

NATIVE SOIL

EARTH'S TREASURES

THE SLEEPY TOWN OF SAVIGNO ATTRACTS HUNDREDS OF FOOD LOVERS EVERY OCTOBER FOR ITS PRECIOUS TRUFFLE FESTIVAL.

By Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli



Black truffles have a rich, delicate aroma that enrich traditional recipes, including sauces and condiments.

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF APPENNINO FOOD GROUP



APPENNINO
FOOD

Truffles



Black truffles, native to the Apennines, are versatile and can be enjoyed with a wide variety of Italian dishes.

NATIVE SOIL

“I BEGAN THIS PASSION, I call it a passion because I cannot call it work, at 17-years-old. I wanted to live with nature and be with the animals that I have always loved. The story started in 1985 when I bought a dog. Not just any dog, but a truffle-trained dog, a pointer,” says Signor Luigi Dittilo, owner of Appennino Food Group.

Signor Luigi’s office and production facility are tucked away in Savigno, Valsamoggia, a region in Emilia Romagna, 16 miles southwest of Bologna. The drive from Bologna to Savigno is easy and I know the way by heart. One narrow road winds through rolling hills and endless green pastures where Mother Nature is at her best. Coming to Savigno at the end of October is a tradition for my husband Rino and me. We have been making this food lover’s pilgrimage for 15 years.

Signor Luigi explains how his love for truffles began. “When I first started hunting truffles, I did not sell them. I kept the truffles for my family — my parents and brother. Back then, it was a hobby,” he says.

By 1987, he had opened an office. He began selling truffles to chefs who were “very satisfied with my product and service, and by word of mouth, my business became known,” Signor Luigi adds.

“In 1994, I took a bigger office. My brother, Angelo, eventually joined me and we moved the operation to a larger space and the business grew again. Our objective was to service the restaurant industry with high quality truffles and truffle products. We also expanded the product line with both fresh and frozen mushrooms and other food products made with truffles: truffle oil, truffle cream, truffle salt and truffle butter for chefs,” says Signor Luigi.

The business continued to grow, and today Appennino Food Group employs 50 workers.

“We expanded to the United States and now have an ambassador in Florida and in Singapore,” Signor Luigi says. The company’s goal is to develop a stronger presence in the United States, bring its products to more markets and more chefs, and expand the food education program.

“Most of all, we want to communicate the true meaning of the tartufo, truffle, and educate the food industry on what the truffle is and how to use it correctly in the kitchen. This is an important goal for us. For this reason, we have developed a [digital] application called e-Truffle,” he says.

“The app lets chefs from all over the world enter into our refrigerators, and with a click, select their truffles according to the season, variety, color, ripeness and size. Once they’ve selected their truffles, we ship them directly to their destination in a special packaging that keeps the truffles fresh,” he says.

PHOTO COURTESY OF APPENNINO FOOD GROUP



APPENNINO
FOOD

Truffles

White truffles mature in the fall and are highly prized for their intense flavor.

NATIVE SOIL

Preserving truffles is an art in its own right. “The most important secret lies in the careful selection of fresh truffles matched with the use of advanced technology, which allow full-fledged preservation without damage. Our goal is to always have a final product that satisfies the chef,” he says.

Important players in finding just the right truffles are Signor Luigi’s dogs: Macchia, a truffle-trained pointer, and Pupa, Macchia’s mother.

In addition to Macchia and Pupa, Signor Luigi has a collaboration of more than a thousand truffle hunters, each with their own truffle-trained pointer dog. The bond between the truffle hunter and their dog is indescribable.

“In Italy, we exclusively use the pointer dogs when we hunt for truffles, unlike in France where they use pigs. It is also illegal to truffle hunt in the dark. The truffle hunters can only go truffle hunting in daylight. This practice respects and protects the forest,” he says.

Besides the dogs, the growing conditions for truffles are important.

“Our region is comprised of a very vast forest area consisting of 50 square kilometers, and that’s important for growing truffles. The ambiance, atmosphere, land, temperature and climate are important elements for growing perfect truffles. The truffle is ipogeo fungo, a mushroom that grows underground. The plant needs a mineral rich soil to help it grow and live,” he says.

Of the many types of truffles harvested, the tartufo bianco, white truffle, is the most famous, and its season starts at the end of October, says Signor Luigi. Other varieties are bianchetto, black winter, black uncinatum and black summer.

“Each year, the truffle production is based on the season’s rain — whether it is a dry summer or not. This factor adds to the growth and dimension of the truffle. A dry summer means the soil is compact and the truffle’s dimensions will be smaller. If there’s been more rain, the soil is loose, not compacting the truffle, and the size will be bigger,” he says.

When I ask Signor Luigi his favorite recipe with truffles, he responds, “Egg. Egg is the principal ingredient that goes well with the tartufo, especially if it’s a tartufo bianco, white truffle. No matter how you make an egg with truffle, the most important thing is to keep the yolk liquid. Pasta goes well with truffles, too. I love tagliatelle, made thin and prepared with lots of butter and truffles,” he says.

He points to a basket of truffles, calling them “Earth’s treasures.”

I agree with Signor Luigi. “They are truly nature’s beauties. A day in the forest, the scent of the soil, and keeping up with Macchia — it works up an appetite,” I tell him. I hold up a truffle. “Thanks to Macchia!”

