

Foraging for Your Dinner

Story and photos by Tracy Beard

Oregon Truffle Festival unleashes primal excitement

The forest yields delicacies that nourish and delight us. The Pacific Northwest's rich variety of plants, herbs, and mushrooms can fill or enhance your dinner plate. In the distant past, the only way to dine on foods from the forest was to gather them yourself. But as societies grew more agricultural and communities became more established, farmers' markets began selling these treasures. Today, most local grocery and specialty stores routinely stock a variety of these forest finds.

No reason to miss out on these mouthwatering treats

Whether or not you have the skills, knowledge, or desire to venture into the forest and safely collect your own edible treats, you can put together a woodland feast without trudging through the trees, by simply making a quick stop at the local grocery store or farmers' market, or even by ordering them



online. There is something primal and exciting about foraging for your own food, however, and those who hunt and gather have experienced that special sense of satisfaction and enjoyed the tasty rewards.

One highly sought-after forest fungi is the elusive truffle. Connoisseurs around the world continuously work to perfect the art of acquiring and farming the mycorrhizal fungi. Traditionally found in France, Italy, and other European countries, truffles are also discovered in various areas throughout the US. These truffles are referred to as "Oregon Truffles."

Truffles grow completely underground and when ripe emit a gas that pigs and dogs easily detect. People in the US have been foraging for these truffles for several

years; but because they used rakes to gather the truffles instead of trained animals, the truffles were sold before they were ripe, giving US truffles a bad name. An unripe truffle is like an unripe tomato — there is little or no taste. Today, more educated truffle hunters are using trained dogs to forage, and those truffles are gaining international notoriety.

Oregon Truffle Festival

For the past 13 years, truffle lovers from around the world have gathered to celebrate the fungi at the Oregon Truffle Festival. The festival promotes native culinary truffles in Oregon's Willamette Valley and is composed of a series of

events throughout Willamette Valley — truffle dog training, a marketplace for truffle products, educational forums, and a multitude of dining experiences. I was privileged to attend the 2018 festival in January.

The Truffle MacDown featured more than a dozen chefs, each one creating their own truffle dish for more than 200 guests. Several wine, cider, and beer selections were available for tasting. The Grand Truffle Dinner featured a scrumptious, six-course indulgence of truffle delights prepared by chefs from Portland, Seattle, and Chicago, perfectly paired with sparkling wine, local wines, and a tasty brown sugar bourbon from Heritage Distilling Co.

The food and drink throughout the festival was tantalizing and euphoric, but the highlight of the weekend was when I spent a morning in the woods foraging for truffles (see photos, above).

The work of freelance writer and photographer Tracy Beard has been published in many regional, national, and international magazines. Her stories focus on luxury and adventure travel, outdoor activities, spas,

fine dining, and traditional and trendy libations. She attended culinary school in San Francisco, and owned a catering company, adding to her enjoyment and authoritative understanding of food. She lives in Vancouver, Wash.



Professional truffle dog Stella del Tiglio and her owner, Sunny Diaz lead the foragers through the woods in search of "buried treasure."

Ad removed for archival purposes

Foraging for dinner

from page 21

Lagatto is a special breed of dog trained for truffle hunting, and they have replaced most of the traditionally trained pigs, as it is much easier to take a treat from a 30-pound dog than a 150- or 200-pound pig.

I arrived for the hunt dressed in raingear, gloves, and a hat, then wandered through the woods with a group of festival attendees behind Stella del Tiglio and her owner Sunny Diaz. Stella, a professional truffle dog, earns her keep with her finds as Sunny sells them to stores and restaurants for profit.

Plodding through the trees, we watched and waited as Stella discovered truffle after truffle underneath Douglas fir trees. At each spot, Sunny stopped Stella after she gave her “tell,” a signal confirming where the truffle is. With each truffle encounter, Sunny invited someone from the group to finish digging up the treasured morsel. Stella was right every time, and she received a dog treat while someone in the crowd took home a truffle.

Truffles are part of the mushroom family, but mushrooms are easier than truffles to forage in the woods or find

in stores. Both fungi are seasonal. Chanterelles, lobster, and black trumpet mushrooms grow in the fall. Truffles mature in the winter, and black morels sprout in the spring. You can find wild mushrooms



outside only when they are in season, but farms grow many varieties year-round so they are available in stores.

Mushrooms are very popular with the vegetarian and vegan communities. They add a meaty chew to dishes, giving texture and flavor. Pinot Noir is the perfect wine pairing for truffles and mushrooms. The next time you plan a dinner party, make a dish with some of these delicious fungi, add a little butter or olive oil, and serve it with a big glass of Pinot for a match made in heaven.

Here is one of my recipes, and you can use any mix of mushrooms, whether found in the store, purchased at a farm-stand or foraged in the forest. Just remember, if you gather edibles from the woods, know for certain what you have or bring an expert with you on your quest. The wrong mushroom will not only ruin your dinner, but it is seriously hazardous to your health.



• • •
If you are fortunate to obtain Oregon or European truffles, finish the plate with a few slices over the top to elevate the dish to a luxury meal



Mixed Mushroom and Cheesy Herb Polenta

Recipe by Tracy Beard • Serves 2

- 4 Tbl olive oil
- 4 cups mixed mushrooms (cremini, chanterelles, button, etc.), cleaned and quartered
- 2 crushed garlic cloves
- 1 Tbl chopped fresh thyme + 4 stems with leaves
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 2 ¼ cups chicken stock
- ½ cup polenta (instant or traditional)
- ¾ cups grated Fontina cheese*
- 3 oz grated Parmesan cheese
- 2-1/2 Tbl butter
- 1 tsp. chopped fresh rosemary
- 1 Tbsp chopped fresh chives

Heat half the oil in frying pan over medium heat. Once hot, add half the mushrooms and cook for a few minutes until nicely browned. Remove and repeat with other half of mushrooms. Once browned, put all mushrooms in the pan, add garlic, chopped thyme, and salt and pepper and keep warm.

Bring stock to a boil. Slowly whisk in polenta, then reduce heat to low and cook, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon. The polenta is ready when it leaves the sides of the pan, but is still runny. This can take anywhere from 5-45 minutes, depending on your polenta. Add more stock if it dries out. It should be a thick porridge consistency.

Once cooked, add butter, Parmesan, Fontina*, and salt and pepper to polenta.

Add rosemary and chives to the mushrooms.

Place polenta in a large ramekin or soup bowl. Top with mushrooms and decorate with thyme stems.

**Note: Fontina cheese is a semisoft cow's cheese with a gentle buttery, nutty flavor. Emmental, mild provolone or gruyere may be substituted.*

Ad removed for archival purposes