

## Truffle trance

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In an age where everything can essentially be formulated in a lab, white truffle is a prized food item that can only be foraged by pigs, and increasingly now by dogs, in the woods of the Piedmont region of northern Italy.

Chef de cuisine Eugenio Iraci of The Mistral (Tel: 2731-2870) at the InterContinental Grand Stanford has his own way of determining the freshness of the precious fungi.

"When you unseal the box of white truffles upon their arrival, the aroma should be so intense that it cancels out other thoughts in your mind," he says.

Highlighting the Umbrian black truffle and white Alba truffle, The Mistral is offering a special menu of seven mesmerizing dishes to celebrate this rare delicacy, available until the end of this month. "It is always my dream to have truffles for the first meal of the day," says Iraci.

Served in a ceramic glass in three layers, the warm organic egg sabayon (HK\$168) with mushroom essence and white Alba truffle does have a breakfast feel to it, with the exquisite truffle taste complemented by the harmonious combination of mushroom gravy and creamy sabayon.

The taste of white truffle is mild, subtle and elegant, while the black variety has a distinctive garlicky, musky and woody accent, adds Iraci.

For another dish recommended by Iraci, short ribs are braised in Barolo red wine with lightly caramelized Swiss chard (HK\$488), shallot confit and black truffle. He points out that the spice mix he uses for braising "has quite a kick to it" - nicely complemented by the pungent flavor of black truffle.

Other highlights include handmade egg tagliolini in Piedmont style with white Alba truffle in Parmesan cream sauce (HK\$188) and Jerusalem artichoke cream with snail ragout and black truffle (HK\$168).

Both black and white will be shaved in front of diners for HK\$150 and HK\$120 per gram respectively.

Instead of an a la carte truffle menu, Goccia (Tel: 2167-8181) in Central is offering a "spontaneous gourmet feast" of Alba white truffle with "no menu, no limitation, and no rules" this month only.

Diners can pick any dish from the a la carte menu and enjoy the aroma of the big fresh white truffle being shaved in front of them at HK\$120 per gram, in addition to the cost of each dish.

Executive chef Fabrizio Napolitano explains: "Coffee tastes good by itself, but adding sugar makes the coffee taste even better. It is the same with white truffle and the dishes it is served with. Truffle doesn't

need a special sauce, flavor, or spices; it's best to keep the main ingredients simple in order to bring out the original flavor of the truffle.



"White truffle belongs to the winter; it's a winter ingredient. Therefore I choose other ingredients that are good for winter to go with it," Napolitano says.

Cooked with light and milky cheese, the creamy cheese fondue (HK\$128) is served with some crunchy sauteed porcini mushroom, with thinly sliced white truffle melting gloriously into the hot cheese base.

Vegetarians can choose to enjoy the truffle in a porcini mushroom salad with shaved parmesan cheese (HK\$128) or the green asparagus with poached eggs (HK\$98). The woody flavors of the seasonal ingredients blend in well with each other, says Napolitano.

Truffles are usually found around hardwood trees such as oak, willow and beech. But those growing beneath chestnut trees often have red spots inside, which executive chef Harlan Goldstein of Gold by Harlan Goldstein (Tel: 2869-9986) on Wyndham Street is particularly fond of.

"Truffle doesn't have a strong taste, but has an intense fragrance. The whole excitement of truffle is the smell. Dishes that we have selected for the menu actually help the truffle ignite its full smell and taste," he says.

The earthy, garlicky flavor of white truffle is the high point of Goldstein's Dutch veal cheek (HK\$588), which is slow-cooked for 16 hours in its natural juices and served with cauliflower foam and morel mushrooms.

The white risotto with mascarpone cheese (HK\$488), a personal favorite of the chef, is complemented with fava beans that add a little crunch to the dish.

Additional portions of white truffle can be ordered at HK\$178 per gram.

And if you still can't get enough of these famed fungi during truffle season, take part in the 13th Worldwide White Truffle of Alba Auction.

Benefiting the Changing Young Lives Foundation, this charity event will be held at Castello di Grinzane near Alba, Piedmont, in Italy.

Hong Kong enthusiasts can make their bid through a live internet link-up at Island Tang in Central.

Last year, Hong Kong-based wine critic Jeannie Cho Lee won the auction with a record bid of HK\$1.12 million for a 900-gram white truffle.

Care to be this year's winning bidder?