

TRUFFLES

FOR

LONDON

By

Dame DJ

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Truffles for London has been compiled from notes taken by a London truffle seller, giving a rare glimpse into meeting top chefs in the best restaurants on the vibrant London restaurant scene in 2015/16. It also includes some truffle history, further information on world producers and some classic truffle recipes.

No details of any purchases, orders or transactions are given in this confidential business.

TRUFFLES

THE

LEGEND

"It's all about sex. It's all about the aroma on the nose." Said a chef as he picked the biggest and the best truffle from the pile on his table.

Truffles are not 'harvested' or 'picked' but are 'hunted.'

It's all about the smell and those messages we get *because* the truffle tuber profligates via its scent and grows underground.

Does that smell evoke such a reaction because we know they are so expensive? Would the 'swooning' and the 'glazed eyes' seen in folks exist if truffles were the same price as radishes, shallots, walnuts or ginger?

"No!" You say truffles are rare, hard to find, fiercely protected, smuggled, fought over and sometimes killed for.

How did that happen? When did that happen? How did we fall so deeply for a black knobby hard lump of fungus grown underground on a few particular tree roots?

Is it because only the top restaurants, in most luxurious settings, handled by talented and caring chefs, set the stage for love of this tuber?

As far back as 4,000 years ago Zimri-Lim last ruler of the city of Mari, now Tell Hariri in modern day Syria, left an abundance of clay tablets, with texts from his palace and a letter, which read;

"Ever since I reached Saggartum five days ago, I have continuously dispatched truffles to my lord. But my lord wrote to me: "You have sent me bad truffles!" But my lord ought

not to condemn with regards to these truffles. I have sent my lord what they have picked for me.”

Known both to the Greeks and Romans Theophrastus (371-287 B.C.) wrote on the subject of botany and especially a truffle called misu, which grew near Cyrene in Libya, while the Moorish great Arab physician Avicenna prescribed truffles to patients grown in northern Tunisia, which Romans had colonized making Cathage a major port in the Bay of Hammamet.

Roman Pliny the Elder (23-79) wrote that the most highly valued truffle came from "Africa" which is now modern day Tunisia, north-eastern Algeria and western Libya, all of which needs further investigation and rediscovering.

The Roman's and the Greeks both loved truffles and thought they were an aphrodisiac, which started as the aroma hit the nose, before being actually eaten.

Theophrastus thought they came from heavy rains combined with a clap of thunder and lightning, while Plutarch suggested they were mud cooked by the lightning, which might sound ridiculous until you realize how incredibly difficult they are to grow.

The word 'lucullan' which means luxurious, gourmet and lavish comes from the great Emporria Lubcullus who loved truffles, was very knowledgeable and a great cultivator of apricots, cherries and Swiss chard on his huge estates in Rome and Naples.

The truffles the ancients enjoyed were described as reddish, white or black and they respected this unpredictable 'tuber' alongside other edible rare pungent mushrooms.

After hundreds of years and attempts at cultivation in Périgord, Limousine and most recently California one further understands how they spore spontaneously and only then are 'sniffed out' by valuable pigs and dogs.

The truffle then disappears for most of the Middle Ages then reemerges on the tables of the French king Francois 1.

THEO RANDALL
ONE HAMILTON PLACE
PARK LANE
LONDON

<http://www.theorandall.com/>

Theo Randall is good-looking man and he can't help it.

He also has a nice expression, exudes charm and a professional patience -at least that's what I saw in him. I could be wrong, as I had previously seen all those qualities in men I had married, then divorced but they couldn't cook.

"What a great kitchen you have" I said instead of "aren't you handsome" and embarrass us both. It was a huge, spotless, calm sea of stainless steel.

"Thank you. Put them all over here please" and he broke away from what he was preparing and I tipped out the bag of the precious black gold.

His name is forever linked to Chez Max and the start of River Café in which he spent 17 years and they must still miss him.

We went to the River Cafe when it first opened and hated driving through the backstreets of Hammersmith, feared for our lives, rarely saw the pretty river Thames view because it was already dark, but enjoyed the food, drank great wines and swore to return for lunch.

Nowadays it's a couple of turnings off the Hammersmith roundabout and often there's a fleet of chauffer's sitting outside; how London and Londoners have changed.

