

Truffle Hunting in Istria

Truffles are today a highly esteemed and sought-after specialty, which also became part of the gastronomic identity of Istria. This explains why many foreign and domestic tourists visit Istria for holidays to taste truffles, enjoy their flavour and find out whether they truly possess aphrodisiac and other qualities attributed to them.

This paper deals with the changes in truffling methods (who used to hunt before and who hunts now), changes in truffle consumers (who used to eat them before and who eats them now), and changes in transferring a traditional dish consumed in peasant kitchens to a different environment - the restaurant.

Key words: truffle hunting, traditional nutrition, Istria

With the intention to highlight its specific traits as a tourist destination, Istria has also turned to enriching its gastronomic identity. "A state, a region or even a small community can have an original cuisine, which often gives a better identification of its characteristics and cultural heritage than any other hallmark" (Quijano-Caballero, 2002: 65).

Truffles are one of the significant characteristics of the typical cuisine of this region. They were never part of the traditional Istrian cuisine, but nevertheless appear on the menus of wine cellars and restaurants.

This paper is only the beginning of the research of certain segments of the traditional Istrian food and deals with the beginnings of organized truffle collection in Istria and changes that occurred in truffling and the consumption of truffles.

Truffling in Istria

The answers to the questions about the beginning of organized truffle collection in Istria are quite interesting.

According to one of my informants, the Italians were responsible for the beginnings of truffle collecting in Istria. In his opinion, the arrival of Italians in the 1920s meant a more intensive cultivation of land which led to the discovery of these underground tuberous plants. Since they had experience with truffles, they initiated truffle collecting in this region.

As reported by another informant, the story of the truffles begins in the late 1920s, when an inhabitant of a village near Livade brought the "big smelly bulbs" (usually thrown to pigs by the peasants), which he encountered when ploughing, to one of the biggest land-owners in Livade - some Agostinelli (Agoštineli). The village of Livade developed thanks to the Parenzana, a railroad connecting the cities of Trieste and Poreč. Agostinelli was a learned and rich man, and also the only one in the area who had a telephone. He called the baroness Barabra von Hütterott in Rovinj, who sent her people with dogs to check out this truffle field. The inhabitants of Livade and the surroundings soon started to collect truffles for the company owned by the Hütterott family, who purchased and exported them.

An article in the daily *Glas Istre* of March 10, 2003, brings an interesting information about Josip Folo, an amateur historian, and his discovery of documents about the establishment of the first company for research, collection and export of truffles in the County Museum of Rovinj. The company called "L'azienda del Tartufo Sella Hütterott" was established in 1933 in Livade by the baroness Hütterott, Massimo Sella, who was managing the Rovinj Institute for Maritime Biology at that time, and two Italian truffle researchers from Pula.

Glas Istre also published details of the first paper on the white Istrian truffle written by Massimo Sella and translated by J. Folo. The paper contains the information that Italian truffle researchers from Pula discovered the first truffles in the area of Pazinski Novaki in 1929. Their search continued in 1931, after two years of inactivity, with the aid of trained dogs. Analysing the areas where truffles could be found, M. Sella said that "... the truffle finding zone is limited to the lowlands and meadows of the valley (Pazinčica), in particular to the 30 to 40 m wide area along the stream." Other finding places were in the region towards Golgorica, the valley of Roč and the valley of Rečina below Hum and Buzet. A special finding place was in the valley of the river Mirna towards Livade and the wood of Motovun. He believed that the wood of Motovun could become a truffle nursery if the land gets meliorated due to frequent floods. He found that truffles thrived in this area due to a favourable combination of limy and clayey soil, the trees growing in this region (poplars, willows etc.), surface and subterranean waters and the continental climate with hot summers and cold winters. Taking the example of France with its annual production of roughly three million kilograms and Italy with an output of one million per year, Sella calculated that more than 300 kilograms of truffles could be collected in Istria.

Sella, who wrote this paper in 1932 for the Italian Botanical Society of Florence, realized the great economic potential of truffles in Istria, which was at that time a province of Italy.

The magazine *Menu* brings in its 4th issue of July/August 2002 the interesting information that the truffling in the region of Livade developed thanks to railwaymen of the region Emilia Romagna, who were experienced collectors. It was on their initiative that the first truffle collectors appeared in Livade, where peasants used to feed pigs with truffles before.

