

Truffles in the Canberra Region



The Truffle Festival - Canberra Region runs throughout the Australian Truffle season (June to August). The festival draws attention to the beautiful winter season experiences available in the Canberra region, highlighting for visitors the seasonality of our local food production and particularly the fresh, high value Black Winter Truffle.

So what are truffles?

Truffles are a fungus and grow under the ground as a result of a symbiotic relationship with the roots of particular trees (e.g. oaks and hazelnuts) infected with the appropriate mycorrhiza (literally, fungus root).

While they were originally confined to the wild, the past century has seen considerable research, particularly in France, in cultivating them as a domestic crop.

The truffles form in summer and slowly mature during autumn, ready to harvest in winter. They can be found breaking the surface of the ground or down to 200 millimetres deep and are best located by a trained dog, from the aroma emitted when ripe.

The truffle then must be assessed by a trained human nose to determine whether it is truly 'ripe' or should be left in the ground for a few days or a week before being harvested. There are many different varieties of truffle available around the world. The Canberra region produces the Black Winter Truffle or Périgord Truffle (*T. melanosporum*).

Truffle aroma: tell me more

The aroma has been isolated by chemists and while it has up to 80 components, the nine primary chemicals were isolated and now fool everyone. It is marketed as 'Truffle Aroma' and is the basis of all truffle oils. There has also been a lot of work done on electronic instruments to sniff truffles and identify them by the aroma. This might assist with quality issues in the future.

What does it taste like?

Some say that if you hold your nose, you will taste nothing. Like many exotic flavours, it can be an acquired taste. And there is the confusion of distinguishing between taste and aroma. Taste on the tongue is the usual sweet, sour, bitter, salty and "umami" (savoury), but the nose is much more discriminatory. Thousands of notes, to a trained nose.

The aroma of *T. melanosporum* is musty and sweet; a very intense mushroom smell overlaid with other notes, especially what wine tasters call "forest floor". It cooperates with the flavours in food, enhancing and intensifying them. A steak with truffle sauce becomes meatier, eggs are transformed into a gourmet item, and every aspect of the meal becomes more satisfying.

Where are truffles grown in Australia?

Truffles grow in a wide variety of soils and climates within Australia, with production currently coming from the south of Western Australia, many areas in NSW and the ACT, many parts of Victoria and, of course, in Tasmania where the first truffle plantations were developed in the early 1990s.

There are also plantations in South Australia and Queensland, however some of these plantations are yet to commence significant production.

A quick guide to using truffle in your cooking

- Truffles go with anything as they are a flavour enhancer (they contain glutamic acid!) and have the 'umami', or savoury taste.
- Truffles go well with simple dishes involving eggs, mushrooms, chicken, pasta, potatoes, risotto, Jerusalem artichokes, celeriac etc.
- Truffles have a great affinity for fats, any fats, which retain the aroma.
- If shaving truffle, they should be shaved as thinly as possible, as the greater the surface area exposed, the greater the aroma from the truffle serving.
- Truffle shavers (available from www.trufflegrowers.com.au) show the texture and marbling of slices. Microplanes are also useful for some dishes. Both are economical in serving truffle. Julienne or whole truffles are also options.

Storing truffles

- Truffles are best stored in the refrigerator in a large jar, each wrapped in a paper towel to prevent them getting wet. Truffles lose moisture (weight) and aroma continually.
- If they grow a little white mould, brush it off under running cold water and dry the truffle before replacing it in the fridge.
- Store the truffles with fresh eggs (any eggs!) in the large jar and the yolks will be infused with the truffle aroma, excellent coddled, in omelettes, scrambled, for making sauces and dishes that can be lightly cooked.
- Truffles continue to lose their aroma following harvest and are best used within three weeks.
- Truffle stored as suggested above will keep longer but the aroma will continue to decline.
- Truffles can be preserved by snap freezing (minus forty degrees), but will only have a fraction of the aroma of fresh truffle. They must then be kept, used or shaved frozen as they become rubbery on thawing.

Remember ...

- All truffle oil is synthetic and does not taste anything like FRESH truffle.
- **TRUFFLES ARE SEASONAL AND FRESH IS BEST!**

