

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

A Truffle the Size of a Soccer Ball

NOVEMBER 19, 2010, 11:32 AM HKT | AMY MA



8 1/2 Otto e Mezzo Bombana



The 900-gram truffle

8 1/2 Otto e Mezzo Bombana

It's one thing to buy a large white truffle — this year's top prize at the 12th World White Truffle of Alba Auction was a 900-gram truffle that sold for 105,000 euros (US\$142,653) on Nov. 16 to Jeannie Cho Lee, a Hong Kong-based wine expert.

Cooking it is another thing.

And this Sunday, that responsibility will fall to Umberto Bombana, chef and owner of 8 1/2 Otto e Mezzo Bombana in Hong Kong. The chef assures Scene: He isn't nervous.

This isn't the largest truffle Mr. Bombana has ever worked with. In 2006, when he was executive chef at Toscana in Hong Kong's old Ritz-Carlton, Mr. Bombana was entrusted with a 1.5-kilogram truffle purchased by property tycoon Gordon Wu.

Unlike fine wines, which can be stored and aged, a truffle must be consumed while it is fresh — one week is considered the maximum shelf life.

As such, there's pressure to quickly arrange the 900-gram truffle dinner, set for Nov. 21 at Mr. Bombana's restaurant. There, 25 to 30 guests will consume every last bit of the fungus, which is nearly the size of a soccer ball. "I may have to add even more truffles if we run out," says the chef.

How do you prepare a meal worthy of a \$142,653 truffle? Compared with black truffles, the white variety of this fungus has an especially delicate texture; it doesn't stand up to much cooking at all and is usually served freshly shaved on a dish. So Mr. Bombana will spend most of his time preparing dishes to accompany the truffle, rather than cooking with the truffle itself.

The chef has chosen a classic menu for the eight-course dinner: a porcini risotto, an egg ravioli with ricotta cheese and spinach in hazelnut butter, and a roasted veal tenderloin with braised savoy cabbage, Iberico ham and truffle mash potatoes, for example. All will be topped with generous shavings of white truffle. The most inventive truffle dish comes at the end: a dessert of mascarpone and ice cream infused with the last remaining scraps of truffle, with honey and chestnut nougat.

"Lighter meats — like veal — and pastas will not overpower the flavor of the truffle," says Mr. Umberto. No one but the chef will handle the white truffle, due to its immense value. "The most difficult part is cleaning it well, and carefully brushing away the sand," he says.

Another important step — and one of the perks of the job, he adds — is the taste test. "For sure, I will also have to try the truffles in all my dishes," he says.