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DESTINATIONS

Truffle Hunting in the Tuscan Hills

The thrill is in the both the treasure and the chase.

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"A PLACE LIKE this is real luxury because everything starts from here," says Luca Campinotti, a professional truffle hunter at Savini Tartufi in [Tuscany](#). He gestures to the wooded land surrounding us as Giotto, his canine hunting companion, sprints ahead. It is autumn in the [central Italian region](#) known for its natural beauty, and the trees are bathed in a golden light. "You can have fresh white truffles in beautiful, amazing [restaurants](#)," Campinotti continues, "but we need to come here first. We need to play with the dog and get our hands dirty."

"*Dai, dai, dai!*" (Go, go, go!) Campinotti shouts to Giotto as the Lagotto Romagnolo, a typical truffle-hunting dog with a thick, protective curly coat and a super sense of smell, explores the area. When Giotto finds something, he buries his snout in the dirt, his tail pointed skyward, inhaling deeply, then begins frantically digging. "*Dove? Dove?*" (Where is it?) Campinotti asks. After desperately attacking the earth to get to the prized white truffle (white truffles grow deeper than other varieties), Giotto backs off. He is trained not to destroy (or eat) the treasure he has discovered. Campinotti holds Giotto aside, praising him sweetly, as he carefully extracts the aromatic fruit of the fungus from the dirt. "Look at that," he says, holding out the two-inch truffle for me to examine. It's the freshest one I've ever seen, with a potent aroma that is equal parts mystifying and mouthwatering. "This might be worth 200 euros. And from what, having a walk with a dog?"

Above image: Professional truffle hunter Luca Campinotti searches the woods for white truffles with his dog Giotto. Lead image: Morning fog blankets the rolling hills of Castelfalfi, a 2,700-acre resort in the village of Montaione, just over an hour from Florence.

We're on the grounds of [Castelfalfi](#), a 2,700-acre [resort](#) in the hills of the village of Montaione. Castelfalfi secures truffles for its restaurants from Savini Tartufi, a family business now operated by the fourth generation. But the resort also partners with the well-known company to offer its guests an experience like this one: a genuine hunt for one of the region's most beloved exports with a seasoned expert. Campinotti is energetic and funny; he makes self-deprecating comments as we move through the trees, suggesting at one point that the truffle hunter is but a glorified dog walker: "Imagine, I just go for a walk every day. It's the dog who does all the work."

Seven different varieties of truffle are popularly eaten, and part of what makes Tuscany special is that all of them grow here. Each variety lives in a symbiotic relationship with particular types of trees and each has its season, as well as a different smell, taste, and use in the kitchen. This year, due to the heat and dry weather conditions, the quantity of white truffles has been very low — so low that they fetched about 5,000 euros per kilo. (For comparison, that's ten times what the far more common black truffles were going for.) "It's like searching for diamonds, especially with white truffles," Campinotti says. And as with precious gems, the most sought-after are the largest and most intact.

