

Marianna Hunt

Prince Philip and the British love affair with truffles

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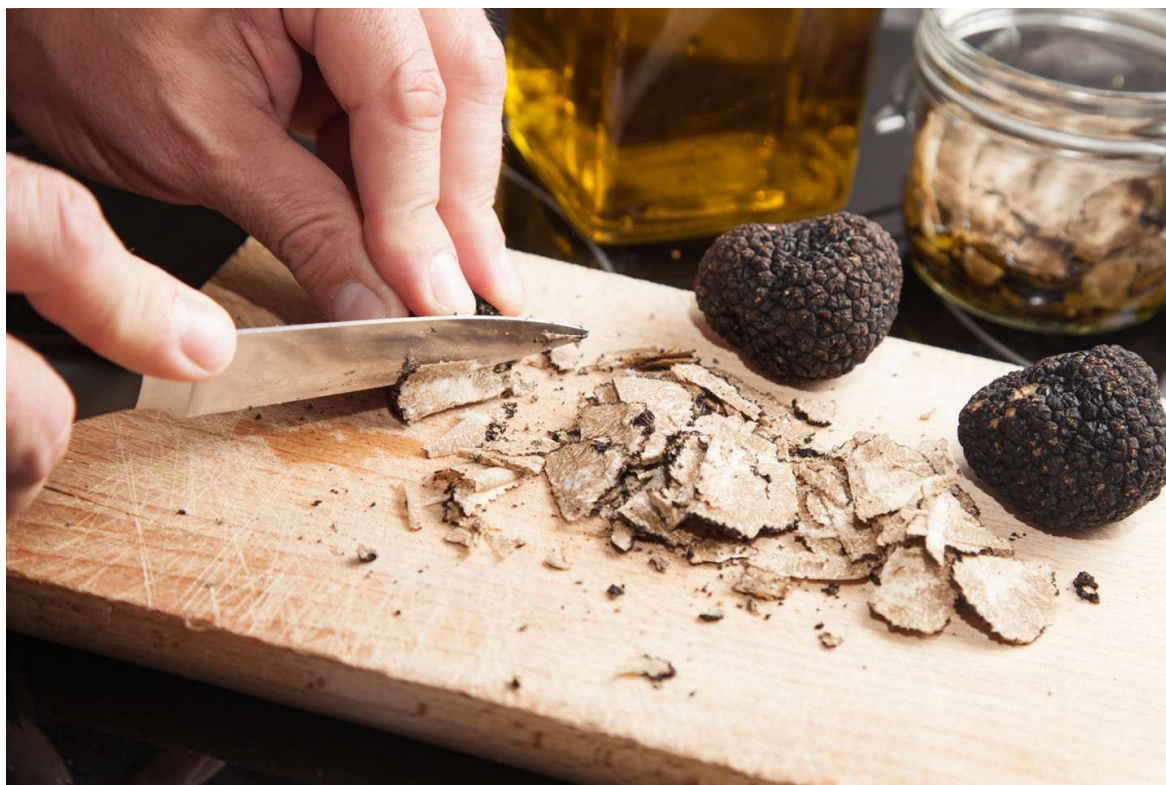
What present can you give a 97-year-old monarch with a net worth of circa \$30 million? A crop of French Perigord black truffles (worth £150-£200 per 100g) is no bad choice – as Prince Philip discovered after 12 years of fruitless attempts to coax the mushroom into growing on his Sandringham estate.

Aside from making the Duke of Edinburgh reportedly the first person to cultivate black truffles from English soil, the success also fulfilled a decades-long obsession he had developed with the elusive fungi.

His love affair with these 'black diamonds' is said to have begun in the 60s after the Duke was taken on a truffle-hunting excursion in Italy by his uncle, Earl Mountbatten of Burma.

'We were never allowed to buy fresh truffles at the palace. Always deemed too expensive a luxury,' former Palace chef Darren McGrady recalled in 2019. The only time Prince Philip enjoyed fresh truffles in the palace, McGrady said, was at Christmas – as part of the annual Harrods gift hamper. The Queen reportedly much prefers chocolate truffles – particularly those from Royal Warrant-holding chocolatier Charbonnel et Walker.

Determined to set up a *truffière* (truffle ground) on the Royal Fruit Farm at Sandringham, in 2006 Prince Philip planted more than 300 saplings of hazel and oak impregnated with truffle spores. However, for years nothing seemed to take. The Duke's failure to cultivate any black diamonds became something of a family joke as year-after-year trained truffle dogs (unlike pigs, they won't eat the truffles) found nothing. Finally in 2019 they hit gold. Rather than selling his treasures, the Duke is believed to have given them away for free to friends and family.