TRUFFLE NOTES

White Truffle (*Tuber Magnatum Pico*)

The most sought-after truffle of all, truly the king of the woods. It matures in our woodland in autumn. Intense with unmistakable flavor, it is shaved into wafer-thin slices to make even the simplest dishes truly luxurious.

Bianchetto Truffle (*Tuber albidum Pico*)

A lesser variety of white truffle, available in late winter and at the beginning of spring. It has a strong and distinctive personality, with an intense flavor profile.

Black Winter Truffle (*Tuber Melanosporum*)

The black truffle par excellence is native to the Apennines, where it grows abundantly throughout the winter. It is a more versatile ingredient and lends itself to any dish, minced or shaved wafer-thin.

Black Uncinatum (*Tuber Uncinatum*)

This truffle is distinguished by its large size and warm hazelnut aroma. It grows in autumn throughout the Apennines, and it is best savored in wafer-thin shavings or else minced to enrich sauces and condiments.

Black Summer Truffle (*Tuber Aestivum Vitt.*)

The most common woodland treasure, but no less flavorful for it. This truffle abounds in the Apennines in summer months. It is widely used to enhance traditional recipes with its fresh, delicate aroma.

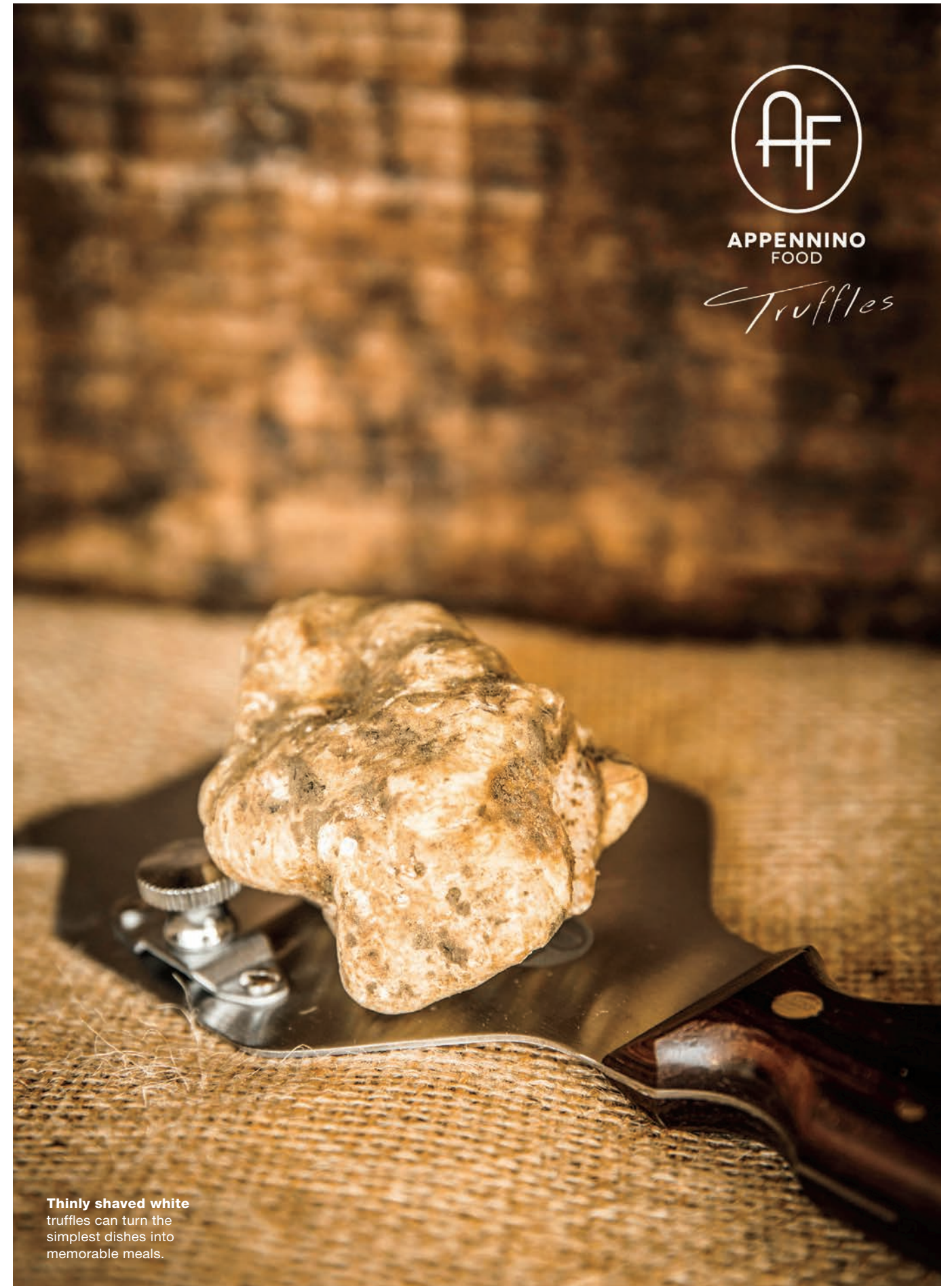
Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli is founder and owner of Cooking Vacations Italy which specializes in culinary tours, hands-on cooking classes and cultural adventures in Italy. www.cooking-vacations.com; (617) 247-4112.



Black and white truffles from the Appennino Food Group are available fresh, frozen and preserved.



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF APPENNINO FOOD GROUP



APPENNINO
FOOD

Truffles

Thinly shaved white truffles can turn the simplest dishes into memorable meals.