

## Dazzling the Palate

Some call Alba the gourmet capital of Italy — and for good reason.

By Nick Passmore

★ It was October in Piemonte, Italy, and that meant truffles.

Specifically, the most prized and expensive of these strange, alluring fungi: the white Alba truffle. It was why I had come to this region in northwest Italy, known in English as Piedmont, and my pilgrimage was rewarded the very first evening with a near-religious gastronomic experience.

A small group of us dined at Antica Corona Reale, a 158-year-old restaurant in Cervere, near the town of Alba. We were guests of Michele Chiarlo, proprietor of the winery bearing his name, and his wine-maker son, Stefano.

Our first course was a dish of delicate tagliatelle and porcini in a veal broth, topped with wafer-thin shavings of truffle and accompanied by the Chiarlo Gavi di Gavi Rovereto 2010. Gavi is normally considered nothing more than a pleasant quaffing white, but this version was special. It came from a single vineyard and had more than enough gravitas to stand up to the rich pasta.

The high point of the meal, however, was the

*l'uovo in concotte con tartufo*

*bianco* — an egg

poached in a sauce of

cream and fontina

cheese from the

Valle d'Aosta,

a mountainous

region just north

of Piemonte. At the



table, more truffles were shaved over the concotte. This miraculous concoction was accompanied by the velvety, polished Michele Chiarlo Cerequio Barolo Riserva 2006. True indulgence! So mesmerizing was this culinary magic that it banished all lingering jet lag and reduced the previously chattering table to reverential silence.

While these creations were exceptional, the pairing of truffles and wine speaks to the very heart, not to mention the stomach, of Piemonte. And over the last generation, the two are responsible for transforming the region.

Demand for Piemonte's wine and truffles has fueled an influx of cash and tourism. Roads that 50 years ago still carried horse-drawn carts are now clogged with BMWs and Audis.

On the morning after our revelatory dinner, the skies were murky and gray. But the dull light

**From top:** vineyards and country house in Italy's Piemonte region and a white Alba truffle

PHOTOS (FROM TOP): SIMÉ/ISTOCK PHOTO AND COURTESY OF TARTUFLANGHE SRL



couldn't mask the beauty of the rolling, vine-covered hills. These days, those vines yield riches undreamed of by the current owners' grandfathers, who long labored in poverty to produce common table wine deemed fit only for local consumption.

The story of the Michele Chiarlo wine operation epitomizes the region's evolution. Michele's father and grandfather were simple grape growers. But in 1956 his father took the radical step of bottling his own wine.



The operation grew and prospered so that today the annual production consists of 24 different cuvees, 100,000 cases in all. That's over a million bottles. And his story is not unique. In Piemonte, as in Tuscany, producers realized in the 1970s and 80s that there was real money to be made from high-end

**Michele Chiarlo  
Cerequio Barolo  
Riserva 2006**

wine that appealed to the international market. Winemakers started focusing on quality rather than quantity and changed their production methods accordingly.

Truffles have experienced similar growth. Domenica Bertolusso, proprietor of TartufLanghe, the largest truffle wholesaler and retailer in Piemonte, has seen international demand for truffles soar. "German and Swiss tourists were the first to discover Alba and its gastronomy," she says. "Then about twenty years ago Americans started coming to Alba and discovering the food and the wine. Now we have new markets in Brazil, China, and Hong Kong."

Pietro Giovannini, a wine and food writer based in Alba, attributes the truffle's increasing popularity to the culture of the celebrity chef. "There is more spectacle, more show in food these days," he says. "Now chefs become stars. And the truffle has become more popular than ever."

Giovannini also points out an unfortunate twist to all this prosperity. The popularity of the region's wines — the Barolos and Barbarescos, Dolcettos and Gavis — has led to more and more new vineyards, which have replaced some of the woods that provide a habitat for truffles.

But not all of them. One evening

**OUR HAUL, A HALF-DOZEN MEDIUM-SIZE TRUFFLES, WAS PUT TO GOOD USE THE NEXT DAY.**

after dinner we went out truffle hunting. Roberto, a Chiarlo employee, and his dog, Licu, led the expedition. Roberto's weathered face bore a huge, constant grin until he got down to the business of seeking truffles; then it turned serious with concentration.

Carrying flashlights, we worked along a rutted track with vineyards on one side and scrubby woods on the other. Occasionally Licu would scratch excitedly at the hard, dry soil — it had been a dry fall, not good for the truffle harvest — and Roberto would restrain him with one hand while using the other to gently probe the ground with a trowel. If he was lucky, he unearthed one of the knurled gastronomic gems.

Our haul, a half-dozen medium-size truffles, was put to good use the next day.

We "helped" — really watched and tasted — as Mariuccia Ferrero, owner of Ristorante San Marco in Canelli, prepared a series of traditional Piemonte dishes.

There was *bagna cauda*, a sauce of

PHOTOS (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): SIMÉ/ISTOCK PHOTO (2) AND COURTESY OF MICHELE CHIARLO

garlic, anchovies, and milk cooked in multiple, complex stages and then served with raw veggies. There was a decadent fondue made with Bettelmatt, a rare cheese with a sharp tang.

The truffles came into play in a dish of deceptive simplicity: a plate of tagliatelle, drizzled with olive oil and topped with the previous evening's harvest. It was perfection with the Chiarlo Barolo Tortoniano 2008, a red wine with mellow earth tones.

The Alba truffle has a delicate flavor that disappears entirely when cooked. The magic lies in its distinctive, intense aroma, so it is grated in wafer-thin slices over simple foods, which serve as a vehicle for the pungent fungus. Some people prefer pasta or rice, others a cheese sauce, but for Alberto Chiarlo, head of sales and marketing for the family company, it's eggs. "The best way to eat truffles is on eggs, especially when they are set on a bed of chopped, sautéed porcini, and topped with shaved truffles," he says.

Sounds perfect for brunch. I wonder where I can find it in America. ★

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*Nick Passmore is a contributing editor.  
His website is [nickonwine.com](http://nickonwine.com).*

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## ***When in Alba . . .***

### ***Where to Buy Truffles***

#### **TARTUFLANGHE**

Catena Rossa 7, 12040 Piobesi d'Alba  
[tartuflanghe.com](http://tartuflanghe.com)

#### **RATTI ELIO**

Via Vittorio Emanuele, 12051 Alba

### ***Where to Eat***

#### **ANTICA CORONA REALE**

Via Fossano 13, Cervere  
[anticacoronareale.com](http://anticacoronareale.com)

#### **RISTORANTE BOVIO**

Via Alba 17, 12064 La Morra  
[ristorantebovio.it](http://ristorantebovio.it)

#### **RISTORANTE SAN MARCO**

Via Alba 136, Canelli  
[sanmarcoristorante.it](http://sanmarcoristorante.it)

### ***Where to Stay***

#### **PALAS CEREQUIO,**

#### **BAROLO CRU RESORT**

Borgata Cerequio, 12064 La Morra  
[palascerequio.it](http://palascerequio.it)