"I presume your tan is from Italy where you had to go and search out best truffles in gorgeous locations while suffering long al fresco lunches on our behalf?" I asked him with a smile.

"Something like that" he replied knowing I was totally envious.

"Is Ashley in today? (Ashley Wells Ex Head Chef) I would love to say hello?" I asked about all my favourite people.

"You're looking well also! What are you all eating down here?" I asked Ashley who looked great. It was a stupid question as this kitchen was full of the best food in the capital.

Theo was preparing some fish on a huge steel counter and I wanted to help, ask plenty of questions, stay all morning, taste something; anything not to leave.

Truffles came out and truffles went back in and we sniffed, turned and examined each and every one like comparing our fancy marbles at school.

“Take a look at the new restaurant refurbishment please,” said the suntanned Theo with a Hollywood smile.

“Yes, thank you that was my intention I cant wait to see what you have done” and off I went into the beige, pale cream, tranquil dining room that reminded me of California and wondered if his days at the wonderful Chez Panisse still flowed around his veins like a good Napa wine?

A large glass bowl of perfect shiny red peppers took center stage by the front door reminding diners it was all about high quality, world-class preparation and honest tastes.

The restaurant décor was in total contrast to the Intercontinental Hotel’s very Middle Eastern cliental filling the lobby and the opulent lounge areas; it was two different planets, with two different species, divided by a single restaurant door.

Years ago the Intercontinental Hotel was the slightly dull cousin to an elegant and sophisticated Four Seasons Hotel opposite, but this is no longer the case. This ugly cousin has grown long legs, eyelashes, stylish features, is now full of confidence with a fleet of chauffeured cars outside.

I went back outside clutching my precious bag of truffles, through the revolving doors into the cold London sunlight and remembered I was here on a freezing February night when he had first opened.

He was one of the first celebrity chefs ensconced in a grand five star hotel with his name over the restaurant door that guided guests away from the bland, ordinary, dull hotel food of the past.

Theo is a legend in his own lifetime, has remained gracious, and hardly aged a bit.

WORLD TRUFFLE GROWERS

AUSTRALIA

Who would have imagined truffles in Australia? Why?

Because truffles are normally so French or Italian? So mystical and romantic?

Because we cannot assume these mysterious phenomena could occur naturally anywhere other than Europe?

Perhaps, like great wines, fabulous cuisine and great chefs the Australians got fed up with importing, so got on with producing their own, and do a fabulous job.

The Australian Truffle Growers Association web site starts of very bluntly, puts their information clearly, and takes out some of the mystery we have suffocated in.

<http://trufflegrowers.com.au/>

“Truffles are a fungus and grow under the ground as a result of a symbiotic relationship with the roots of particular trees (such as oaks and hazelnuts) infected with the appropriate mycorrhiza (literally, fungus root). While they were originally confined to the wild, the past century has seen considerable research, particularly in France, into developing the capability of cultivating them as a domestic crop. The truffles form in late summer and slowly mature during autumn and are ready to harvest in winter. They can be found breaking the surface of the ground or down to 200 millimetres deep and are best located by a trained dog, from the aroma they emit when ripening. The truffle then has to be assessed by a trained human nose to determine whether it is truly ‘ripe’ or should be left in the ground for another few days or a week before being harvested.”

“Simple right? No problem. Got that mate? And whose going to cook them cos they aren’t for the BBQ?”

The Australians now supply some of the best London restaurants from about late June and as one Italian Mayfair chef said in a slightly guilty manner “please let me know when they arrive as I love them and use them a lot”.

This years 2016 season was now running 2-3 weeks late, as they had not yet ripened. It was said about the terrible weather in Europe “good for truffles, bad for grapes” but they don’t want hot weather either.

The Australians are keeping a very close eye on another source of competition from Chile and China, they intend to stay ahead of the game and protect their quality.

Interestingly The Canberra Times quotes "The Australian Truffle Growers Association confirmed that New South Wales holds the record for the biggest French Black Périgord truffle ever recorded in Australia, weighing in at 1.172 kilograms.

It was absolutely fitting that the industry's key event be hosted in this region," Said Mr Barilaro a member for Monaro.