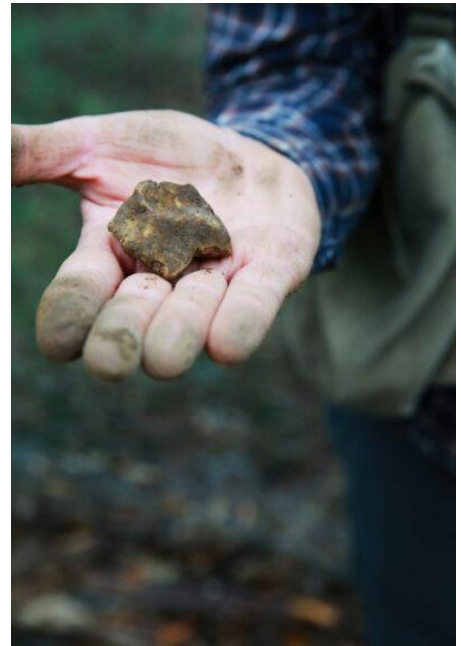
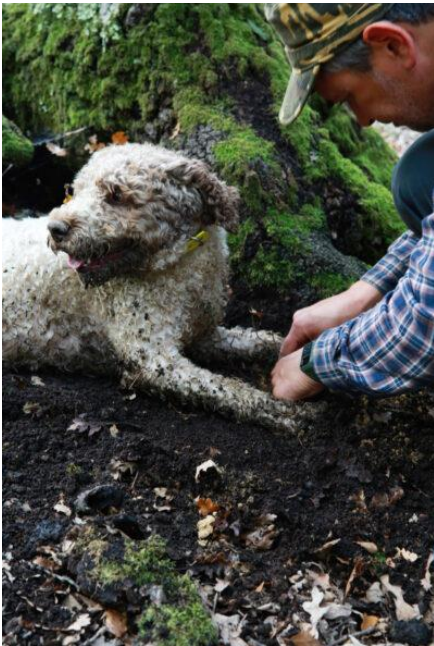
Savini Tartufi employs 600 independent truffle hunters, some of whom go out hunting multiple times a day. When they uncover something special — during this season, for example, a ripe but still firm egg-sized white truffle — some rush back to headquarters so that it might be immediately purchased by Savini and sold to a chef.

Here, however, the mushroom-like delicacy presents a kind of paradox. Campinotti explains that while all chefs revere an impressive, intact specimen, not all can afford it or make use of it within its short lifespan of five to seven days. (Black truffles can last up to two weeks if stored properly.) "When you have a huge, beautiful truffle, maybe a Michelin-starred restaurant can buy it, but not a common restaurant." Those with tighter budgets or fewer diners are more likely to buy a smaller specimen. If a truffle is softer and therefore older, it can often be used in a Savini product, like oil or honey. This way, the company can make use of nearly everything found by its esteemed hunters, including damaged or partial truffles.

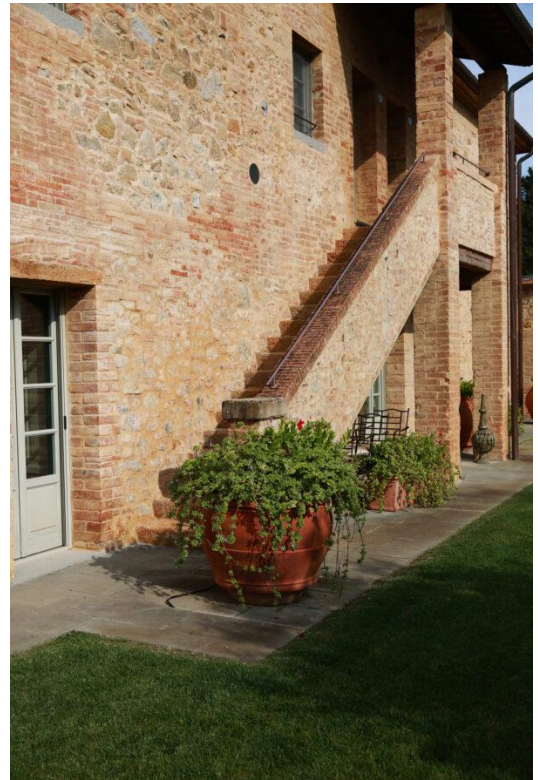


The hunt is an immersive experience, from Campinotti's boisterous Italian commands, Giotto's unbridled enthusiasm (which, I realize with tenderness, is really just an expression of devotion to his master), the thrill of discovery, and the heady bouquet of the freshest truffles I have ever smelled. It's even more exciting to know that later that evening, at La Rocca, Castelfalfi's formal restaurant, we'll sample white truffles grown in this same area atop homemade pasta, along with other fruits of the massive, recently restored agricultural estate, like olive oil and wine.

