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TRAVEL

Fantastic forage: On the truffle hunt in northern Croatia



ALYSSA SCHWARTZ, SPECIAL TO NATIONAL POST | Nov 17, 2012 11:00 AM ET
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In Motovun, far from the more popular Dalmatian coast, olives and grapes are plentiful, but it's the white truffles that draw knowledgeable gourmands from all over. Alyssa Schwartz

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It was one of those rare occasions when the reality was better than I ever dreamed: After setting a platter heaped with Italian antipasto — tomato bruschetta and crostini topped with chicken liver pâté and creamy baccala, and carpaccio draped in Parmesan



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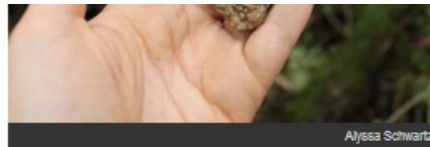
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— in the centre of our table, our waiter donned a cotton glove, plucked a white truffle the size of a walnut off another plate, and began to shave it all over our appetizers. After a while, he reappeared with a new dish, this one heaped with two kinds of pasta and risotto made with red wine and radicchio. And out came the truffle once again.



It wasn't shaved precisely, the way you'd expect an ingredient so precious to be treated, but indiscriminately — paper-thin discs, with pale rims and a creamy, marbled, rosy-taupe inside, landed in piles on our food and also on the plate all around it. I'm ashamed to admit we treated that truffle casually, too. For a while, we savoured each bite, but there was far more food than we could manage, and we allowed the waiter to take that plate, still dotted with excess truffles, back into the kitchen and out of our lives forever.

The problem is — and it's not a bad problem to have — it was our third day in Istria, the peninsula in northwest Croatia (not far from Italy and Slovenia) where truffles grow — along with olives that get pressed into rich, peppery small-batch oils and wine grapes, the end product of which have stealthily been earning some major accolades at places like the Decanter World Wine Awards in London. Suffice it to say, we'd been eating well.

It was the white truffle that lured me to this part of Croatia, far from the Dalmatian beaches most popular with North American visitors. About a year ago someone I knew mentioned it was possible to go truffle hunting here, so a friend and I hatched a plan to go, one of those "wouldn't it be amazing if ..." dreams that somehow came together just weeks before we flew to Zagreb. From there, it was a three-hour drive to the heart of Croatian truffle country.

The truffle hunting was that morning. We'd spent the previous night in Motovun, a tiny medieval town atop a high hill in the Istrian hinterland. We arrived after dinner, driving up the village's lone, steep cobblestoned road in the dark. In the morning, fog in the valley made us feel like we were among just a handful of people on an ancient island; as the mist thinned, we could see Motovun forest, where white and black truffles grow in dense grey mud among the roots of oak and hazelnut trees. It's about a 20-minute drive from Motovun to Paladini, the small village where Karlic Tartufi, a family-run truffle operation, is located. While the Karlic family — Radmila and Goran and their children — mostly make a living foraging for truffles that they use in cheese, pâtés and other products sold at about 400 restaurants and shops around Croatia, they also take visitors into the forest to forage for the coveted tubers themselves.

We're greeted with heaping plates of Radmila's cheese, made from cow's milk and speckled with black truffles, along with truffled salami, honey, olive oil and canapés of truffle cream cheese crowned with black truffle shavings. Before we dig in, Radmila brings out a cloth-lined basket filled with white and black truffles — some of the black ones are the size of my fist — and gives us a quick primer on the two (whites appear in the fall and early winter, while black truffles grow year-round; though tasty, the blacks lack the intense flavour and aroma that make white truffles so unusual — and expensive). Once we've sampled her goodies at wooden benches in Karlic's open-air stone kitchen, Radmila brings over a massive platter of fritaja, a local specialty that consists of gooey scrambled eggs (there are at least eight eggs on the plate), mixed with chopped black truffles and Parmesan cheese. This being the first truffle meal of the day, we clean the plate.

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After breakfast, Radmila's son, Ivan, loads two of the family's truffle-sniffing dogs — both female mutts (the males can't stay focused, he says) — into his car and we follow him down the road into the forest. Truffle hunting, it turns out, is a lot like taking the dogs to an off-leash park. Ivan lets them run this way and that as they sniff out truffle gold. There's a lot of false excitement — the first time Crno, one of the dogs, starts digging, I hold my breath while Ivan lays on the ground next to her

and urges, "sho sho sho," ("come on, come on, come on"). When it turns out to be a false alarm, I literally yelp from disappointment.

Later, I'm bringing up the rear with a newlywed couple from Toronto (they'd been out foraging for black truffles earlier that morning and the Karlics invited them to come along with us to hunt whites), when we spot a spray of dirt arching through the air, one of the dogs digging furiously through the mud. We call for Ivan who races over and pulls the dog away by her collar. "S-t," he swears in English: She's already taken a chomp. While we hold the dogs away, Ivan works with several tools of varying size and delicacy — even a nail brush. It takes him about 15 minutes of careful work to spring the truffle loose. "I want to see what this guy looks like already," says Lani, one of our new Torontonian friends, hopping lightly as we crowd around watching Ivan scrape at the dirt.



When he finally releases it, the truffle is only about two inches long, but its aroma is so strong I can smell it several feet away. The dogs jump frantically as we photograph the fungus, desperate for another taste. Ivan estimates that one stolen bite was 30 grams, or about \$30 worth. Later, we find another truffle no bigger than a pencil eraser, and Ivan feeds it to one of the dogs.

The hunting wasn't hard work — for us anyway — but by the time we wrapped up (total haul: three white truffles, not bad considering that a summer drought has resulted in the worst season in years; often the Karlics go three or four days in a row without finding one) we were sweaty and covered in mud. There's no better way to work up an appetite for that dreamy white truffle lunch back in Motovun at Konoba Mondo, which the New York Times once called "the best little restaurant you may never reach."

Going easy on the pasta means room for dessert, panna cotta that was sufficiently delicate to let truffles — this time in the form of a generous pour of white truffle honey — dominate.

By the time we packed up and left Motovun the next morning, the hunt, the meal, all of it, seemed so wondrous, I felt I must have imagined it. Those are some magic mushrooms indeed.

IF YOU GO

- Motovun is located three hours by car from Zagreb, or an hour from Pula, the nearest airport. Accommodations are scarce, but there's a boutique hotel, Kastel (hotel-kastel-motovun.hr/), B&B Villa Borgo, and apartment rentals.
- Karli Tartufi: karlictartufi.hr Truffle hunting tours are available by reservation; 65 euro per person or 50 euro per person for groups of four, including breakfast.
- Konoba Mondo: White truffle dishes start at 125 kuna, or about CAD\$21, extra white truffles are 105 kuna (\$18). Open Monday, Wednesday and Sunday, reservations recommended. Phone +385 52 681 791, email klaudio@sundance.hr

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