



Truffles big on flavor, reputation and price

Why are truffles (the fungi) so expensive?

Like just about anything in the marketplace, it's all supply and demand.

Truffles are fungi that grow underground, near the roots of certain trees. It takes time and effort to find them — many harvesters use specially trained pigs or dogs to root them out. Pigs are more traditional, but dogs are less likely to gobble up the exclusive prize once found.

According to the James Beard Foundation, which recently celebrated “The Truffle Towns of Italy” in a fundraising event, there are more than 100 kinds of truffles. Yet, only eight are commonly consumed, and just four are readily available to purchase fresh.

Of those four, the white truffle (*Tuber magnatum pico*) will wipe out your truffle budget the fastest: Its price has averaged \$3,200 a pound over the last five years. Black truffles, on the other hand, can be found for \$20 to \$75 an ounce (that equates to anywhere from \$320 to \$1,200 a pound).

The white truffle is available from October through December and is most commonly found in Slovenia, Croatia and in certain parts of Italy. Its flavor is described as strong but fragile, and chefs say never to cook it; rather, just sprinkle shavings as a finishing touch on a dish just before serving.

More well-known is the black winter truffle (*Tuber melanosporum vittadini*), which grows wild throughout Europe and has been farmed even in the United States and Australia. Its season is from November through

February. Black winter truffles, with subtle, earthy flavor, can be cooked or served raw. Unlike white truffles, they need to be peeled first.

Not to be outdone are black summer truffles (*Tuber aestivum vittadini*). Their season is from June through October, and they're the most plentiful truffle around.

The fourth commonly marketed truffle is the Bianchetto truffle (*Tuber albidum pico*). It looks much like the white truffle, but its flavor isn't as pronounced. It's available from January through April.

North American-grown truffles are catching on, too, and can be found for a fraction of the price of imported fresh truffles. But they're different species than what's available from Europe and don't yet have the culinary reputation of their foreign cousins.

Truffles can lose their flavor quickly, so use them as soon after purchase (and harvest) as possible. Many experts suggest surrounding them with rice while refrigerated, and then using the rice, which absorbs some of the flavor, in a complementary dish. However, the James Beard Foundation recommends wrapping truffles in a paper towel and placing them in a closed glass jar in the refrigerator to let them retain as much flavor as possible.

For more information on truffles, see <http://jamesbeard.org>.

Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH, 43210-1044, or filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu.



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