Based on all this, we can conclude that organized truffle collecting started in Istria in the late twenties and early thirties of the 20th century. Istria was at that time under the administration of Italy, a country with a tradition of truffle hunting. Under the influence of the people who found truffles there, truffles started to be collected and bought off by the company "L'azienda del Tartufo Sella Hütterott", from where they were probably exported to Italy.

The truffle hunt continued after World War II, when the Forestry Office became responsible for the purchase and sale of truffles. In former Yugoslavia, truffle hunters were satisfied with the purchase prices and regularly delivered the truffles to the Forestry Office. Illegal trade appears in the 1980s and the Forestry Office today only deals with the issuance of truffle hunting licenses.

Hunting, pricing, smuggling and the future

My informant could give no definite answer to the question whether truffle hunting used to be an exclusively male business. However, he gave an example from his own family. His great-aunt, who died a decade ago at the age of eighty, "went after truffles" her entire life. The example of the truffle hunter Francesca Bazjak, presented together with her male fellow hunters in the documentary "Stories from the Wood of Motovun", demonstrates that little has changed since then. Women can also go hunting for truffles (although less frequently) and the method of hunting also remained the same.

Truffles are hunted exclusively with dogs, which explains why it is said that truffles are hunted rather than collected. Every truffle hunter probably has his own opinion about which dogs are best suited for the hunting - thoroughbreds or cross-breeds. My informer claims that his twelve mongrels make excellent dogs for the truffle hunt. It takes two or three years to train a dog for hunting. During the training, dogs are rewarded with a piece of sausage when they find a truffle, and it can also happen that they eat a piece of the catch when hunting.

According to my informers, pigs were never used for truffle hunting in Istria, which is explained sometimes by purely practical reasons: "It is doable with a pig, but it is practically impossible because of transport."

¹The documentary "Stories from the Wood of Motovun" was directed by Zoran Margetić, produced by Magnatum Film and Gastronomad of Zagreb and based on the screenplay by Željko Šatović, Rene Bakalović, Mirko Bajš and Zoran Margetić. It was broadcast by the Croatian TV in early April 2003.

The truffle-hunting season opens in early or mid-September and lasts until around New Year's Day. There is a deep-rooted belief that truffles should be collected only in the evening and by night, which is the time when their scent is stronger. However, this is not the truth, but rather a mystification of the truffle-hunting process. Truffles are hunted whenever one has spare time. Truffle-hunters expect that the wood will be less crowded by night and some of them avoid being seen. However, the informant says: "But then they all swarm in and the wood turns into Las Vegas, everybody walking around with their flashlight torches."

The hunt usually lasts two to four hours and when the hunters and dogs get tired, they go home. When a dog finds a truffle, the hunter removes the soil with an extraction tool, takes the truffle out, leaves the mycelium, puts the soil back on it and stamps the earth down with his feet. My informant believes that this is the right way to extract truffles, but this does not mean that all truffle-hunters adhere to it. Small truffles, some believe, should not be collected. But my informant disagrees: "If one dog doesn't eat it, another will."

After the truffle is extracted, the hunter puts it into a thickly lined pocket or a bag. The catch varies and can reach a kilogram and a half of truffles, but the hunter can also return empty-handed. It is all a matter of luck.

Truffle prices also vary. They depend on whether the year was rainy or dry. In her paper from 1998 entitled "Rain, Food and Culture...", Sanja Kalapoš states that the price for a kilogram of truffles amounted to a million and a half Italian liras, which equals roughly 1500 DM (750 €). My informant reports that 2001 was an extremely rainless year, unfavourable for truffle growth, and the prices went up to 5 million and 300 thousand liras, i.e. 5300 DM (2650 €). The average price, to his knowledge, is between 1000 and 1500 DM (500 - 750 €).

My informant stresses out that it is hard to believe that no truffle-hunter was ever hurt by the gun of a game hunter, since this region is also a game-preserve. It could be, in his opinion, a matter of hunter ethics, according to which no game hunting occurs in areas where truffles are collected. However, since the wood of Motovun has recently become a public hunting-ground, there is no guarantee that such accidents could be prevented. To make things even more interesting, the leaseholder of this public hunting-ground is the state-owned company Hrvatske šume (Croatian Forests), i.e. the Forestry Office which issues truffle hunting licenses for the wood of Motovun.

