

IT'S Truffle TIME!



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Truffles are in season. Rejoice!

Bewitchingly delicious, their haunting, earthy-mushroomy redolence adds intrigue to savory cuisine. Exquisitely rare, they must be foraged wild or painstakingly cultivated. And they're phenomenally expensive—one ounce of prized white truffle will set you back about \$200.

But they're expensive for a reason. Truffles are fiercely difficult to procure, foraged by truffle-hunters, alongside trained dogs. Even cultivation is no guarantee of fortune, as it can take a plantation—a *truffière* in French—up to ten years to come online.

The price is also due to truffles' prized flavor. Nearly ineffable, it's variously described as musky, funky, nutty, garlicky, sweaty, cocoa-y, pungent, earthy, animal. Sounds weird, but it's really just weirdly compelling, a flavor you want to taste again and again. And since it shares a chemical kinship with human pheromones, it's no wonder the effect is so lusty—and so confusing.

Wilfried Bergerhausen, Executive Chef at Le Cirque in Las Vegas, knows that must-taste-it-again obsession. "People really enjoy white truffle, and once they eat it, they always want more," he says. His truffle tasting menu offers diners the option to (try to) get their fill. "We actually leave the truffle on the table and they can shave it as they like."

Fortunately, eating truffle again and again is what you must do when you've managed to get your hands on one. Even under the best storage conditions, they lose 5% of their weight each day as their moisture evaporates, aromatics spiriting disappointingly into the ether of your fridge. Within ten days they'll have lost 40 percent of their mass and be no more exciting than a handful of wrinkled button mushrooms—that cost \$3,200 per pound.

Truffles are mushrooms, of course, the fruiting body of a fungus that spends its lifecycle underground, locked in a symbiotic relationship with an oak, hazelnut, poplar or other tree. The tree feeds

Executive Chef Wilfried Bergerhausen of Le Cirque in Las Vegas offers a truffle tasting menu designed to celebrate the unique flavor of fresh white truffles.





White truffles are the perfect savory topper for this gorgeous sunchoke soup at Le Cirque in Las Vegas.

the truffle carbohydrates, and the truffle feeds the tree minerals, its vast, threadlike mycorrhizae network pumping nutrients into the tree's root system.

This symbiosis proves especially helpful in poor, calcareous soils of the truffle's native habitats. White truffles (*Tuber magnatum*) hail from Italy, most famously Alba in Piedmont, and are harvested from late fall through early winter. They look a bit like lumpy potatoes—"truffle" derives from the Latin word for tuber—with a knobby taupe exterior and a mottled center like creamy pink marble.

Black, or Périgord, truffles (*Tuber melanosporum*) are native to eastern France, and like the white, hit markets in late fall. Slicing through their coarse, nubby black surface reveals chocolaty brown flesh marbled with white.

European summer truffles (*Tuber aestivum*) and Burgundy truffles (*Tuber uncinatum*)—actually proven to be the same species—are milder tasting and cheaper than their aristocratic rivals. Truffles of all types are also cultivated now in Oregon, New Zealand, Australia, Chile and South Africa.

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Adventuresome cooks can purchase truffles fresh in season from gourmet shops and online merchants, buying as little as a half an ounce at a time. Truffle oil, truffle salt, truffle butter, truffle cheese, truffle honey—truffle whatever—also populate the markets, but caveat emptor: Most are made with a synthetic truffle flavoring. One exception is truffle vodka, almost invariably made with the real deal, as alcohol proves a perfect medium for truffle's funky deliciousness (see sidebar). The spirit adds savory flare to cocktails and reduction sauces.

Handle all truffles delicately, advises Chef Wilfried. "The white truffle is very different from the black truffle. It's much more fragrant. It doesn't have as much bite. You're not going to cook a white truffle; you're going to slice it very thin and raw almost every time."

Black truffles are beefier, and heat actually boosts flavor. "Black truffle is very, very different—more mushroomy. You can cook it, then you can deglaze with some wine," he says. "You can do much more."

If you're new to the taste, Chef Wilfried says to keep it simple. Try thin shavings of white truffle over pasta, risotto, eggs or potatoes—mild bases that showcase the flavor. Or try a truffle risotto like one he has on the menu at Le Cirque, dressed with a tiny splash of white balsamic vinegar, "to brighten the whole thing and make the truffle shine even more," he says.

Truffles are a luxury, but a little goes a long way. And unlike foie gras, dry-aged beef and caviar, it's one luxury vegetarians and vegans can enjoy.

Can you overdo it? "I don't know!" laughs Chef Wilfried. "I don't think there's ever too much truffle." ■**cr**

Truffles in the Glass

When Paul Amin planted 10,000 truffle trees and was rewarded with an overabundance of black Périgord truffles, he knew he needed to get creative with this abundance of flavorful tubers, so he chopped them up, stuck them in a bottle of vodka and forgot about it. When he rediscovered the bottle three weeks later, the liquid had turned inky black, and all of the flavor and color from the truffles had been absorbed into the spirit.

Thus, Black Moth Vodka was born, unlike any other infused vodka on the market. With a pronounced umami note balanced by light sweetness, Black Moth Vodka is an incredible cocktail base, shining in both sweet and savory cocktails, and even makes a classed-up Bloody Mary.

The Swine's Sacrifice

by Derick Baumgartner,
Lago at Bellagio, Las Vegas

- 1½ oz. Black Moth Vodka
- 4 oz. "pig's blood" (fire-roasted tomatoes, onions and birds-eye chilis blended together)

Garnish with truffle bacon or truffle celery and smoked salt.