Reportedly New South Wales now has the highest number of truffle growers, while Western Australia has the biggest yield and there was potential to catch up to Western Australian producers, who harvested six tonne last season.

CHAMPAGNE & ALBA TRUFFLE RISOTTO

Ingredients;

5-10g of cleaned Alba truffles from a good supplier

300 g quality unsalted butter

400g Carnaroli risotto rice

1200 ml of mushroom stock

Truffle oil

Salt and fresh ground black pepper

2 finely diced shallots

125ml Champagne

150g freshly grated Parmesan cheese

80ml double cream

Method;

Melt 100g of the butter in a wide bottomed pan and gently stir in the rice with a wooden spoon until it becomes translucent.

Adding the mushroom stock slowly stirring after each addition so the stock has been absorbed before adding more but do not over cook the rice.

Stir in the butter a few cubes at a time and when that is mixed in pour in the Champagne.

Add Parmesan cheese, double cream and seasoning.

Serve but make sure the plates are not cold.

Drizzle with the truffle oil and shaved truffles

Porcini mushrooms are a good substitute if truffles are out of season.

ROUX AT THE LANDAU
THE LANGHAM HOTEL
1C PORTLAND PLACE
LONDON

<http://rouxatthelandau.com/>

I had heard about the film 'Burnt' but only saw it long after visiting the elegant Roux at the Landau Restaurant at the Langham Hotel.

Having found a handsome black and white head shot of Bradley Cooper in his chef whites I immediately felt I recognized him from some London kitchen I regularly visited but couldn't quite place him. I pushed it to the back of my mind assuming one day he and I and the truffles would be reunited one day in a sea of grey reflective stainless steel below ground. Nothing had ever felt more natural.

Several months after being in Roux restaurant and sitting down to watch the film in France I realized who Bradley Cooper was, connected up the dots and exclaimed to the person next to me what I had previously assumed.

He looked over, never said a word and thought I must be deeply stupid or just very protected from the actual world.

The Langham was always a good hotel in an amazing position but partnering with a Roux chef really put it on the map because the restaurant shines with grace, style and expectation.

It has its own street entrance, and a short elegant corridor leading into a stunning high ceiling, curved windows in a room of soft colors hung together with gold's and aristocratic celadon green.

The interior designer David Collins who managed to combine fair, style, elegance, colour, atmosphere and dignity into an historical room that felt permanent. Quite masterful.

Some doorways beckon you in, some prohibit, others are a nuisance but this restaurant entrance halts you like an invisible beam, so the staff greet you personally.

I handed over my business card and was escorted across the room of guests finishing off full English breakfasts and into the kitchen. It was like going into the Vatican, past the tourists and straight into the Papal chambers.

“I’m in and I’m staying in-forget about the outside world; this now has my full attention.” I thought to myself as I wove between the silver steel furniture looking for the most important person in the place.

A very tall pale-faced young Frenchman and I got deeply involved in conversation, he gave me a fresh apple juice squeezed on the Denham Estate in the English countryside and we talked about famous chefs he had previously worked with.

Not only had the outside world disappeared so had the rest of the kitchen and everyone else in it as we bonded with our enthusiasm and shared passions, but I had a bag of truffles and had to meet the Executive Chef Chris King.

Abruptly the young Frenchman disappeared into the ether as did the apple juice and I was face with the commander in chief himself. He was precise, direct, isolated in his importance, bold and unfaltering and almost military.

“Well that snapped me out of my romantic reverie” I thought looking at him for the first time; Chefs always surprised me as individuals.

Was it the tiny and important measurements of ingredients chefs had to deal with? Was it the heat and temperatures they need to control? Was it the addiction to constant perfection on every dish or the risk of losing their stars and reputation if a dish failed to impress? What made chefs so different?

I once watched a chef measure out precise ingredients for a salad dressing and realized I had never measured out a single ingredient; I didn’t even bother to read recipes- all I needed was to taste a dish.

He peered at me through finely ground German lenses devoid of fingerprints and apologized for some small detail to which I replied it was “no trouble”, after which he re explained his sentiments. I let it go. I was in *his* kitchen as a guest and if he wanted the last word it was fine.