A seasonal license in Buzet, for instance, cost 600 kuna in 2002 and 400 kuna the year before. According to the Mushroom Protection Rules, truffles are hunted with the help of one trained dog, possibly accompanied by a second one that is being trained. The digging is done only on the spot where the dog has picked up the truffle scent, using a shovel with a blade not longer than 15 cm and not wider than 8 cm, and the holes must be filled with the scooped out soil.

The standardization covered up illegal trade and unlicensed truffle hunting, believes my informant. Formally, the Forestry Office issues licences required to enter the wood of Motovun, but the truffle-collecting license should be issued by the State

Bureau for the Preservation of Nature. However, such licenses are issued to companies and businesses registered for mushroom trade. They get licenses to trade in certain quantities of truffles during a certain period of time. Three years ago, decisions and licenses for the collection of four tons of truffles were issued to some twenty companies and small business owners, who reported only roughly twenty kilogram of collected truffles. This information proves that illegal trade continues to dominate.

Visible improvements in the legalization of the truffle trade were made since the company *Zigante*² was established and found its place in the catering offer. In this way, more truffles stay in Istria rather than being smuggled to Italy, which helps protecting the image of the Istrian truffle. This was the mostly frequented smuggling route - the smugglers would buy truffles from hunters and sell them to Italy. When asked who those people are, my informant responded: "... they are mostly our people living in the Mirna valley. You can tell them by their houses, which have three floors rather than two, like the houses of ordinary truffle hunters do." In his opinion, nothing changed on the truffle market. Illegal trade was practiced before and is still practiced today.

Police patrols occasionally go their rounds on the truffle hunting-grounds and check licenses, but the problem is that the same offences are differently sanctioned. Since the offenders are from different towns, courts in Pazin, Buzet and Buje will pronounce different sentences for the same offence. An even greater problem is that the maximum fine is trifling compared to how much one can earn. Thus the truffle has still not been given the status of a protected national or natural treasure.

The truffle hunters in the region of Motovun have established a Truffle-Hunters Association, which had about 500 members three years ago. According to estimations, however, around 1000 people were hunting for truffles in the wood of Motovun, which means that only half of them were members of the association and held licenses. The Association has neither authority over the wood of Motovun nor the capability to reverse regulations. It can also not maintain the wood, the gorges and the bridges because this belongs to the scope of authority of the Forestry Office. It is a fact that the demand for the truffle, which became part of the cultural and gastronomic identity of Istria, is growing. It is also a fact that there are no regulations limiting the number of issued truffle-hunting licenses. And it is also a fact that an increasing number of people go truffle-hunting without licenses.

But things are not as gloomy as they seem. Individual districts have nevertheless recognized the relevance of the truffle in their tourist promotion. Motovun district mayor Slobodan Vugrinec stated for *Glas Istre* on January 29, 2003: "The truffle is certainly our biggest natural treasure." He emphasized that the district has supported the establishment of the Istrian Truffle Centre to deal with the research and promotion of the Istrian truffle.

² In 1990, the *Zigante* family has started their truffle trade and processing business, presenting truffles as an authentic product of Istria. Since then, the family business *Zigante CEA trade d.o.o.* has been the only company in Croatia purchasing, processing and canning truffles and selling them on the domestic and international markets.

The truffle-hunters association of the district Kršan "adopted a decision on the need to exclude the truffle habitats from agricultural land", it was reported by Glas Istre of January 21, 2003.

The question is what will happen with truffles in future? The truffle is a seasonal product. It is a fungus procreating by spores. The collection of truffles will not endanger their future existence, as my informants tried to convince me. But I wanted to know whether there is a way to artificially stimulate the growth of truffles, by planting tress, for instance or in another way. They were all of a single opinion that nobody in the world ever managed to artificially cultivate the white truffle. Not even the French, not even the Italians. The truffle, just as the edible bolete, cannot be cultivated.

Then and now - who eats them and where

Truffles were normally sold rather than eaten. Truffle hunters would perhaps keep the small and low-quality truffles and use them to train dogs. Truffles are not a traditionally indigenous food. They are like the best wine, which was always sold, while the mixed-sorts, low-quality wine was left for the hosts.

