

TRAVEL  
CULINARY TRAVELS  
PIEDMONT  
ITALY

# On the TRUFFLE TRAIL

**KEREN LAVELLE** TURNS HUNTER AND GATHERER,  
AND GETS A TASTE FOR ONE OF ITALY'S MOST  
PRIZED CULINARY TREASURES.





If it's gastronomic bliss you're after, you could do a whole lot worse than to throw a dart at a map of Italy and blindly follow its lead. The country is bursting with unforgettable culinary experiences and still, Piedmont in northern Italy manages to stand out. Blessed with a strong local food culture, Piedmont is where the 'slow food' movement started just over 30 years ago. No surprise then, that the local food is a focus of serious enjoyment.

Every town and village seems to host a festival around food – I even notice banners for a tripe festival – but the biggest is the white truffle festival held in Alba, which runs for two months in autumn. While black truffles may be found in many places, edible white truffles – *trifola d'Alba Madonna* – are rare, and are most successfully found in this region. They fetch around €3,000 (more than A\$4,200) per kilo.

Hedonistic Hiking's eight-day Jewels of Piedmont tour, led by co-owner Jackie Parsons, must be the most delightful way to get to know the region's food culture. Our small group works up an appetite by going on private tours of castles, churches and museums, walking through chestnut forests and vineyards, and tackling the occasional mountain hike. Our reward for this exertion is indulgence in freshly prepared picnics and visits to specialist regional restaurants, not to mention judicious sampling of the great wines of this district. All of our food and wine is explained to us by Cinzia Long, a locally born, specialist food guide.

We try many Piedmontese specialties such as *peperoni di Cuneo* (a local yellow capsicum) – in a salad as well as stuffed with tuna and served with an anchovy sauce; Piedmontese-style steak tartare *'battuta al coltello'* (cut with a knife); and some of the scores of local cheeses, such as *tomino*, a fresh cheese with herbs.

It's the right season for white truffles, and we go on a hunt for them with the help of *trifolau* (professional truffle hunter) Marco Valardo and his truffle dog Rocky. Jackie translates as Marco explains what truffles are (the fruiting bodies of underground fungi), where they grow (in forests of chestnut, oak, beech, poplar, willow and hazelnut), and the different varieties. He introduces Rocky, descended from a long line of truffle dogs, but who still required months of training.



**Above:** Local wildlife at restored farmhouse hotel Antico Podere Propano.

**Below:** Walking through chestnut forests.

**Opposite:** Truffle hunter Marco Valardo and his specially trained truffle dog, Rocky.



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Marco manages our expectations downwards; there's been a drought, and truffles need rain. There are other complications, he says: success depends partly on the moon cycle. We are in the first quarter but our chances would be better when it's a waning moon.

Uncertain as to how this will go, we follow Marco and Rocky past vineyards and into the forest in the twilight. There is a tension these days between those who want land to grow grapes, especially the valuable varieties Barolo and its 'Little Brother' Barbaresco, and others who want the land left wild, so its forests may keep producing truffles.

Before too long, Rocky's snuffling has brought results, and he alternates between barking and digging furiously. He's allowed to dig up black truffles – and that's what he's found. Suddenly, there's an interruption – the owner of the forest land and his dog, a very enthusiastic young pup, appear. Both men tell the other they haven't found any truffles. We all try to keep a straight face.

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After the owner leaves, it's not long before Rocky starts barking again, and furiously wagging his docked tail. But this time, he puts his paw over the spot. Rocky has hit pay dirt: the valuable white truffle is below, to be carefully dug out by Marco. They find another one before night falls.

We take our truffles to a restaurant in the hilltop town of La Morra where we eat a variety of dishes, including *tajarin con tartufo bianco* – house-made egg tagliatelle, with our white truffles shaved directly over the dish, accompanied by a white wine from the ancient Nascetta grape and a 2009 Barbaresco.

The climax of our foodie tour comes the next day. We visit the truffle festival in Alba, and in the evening we tour the Castle of Grinzane Cavour, which houses a fabulous *enoteca* (wine shop), and a museum devoted to wine production and to the Castle's famous inhabitant, Count Cavour, the statesman of Italian unification. The castle also has a Michelin-starred restaurant, Ristorante Al Castello, under chef Marc Lanteri where we feast on six-courses and sample some more regional wines.

Naturally, the standout dish is a Jerusalem artichoke velouté with an organic poached egg and shavings of white truffle – this delicate 'cooking' of the truffle brings out its earthy, musky flavours. It's our last dinner together, and the first time I fully appreciate what all the fuss over truffles is about.

**Above: The Langhe hills and vineyards at La Morra village.**

**Below: Piedmontese cheeses on display at Quat Taulin restaurant.**



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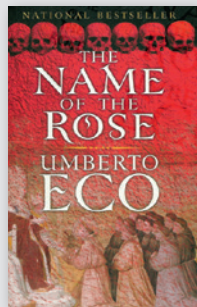
#### DO THIS

Hedonistic Hiking's eight-day Jewels of Piedmont Tour is priced from €2,895 (about A\$4,084) per person twin share. The tour begins and ends in Turin with upcoming departures on 23 June and 25 October 2017 and 22 June and 19 October 2018. [hedonistichiking.com.au](http://hedonistichiking.com.au)



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#### RECOMMENDED READING



#### THE NAME OF THE ROSE by Umberto Eco

The year is 1327. Franciscans in a wealthy Italian abbey are suspected of heresy and Brother William of Baskerville arrives to investigate. When his delicate mission is suddenly overshadowed by seven bizarre deaths, Brother William turns detective. He collects evidence, deciphers secret symbols and coded manuscripts, and digs into the eerie labyrinth of the abbey where extraordinary things are happening under the cover of night. A spectacular popular and critical success, *The Name of the Rose* is not only a narrative of a murder investigation but an astonishing chronicle of the Middle Ages.