Like a good lawyer he wanted to make sure we understood each detail exactly. He must have been amazing to train under, be part of his team, inner circle or partnered with as this was a man who chose everything carefully. He was a scientist of food. This was almost alchemy but the results ended up on a plate for the lucky to consume.

People like that were not on the same wavelength as people like me, who shook oils & vinegars in bottles, poured them over salads, and hoped for the best.

Could he see that in me? Was he saying inside “ah there goes some fool who can’t balance up the oil and the vinegar; who hopes for the best; who think they can taste their way through cooking?”

Did he see all my imperfections through those spotless lenses? Suddenly I wanted to disguise myself but there was nowhere to hide amongst all that polished steel.

As the minutes past I felt he was counting each second and weighing, itemizing those moments of his life on some mental Excel sheet in his head, so we kept to the point and I did not chatter.

We concluded our meeting in the most cordial polite manner, worthy of a presidential matter then fleetingly I caught a glimpse deep in his eyes retina, amplified by those spotless lenses, and saw him delete all memory of me in a millisecond.

Where was sexy Bradley Cooper?

The film ‘Burnt’ was released in August 2015 by The Weinstein Company it had a few critical reviews and initially only grossed \$5 million dollars but did eventually get a return of \$750 million worldwide against a \$20 investment. The whole cast was much more than a BC’s performance as an individual and I am sure he would be the first person to agree.

He had called his restaurant ‘Langham’ in the film so was I talking to the ‘John-Luc’ character -his mentor - or ‘Tony’ who was running the hotel?

The man I stood in front of was controlled, mature, measured and acclaimed not like ‘Adam’ the main character in the film who was a crazy, over emotional, young chef with an ego problem (Bradley Cooper)

On the way out I met a white haired gentleman, sitting on a low chair and holding a huge ledger doing the wine inventory with two male helpers. With very serious expressions they took out each precious bottle from behind two heavy metal framed glass doors of a gigantic wine cabinet and check it against an oversized book.

“I’m here for the tasting and I suggest we start at the very top with the vintage champagnes,” I said bending down to peer onto the list with an authorities air.

He held his pen mid air, stared and blinked at me trying to place who, what, why and what the hell I was talking about.

“Oh yes! You are just in time I was just about to open one of the magnums would that do? He got up and we laughed together while his assistants stood open mouthed in horror.

I flashed them a generous smile and said to him “you are my kind of man but I must rush so lets take a rain check?” And headed for the exit thanking God someone still has some humor in this world

The breakfast crowd seated under huge arched windows had gathered their belongings, mobiles, signed the checks and spilled out onto the London streets, leaving the elegant room empty.

Hesitantly I cast my eye around the stunning walls, lovely solid chairs, bay windows and breath taking flower arrangements for one last time and stopped in the 'Postillion' private dining room, which seated about 18 around a long table, interior high ceiling painted with cherubs.

The word comes from the 16th Century describing the rider on the front horse leading the team near the coachman.

I made a mental note to one-day host a lunch there so I might stare up at the wonderful romantic murals, tease the staff and savor Chris's exquisite food of ingredients measured to perfection performing alchemy on a plate.

HOW

Trees, whose rootlets cultivate truffles include: pines, firs, Douglas fir, oaks, hazel nuts, hickories, birches, beeches, and eucalyptus.

No one knows why the rootlets under oak, beech, hazel and chestnut tree 3-12 inches below ground play host to their fungus but digging in at random can damage the underground network of mycelium, which has grown underground up to 10 meters across.

The 'scorched earth' look above ground means the grass has not grown and looks 'burnt' because of the mycelium have drawn out the nutrients from the earth like an imposing thief and the fungus it is.

Truffles do well in damp, not in dry, conditions but they can also rot in too much summer rain.

The truffle fly burrows into the ground and lays eggs and was thought to penetrate the roots of the oak producing a nut, which then became a truffle but the fly looks for the truffle to lay its eggs in. An experienced truffle hunter will watch to see where an egg-laden fly will settle then carefully dig into the ground to find a rich bed.

Others use dogs, or pigs usually a sow, trained from an early age, and fed on a few bad quality rotting tubers so she instinctively passes up the best quality and munches the cheaper ones.

