

Truffles and Oysters and Wine, Oh My!

By Kristin Vuković

Ivica Kalček was impatient; it was his 52nd birthday, and we were late. Not to his party, but for a truffle hunting expedition in the Livade forest of Motovun, Croatia. Mr. Kalček was dressed for the excursion in rubber boots and a hunting vest, holding the leashes of his three eager dogs: German Bloodhounds Biba and Jackie, and Bobby, an English Setter still in training to hunt truffles. Kalček told us that the best time to search for truffles is sunrise or sundown, because the dogs don't pant from the heat and it is easier for them to use their noses to find the truffle scent. "Croatian truffles have a stronger aroma than Italian truffles," he said in Croatian, smiling proudly.

Continued on Page 88



Istria

Continued from Page 86

Three American journalists and I accompanied Kalček and our Istria tour guide, Ozzi, into the forest. After only fifteen minutes of walking through the brush, Biba found a truffle. Kalček inspected it. “It’s black, so not worth as much as a white truffle, and it’s also damaged,” he said. There are four qualities that determine the grade of a truffle: shape, freshness, fragrance and texture. He held a truffle the size of a ping-pong ball for us to smell; the odor was strong and musty. I wondered how long it takes a truffle to mature. It turns out no one knows how long a truffle grows underground, or why the sizes of truffles differ so dramatically—big or small, the truffle releases an odor when it is ripe, and the dogs pick up the scent and dig for it. Kalček’s eyes flickered. “The truffle decides when it wants to be found,” he said.

Fifteen minutes later we found another black truffle; this one was not damaged. At this rate, I was starting to think there was good money in truffles, but Kalček told me he earns 20-30,000 Euros in a good year (approximately \$30-40,000). He supplements his income with a farm. He has nine horses and over a hundred goats and sheep, from whose milk they produce cheese, as well as twenty beehives that yield honey. This multitasking man also plays the harmonica at events in neighboring towns, and was a singer until he injured his voice. He still finds time to compose music.

It was getting dark and Kalček didn’t want to be late for his birthday party, where all of the dishes included, appropriately, truffles. As we exited the forest, he grumbled about needing to wake up early the next day. Every day, Kalček wakes up at 4 a.m. to hunt truffles, and goes out again at 5 p.m. “Truffles don’t let you rest,” he sighed.

That same day, we were lucky to stumble on a truffle exhibition in the medieval city Grožnjan, where the Don of Truffles, Mr. Giancarlo Zigante, was selling his harvest. Zigante is famous for finding the Guinness World Record’s biggest truffle ever, weighing nearly three pounds. Zigante’s display featured white truffles, or Tuber Magnatum Pico, the biggest and most respected variety, priced on the market from hour to hour because of their rarity. When we visited Istria on September 27, 2009, white truffles were pricing at 2,000-3,500 Euros per kilogram (or 2.2 pounds). The year before they were pricing at 5,000 Euros per kg. due to a drought. *Continued on Page 90*



Istria

Continued from Page 88

Truffles of the fungal variety aren't the only sought-after culinary gems in Istria. Truffle oysters, or "tartufa ostriga" in Croatian, must also be dug for—under the seabed. Emil Sošić runs an oyster farm on the Limski Canal. He took over the business when his brother died in an auto crash. As he pried open oysters for us to taste, he told us about the youngsters who sometimes come to steal oysters, stashing them in empty scuba tanks. "A kilo of oysters is approximately 17 Euros," he said. "I sell the most oysters to restaurants in summer, and sometimes barely break even." For Sošić, running his late brother's business is a labor of love. "You don't get into this business to make big profits," he said. "You do it because of family."

Another profession that requires a labor of love is winemaking. Kabola Vineyards in Momjan, Istria has been producing wine since 1891 and is one of four vintners in the world that make wine "in amfora," which is an ancient Roman method of producing wine. The amphora is a ceramic vessel with a pointed base, allowing it to be easily stored in sand or soft ground. Wine is stored in amphorae and buried underground for seven months, then dug up and transferred into oak barrels to ferment for another full year. The process is laborious, but the Markežić family considers it part of their distinctive style of winemaking. "We are very proud to be one of the premier producers of Malvazija wine in Croatia," Markežić's wife told us. Seventy percent of the wines produced in Istria are derived from the Malvazija grape. The grape is native to the Mediterranean region with ancient origins, and wine produced from these grapes is used for Kabola's famous "Amfora Malvazija," which is golden, more full-bodied and richer in complexity than Malvazija fermented in barrels.

It was only appropriate that we end the day with truffles and Malvazija. For dinner, Ozzi took us to Zigante's renowned truffle restaurant in Livade. A golden replica of the Guinness Book of World Records truffle Zigante found with his dog Diana in the Motovun woods in 1999 graced the entryway. Every course had shaved truffles, even the dessert. White truffles are an aphrodisiac, and Ozzi joked that I should be careful, as I was the only woman at the table. On a more serious note, he explained that Istria County was working to become a gastronomy destination, and truffles were a large draw. Land of "the green and the blue," this large triangular peninsula jutting into the Adriatic offers treasures from both sea and earth, making it one of the most desired destinations in the country. "This part of Croatia has everything," Ozzi said. As I savored my truffle ice cream and sipped my glass of Muscat, I couldn't have agreed with him more.