One of my informants recalls hearing from older people that truffles could be once found in channels, above the ground. They used to prepare them for early lunch as truffle omelette (*fritaja*). He says that it was a very nutritious meal, providing strength for hard work.

I would disagree with this. Just like they never kept the best wine and smoked ham for themselves, they also did not prepare truffles at home when they could earn well by selling them. Another informant confirms my assumptions, saying that he knows how truffle-hunters think because his mother is from Livade and his grandfather was a truffle-hunter. He believes that the truffle-hunters prepared truffles at home if they did not manage to sell them due to unacceptable pricing.

Through its various truffle products such as tartufata, truffles preserved in oil and truffles with mushrooms, the company Zigante made the once prestigious meal now easily available to every household.

Truffles can be also found at folk festivities and food festivals organized to attract off-season tourists. In October, truffle cities such as Buzet and Livade organize truffle days with numerous events such as truffle exhibitions and sales, popular celebrations, bicycle tours, five-a-side football tournaments etc.

The *Subotina* festival in Buzet is of centennial tradition, organized just before or on the first Saturday after the Nativity of the Virgin Mary. For the fifth consecutive year, a big truffle fry (*fritada*) is prepared on that day. Last year, 2003³ eggs, 10 kilograms truffles, 2 kilograms of *tartufat*, 4 kilograms Parmesan cheese, 2 litres truffle oil, 7

³ One egg is added to the *fritada* for each year in which the folk festivity is held.

litres plain oil, 1.5 kilograms of salt and 7 kilograms of butter were prepared in a pan that weighted 1 ton and measured 2.5 meters in diameter. After some forty minutes of frying, the *fritada* was divided into 700 servings that were sold at 35 kuna each. Besides the big *fritada*, the *Subotina* festival also features popular group concerts, fireworks and other events. In this case, a 'newly fledged' gastronomic event merged with a centuries-old festival tradition. Thus the September event also became more attractive to foreign tourists and provided an interesting supplement to the post-season tourist activities.

Truffles with pasta, truffle omelettes or truffles with meat can be found on the menus of agricultural tourism facilities, restaurants and wine-cellar.

As exemplified, the truffle is today easily accessible also to people with lesser spending abilities. It is the wide distribution and accessibility that makes manipulations possible. It has been noticed that some caterers consider the white truffle too expensive for the ordinary guest and resort to cheating - mixing the white and the black truffle⁴, serving black instead of white truffles or serving truffle products. Such cases negatively influence the image of truffles in Istria.

"Istrian Truffle - Tartufo Vero" is a project initiated by the Tourist Community of the Istarska County and the County Tourism Department with the intention to raise the level of the truffle offer. Starting from 2003, plates with inscriptions "Tartufo vero" will be placed on the fronts of ten selected wine-cellar and restaurants,⁵ guaranteeing the visitors that they can taste there high-quality and fresh truffles prepared in an appropriate and quality way. Restaurants and wine cellars were evaluated and selected by a special "gastro-inspection", which checked the quality of preparation and serving truffle dishes across Istria from April to September 2003. The intention of such presentation, following the examples of the Italian region Alba or French truffle regions, is to create preconditions for hosting more affluent tourists from all over the world.

Truffle - a traditional dish?

As already emphasized, truffles, just like smoked ham, are not traditional Istrian food. Smoked ham was served in villages as early lunch to farm hands who came to work, to factory-employed family members who occupied a special status in the family as the highest earners and to guests from the town or was given as present to the doctor, the teacher, etc.

⁴The white autumn truffle (*Tuber magnatum pico*) has a considerably higher value than the black summer truffle (*Tuber aestivum vitt*).

⁵The selected catering establishments are the wine-cellar "Malo selo" in Fratirija, the wine-cellar "Marino" in Kremenje, the wine-cellar "Rino" in Momjan, the restaurant "Igor" in Kaštel, the wine-cellar "Buščina" in Marija na Krasu, the restaurant-wine boutique "Zigante" in Livade, the inn "Toklarija" in Sovinjsko Polje, the wine-cellar "Pod voltom" in Motovun, the inn "Tartuf" in Livade and the restaurant "Vrh" in Vrh.