Dogs are mostly used in Provence and don't have a taste for eating truffles but foxes and badgers have also been used.

'Seed' truffles for sale in France are a fraud, as cultivation of acorns near oaks already growing truffles does not work.

Trade fairs in Alba, Périgord Piedmont are more about the business and truffles themselves are rarely displayed but the pungent aroma let the noses know they are there.

NUTRITION

The nutritional value of truffles is often overlooked and buried beneath the excitement.

Up to 20 % protein

Minerals like iron, sodium, zinc, calcium, magnesium, manganese, copper and surprisingly aluminium

Not many vitamins.

About 60% carbohydrates

Very little fat (3-7%)

Most importantly they act as Immunomodulators, which control the immune function dealing with both an overactive or weak system.

They are also antioxidants, anti bacterial and believed to be anti -tumour.

If truffle oil was all natural it would possess medicinal properties and a high antioxidant capacity but there are very few real truffle oils.

THE RITZ CLUB
150 PICCADILLY
LONDON

<http://www.theritzclub.com/>

The Ritz Club and Casino is a legend in its own time, and while the Ritz Hotel in London is still in business the world has hope.

“If there is any kind of nuclear fallout, invasion from foreign forces, massive pollution of the water supplies, take your credit card and go check straight into the Ritz.” I told my kids in case of emergencies.

They have never lost a guest intentionally, probably have a tunnel connected to Buckingham Place and definitely have a back door used for political figures who should not be seen gambling.

“Don’t worry we can always sell the house and pay the bill as it’s the safest place in London in times of war.” I reassured them as they grew up, they blinked in agreement but might have dismissed the idea after I left the room. In my mind it saved me the horror of relying on relatives.

Cesar Ritz introduced innovations to the hotel like brass beds, en suite bathrooms and it was the first steel building of any consequence in London which he described as ‘ a small house to which I am proud to see my name attached’.

The hotel returned into English hands in 1995, after a complete overhaul of the Grade II listed building, restoring every detail both seen and unseen.

In 2002 The Ritz Hotel received a Royal Warrant for Banqueting and Catering Services awarded by Prince Charles and the first hotel to get such an award. Given we don’t see the Royals popping in and out on a regular basis, and given its proximity I presume it’s become the royal ‘take away’?

“Hello, is that David?” I asked the well-spoken man who answered the phone in a firm and polite manner. After informing him the reason for my call and my desired meeting with his head chef we chatted about a few relative topics and the past.

“My ex husband was one of your members but you probably won't remember him and he has since passed away” I went on to explain which actually had very little to do with truffles.

“Oh, I am so sorry to hear that” he kindly added.

“Please don't be, he is probably eating Dover sole in heaven, if they have any left...and please be assured his death was not related to any gambling debts!” He laughed, I laughed as he had no need to worry another family had left with starving children, and a widow, because yet another man thought he was a better black jack player than he actually was.

Thank God there was humor still left in the world and a couple of days later I arrived at the Ritz Club door, gave my card and took the small but ornate lift down into the ornate red and navy plush basement.

Never has a basement been made so splendid if you like Baroque meets Shari of Persia 1980's. It's the classic style, opulent, wood paneling, imposing but comfortable and all the luxuriant furnishings a high roller would have expected.

It had none of those modern minimal grey hard lines of industrial chic that we have had thrust upon us, which essentially make people look ugly, badly dressed, jaundiced, greasy and unwanted.

David was a young man in his mid 40's but polished and confident befitting such a position in one of London's most important gaming casinos.

I followed him, and the very beautiful cut glass tumbler of Perrier water he held, into a private room and he said he would call for chef as we passed two Russian men, in their mid 50's, drinking large chilled glasses of champagne at 11.00 am.

“How civilized” I thought to serve a decent large glass and not one of those silly little ‘coupe’ sized B breast. While we all poisoned ourselves with fattening coffees all day the Russians drank the sparkling grape. They will outlast us all in the end.

I emptied my case of black gold, and a set of scales, taking care not to spoil the starched fine white cotton virgin white tablecloth.

One day in the future tablecloths themselves will be a restaurant's selling point as I see most of them serving food directly onto tables with the odd slither of paper in place, while the generation who still expect such luxuries, are slowly dying off.

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