Black truffle (iStock)

Prince Philip is not the only A-lister to have developed an obsession with these prized fungi.

In Roman times they were sought-after for their aphrodisiac qualities and in 2007 Catherine Zeta-Jones was reported to be washing her hair with a shampoo made of white truffle – before having it smeared in a mask of Beluga caviar. Marilyn Monroe and her husband Joe Di Maggio loved the taste so much they bought their own Italian 'truffle hound' and billionaire media mogul Oprah Winfrey has her assistants carry around jars of fresh truffle in case she fancies adding it to her meal – even regularly asking hotels to make sure there's a jar of truffle salt available before she arrives.

Previously reserved for the highest echelons of society, truffle is now an almost ubiquitous flavour in our shops and restaurants. Truffle crisps, truffle ketchup, truffle hot sauce...this year Sainsbury's even launched its own truffle hummus, a not-unpleasant combination, with the nutty, butteriness of the chickpeas and earthy umami mushroom – however one which many, I'm sure, consider blasphemous. Last year Technavio, the research company, estimated that global truffle consumption would grow by 19 per cent by 2023.

The most valuable type of truffle in the world is the white winter one. Their incredible umami garlicky taste fades quickly after they are picked, so eating them fresh is key. Those found in Alba and Piedmont in Italy tend to be the most expensive. The black winter truffle is also prized for its chocolatey flavour - although it is slightly less expensive than its white sister. Perigord in France is the place to get these.

The main truffle you can find wild in the UK is the slightly less sought-after black variety.

Truffles command such a high price as they're difficult to cultivate outside of their natural habitat: the Mediterranean soil of France, Spain, and Italy. Soil conditions need to be just right as truffles form symbiotic relationships with trees in order to produce their fruit. They also only grow on certain types of trees, such as oak, hazel, poplar, beech and pine.

Italy is famed for the quality of its truffles – known as *tartufo* – and so London's Italian restaurants are some of the best places to try them. Ave Mario, a funkily modern eatery channeling the spirit of Florence in Covent Garden, does ribboned waves of mafaldine pasta smothered in truffle mascarpone, interrupted with sudden rich, garlicky bursts of fresh black *tartufo*.



A truffle hunter in Abruzzo, Italy (iStock)

The restaurant's outrageous tongue-in-cheek decor – its neon signs and religious paraphernalia provided the backdrop for the video of Kylie Minogue and Jessie Ware's new single 'Kiss of Life' – is reflected in some of the cheekier takes on the holy shroom. These include moorish mac n' cheese truffle croquettes and truffle churros with a parmigiano dipping sauce (available at sister restaurant Circolo Popolare).

'Our truffles come from the Molise region, which is one of the best places to find them in Italy,' Ave Mario's executive chef, Filippo La Gattuta explains. 'This season has been quite hard for truffles. They grow perfectly with a good balance of rain and that has not been the case this year in Italy.' Despite some difficulties with sourcing, the restaurant still manages to get through 12kg of truffles per week across its three London trattorias.

Pizzeria Santa Maria – with five outposts including Chelsea, Fitzrovia and Islington – does a sterling job at the truffle pizza (a hard act to get right; slathering it in truffle oil is not the answer). The base is primed with mushroom and truffle cream with hunks of smoked mozzarella, rare-breed North Yorkshire pork sausage and parmesan piled on top. All for just £12.95.

But if you're looking to go the whole hog, Davies and Brook at Claridge's is the place. The sublime menu this autumn includes roast poussin stuffed with black truffle and foie gras, and ricotta *gnudi* (dumplings) with white truffle and parmesan. However, be prepared: four courses will set you back £125, with truffle dishes often charged at a supplementary rate.

Davies at Brook works with Italian truffle supplier, Urbani, who have been in the business since 1852. Fresh truffles are brought to the restaurant two to three times a week, when executive chef Dmitri Magi will personally choose each one depending on the smell, size and texture.

For those that want to try their own hand at truffle hunting, there are many places to find the fungi growing wild in Britain, including Wiltshire, Dorset, Herefordshire and Gloucestershire. Your best bet is in south-facing beech, birch, hazel and oak woods, in soil rich in chalk or limestone. Autumn is the time to go – although the season can last from September to January/February.

The English Truffle Company offers these kinds of experience days costing £165 in Dorset, Wiltshire and Hampshire. Budding *trifolau* (truffle hunters) enjoy a talk on truffles, lunch, a 2-hour excursion, and a truffle-based dish on their return included in the price.

The chances of stumbling upon truffles are slim – but much improved by heading out with an expert guide and trained dogs.

WRITTEN BY

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