Though it's just over an hour from the center of Florence, Castelfalfi feels far from urban life. The main guest building boasts sweeping views — fog blankets the rolling hills in the morning, and guests can gaze out at the breathtaking landscape as they sip their cappuccinos. The massive property feels far more grand and timeless than the typical resort, but its offerings are in line with what luxury travelers have come to expect, especially those with children in tow. The kids' club includes a farm with animals to care for and vegetables to tend. And there are yoga sessions and cooking classes, among other activities. In addition to rooms and suites, guests can rent one of the property's villas, which sleep up to eight. These homes are constructed with the classic materials of the region: wood, marble, and ceramic in the muted hues of the surrounding nature, but outfitted with modern appliances as well as a pool, pool house, and gym. Villa guests can order produce from the property's fruit and vegetable garden and additional supplies to be delivered. They can even invite a Castelfalfi chef to the house to teach a pizza-making class. Using the property's app, guests can sign up for an array of add-ons (some complimentary, most for a fee), from pilates to bushcraft — where one learns things like building shelter and making a fire. And the 27-hole golf club attracts a membership that includes area locals, whom Castelfalfi warmly welcomes.



“This is still a real village and we don’t want to touch the authenticity; we don’t want to lose it,” general manager Isidoro Di Franco told me the night of my arrival. He gesticulated enthusiastically at the paradisiacal view from the patio bar as he talked about the estate and sipped an Aperol spritz, the twinkle in his eyes suggesting he may know that he is part of the charm of the place. Before I retired to my room, he asked for my phone and insisted on taking a photo of me with the landscape behind me (“You’ll thank me”) and told me I couldn’t appreciate the full effect of Castelfalfi’s magic until I’d slept there for a night. “Tomorrow you will wake up feeling so positive!” he said — and he was right. The magic of this medieval village is deeper than any convenience or lavish accommodation. It lies largely in the land’s rich history, which even Italian legend Andrea Bocelli touchingly recalled in a recent Instagram post. The famous tenor recalled playing at Castelfalfi’s piano bar more than four decades prior, at the very beginning of his career, calling it the place where “my dreams took flight.”



At the end of the truffle hunt, with two elusive white truffles to show for it, we amble slowly back to Campinotti's white vintage Jeep. Giotto has worked hard and appeared gleeful to receive Campinotti's warm praise, and now he trots along, looking satisfied. Throughout the experience, Campinotti has mentioned his new puppy, another Lagotto Romagnolo named Dante, a few times. (He is the son of Giotto.) "Maybe I'll show you a few photos," he offers playfully now. Like a proud father showing off a new baby, Campinotti scrolls, smiling, through images of the fluffy young pup.

When I ask how the puppies are trained, Campinotti tells me it can take up to six months. During that period, the puppy is taken out to train and play every day, rain or shine. First, as soon as the puppy is born, the trainer puts fresh truffle on its mother's nipple, "so the puppy has a kind of truffle milk." Then he replaces the treat in a Kinder egg with tiny pieces of truffle and hides them under leaves. The dogs search for the familiar, comforting scent. When they find an egg, the trainer is careful to show the dog that it does not belong to him; instead, the dog is given a cookie — and affection, and the trainer conspicuously keeps the egg for himself. Slowly, says Campinotti, he learns: "There will be plenty of delicious cookies for you, but don't eat my truffle. The truffle is mine."

Giotto, even exhausted, has a look of love in his eyes watching Campinotti speak. I'm struck by the energy the pair show for a start-and-stop process dependent on seasons and weather conditions that do not deliver consistently pleasing results. "Bravo, bravo," Campinotti has said to Giotto probably 100 times by now, petting him lovingly. Though I know it's silly, I wonder briefly if the truffle is so delicious because it is searched for in such a jolly fashion. Before I can speak the thought aloud, Campinotti says, "It's important that it's not just about 'paying' the dog with a cookie, but making him feel happy. That's what makes the whole process good."

