countryside around the cities of Alba and Astin. Their harvest has spawned an ever-growing crime wave of fraud, poisonings, theft, and tax evasion.

It's no secret why. Truffles fetch thousands of dollars per pound and diners are said to experience euphoric sensations when eating them. The Catholic church banned these so-called "devil's fruits" during medieval times because of their hypnotic, aphrodisiac-like qualities. (I'll leave that statement alone.) And so, the truffle perennially tempts hustlers and cons who, lured by the promise of a quick buck, become ensnared in the ingredient's tangled history of scams, hijinks and even murder.

When the truffle season is in full swing, everything about the business is secretive. First, a truffle hunter usually searches for his prizes in the middle of the night to keep his location secret from the spying eyes of others poised to steal his harvesting spot. Secondly, truffles are taxed significantly by the Italian government. As one hunter stated, "If a hunter finds a big truffle that's worth

\$6,000, it's very rare to find anyone who wants to share that with the Italian government." So, he drives to a parking lot and meets a middleman buyer. It's like a drug deal. He hands the buyer the bag of truffles, takes the bag of cash and that's it."

Sometimes there are assets more valuable than the actual white truffles. One common theft in the truffle world, one might say an arguably more prized commodity, is the theft of the dogs that sniff them up. Italians stopped using pigs years ago because the pigs would eat more truffles than could be saved.

The dogs that hunters train for years to find and locate truffles are often stolen by others for hunts only to be returned later.

Some competitive truffle hunters are much less humane. Instead of stealing a competitor's dogs, some hunters just ... eliminate them. Rival truffle hunters have been known to poison each other's prized dogs, using tactics such as injecting meatballs with strychnine, a weed killer, and dropping the bait in the forest for the dogs to find or, the latest, dropping poison in small pools of standing water waiting for the dogs to drink.

Truffle dealers too complain about crime. Shipments of truffles from Italy after passing through customs often come up a few ounces short and others just disappear during truffle season. One of the newest tricks has some hunters mixing prized white truffles from the Alba region with those found across the Italian border in Croatia. Croatian truffle hunters operate with far fewer rules and regulations than the Italians. The crafty Croatians have been known to smuggle their own whites across the border into Italy where dealers pass them off as Italian or mix them with the Tuber Magnatum.

Given the high prices fetched for their "white gold", hunters and dealers must be ever vigilant to the threat of common thieves looking for an easy

robbery through home invasion and sometimes even murder.

Lastly, let's talk agricultural "knock offs". The Chinese white truffles might look like their European cousins, but they lack any of the flavor or aroma of the originals. The Chinese truffles grow wild throughout millions of acres of forest in the provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan. The Chinese version doesn't smell or taste remotely like its delectable Italian look-alike. Truffle aficionados say, "It tastes like a turnip or potato..no real taste"!

Chinese truffles are cheap. Wholesale, they go for as little as \$20-30 a pound which means that it's almost irresistible for unscrupulous truffle sellers to substitute Chinese truffles for the real thing or, at the very least, to adulterate a shipment of genuine white truffles in the same spirit that creative drug dealers cut their illicit drugs with by-products. Many now believe despite increased policing and internal security, substandard truffles are thought to infil-

trate 30 percent or more of white truffle exports.

Rising global temperatures are also worrying truffle hunters around the Italian town of Alba. Truffle hunting season has been pushed back from August to October in most of the Alba region. Rising temperatures have reduced the truffle size and supply driving the price even higher.

One truth remains, truffles are an appealing investment because of their whopping price. Prized white truffles (Tuber magnatum) from the Italian Piedmont region sell for upwards of \$3,000 a pound. Last year a truffle weighing 1,005 grams (2 pounds, 3.4 ounces) fetched 120,000 euros (\$133,000) — more than twice the price of gold — from a Hong Kong buyer at last year's Alba auction.



Hunting for truffles