



The town of Motovun, where Istria's rolling landscapes evoke Tuscany.  
Credit Andy Haslam for The New York Times

## Truffles in Paradise. (And It's Not Italy.)

Heads Up By JOJI SAKURAI  
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“Go Nero!” Nikola Tarandek, a truffle hunter, urged on his black Labrador, who scratched furiously at the moist soil of Motovun Forest in Croatia. We were in the hinterlands of [Istria](#), a diamond-shaped peninsula that juts into the Adriatic Sea, exploring one of the richest grounds for premium white truffles — long overshadowed in fame but not quality by the truffle mecca of Alba in the Piedmont region of Italy. Nero had caught the scent at the roots of an oak, sending up clumps of dirt as Mr. Tarandek twisted a spade into the black earth.

The commotion yielded only a tiny tuber that wasn't even worth taking back to town. Other truffles that Nero sniffed out turned up spoiled. But it was just the beginning of the season, and within weeks Mr. Tarandek, who runs a side-business taking visitors on **truffle-hunting tours**, would be bringing fist-sized truffles home to market.

Truffles are considered an expensive delicacy in some places, but that is not the case here. And while the Istrian truffle is premium grade, its culture is free of the snobbery, intrigue and astronomical prices found in Piedmont or in the Perigord region of France.

It's as if Istrian truffles have been a well-kept secret, ripe for discovery. And that's beginning to happen with stronger efforts to promote them. The international food world is starting to take notice, with visits to Istrian truffle country increasing every year.

It may seem surprising that a delicacy associated with Italy and France is found in Croatia's dense oak forests, but truffles have been hunted here for centuries. Istrian truffles have maintained a low profile largely because those from Alba enjoy such cachet.



Nikola Tarandek, a truffle hunter, with his dogs, which hunt with him.  
Credit Andy Haslam for The New York Times

And there's another reason: Croatian truffles have for decades made their way to the Italian market and been sold as Alba truffles. Locals say that has translated into little incentive to make their product famous, since hunters earn so much supplying Italy in a shady trade made possible by Istria's proximity to Piedmont.

That's been changing in the last decade. The night before my truffle hunt I was dining at [Mondo Tavern](#) in the village of Motovun, which commands spectacular views on a hilltop overlooking the truffle forest.

The owner, Klaudio Ivasic, said locals are awakening to the benefits of keeping truffles at home. Until recent years, Motovun's tourist season ended in August. As truffle fame has grown, the season is extending through November. "People are coming for the truffles," Mr. Ivasic said proudly.



White truffles found by Nero, a Labrador, in Motovun, Croatia.  
Credit Andy Haslam for The New York Times

For travelers, the attractions of an Istrian truffle tour are plentiful. Istria's rolling landscapes evoke Tuscany; its beaches are among the Mediterranean's most beautiful; cliffs are dotted with fairy-tale villages — and a truffle meal won't burn a hole through your wallet.

At Mondo, a man started shaving a white truffle over my plate of Istrian "fuzi," short pasta. I expected him to stop after a couple of seconds, but he kept going. A heavenly aroma filled the room. The flakes drifted down until my pasta was buried in a white truffle mantle. This dish, which in Milan would easily cost 40 euros (and in New York or London don't even think about it), is priced here at a reasonable 155 Croatian kuna, or 20 euros (\$22).

Mr. Ivasic, himself a truffle hunter, said the dry summer and rainy September had been ideal for white truffles, and that this season could be the best in a decade, although "truffles are a mystery." In the morning, Mr. Tarandek was less optimistic, and it was understandable. He had been seeking truffles for two hours, to no avail. "Too early in the season," he mumbled.



Fuzi with white truffle shavings from Mondo Tavern in Motovun, Croatia.  
Credit Andy Haslam for The New York Times

Suddenly Nero started barking frantically by the roots of a poplar. His owner dropped to his knees, cutting at roots so his dog could dig deeper. “Come down close to the hole,” Mr. Tarandek beckoned, “and SMELL!” I was then on hands and knees, sinking my face into a muddy crater — just like a truffle-hunting dog — and a blast of truffle hit my nose. Is this the jackpot? Mr. Tarandek shook his head. “Oh no, it’s a small truffle,” he said, “but a good one.”

He continued cutting at roots to extract the puny but precious truffle — and stopped. A stream of invective poured from his lips. The yellowish fleck he had found poking from the dirt was only the tip of a much larger prize.

“I have destroyed the truffle,” he groaned, displaying the chunk he had broken off. “Ohhhhhh my God. That was sooooo big a truffle!”

Hunters command top dollar only for intact truffles. With one careless flick Mr. Tarandek had lost up to 300 euros. But soon he’d seen the brighter side of things, for this meant truffle season was starting in earnest.

“Lucky day,” he said. “Now I have motivation.”

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