

A D V E N T U R E

LAND OF PLENTY

Isabel Putinja soon discovered that her new homeland of Croatia was full of food adventures

DESTINATION
Croatia

LOCATION
Istria





A narrow, cobblestone street in a village. On the left is a bright orange building with white trim and dark shutters. On the right is a stone building. In the background, a tall, white church tower with a pointed roof and a cross on top rises against a clear blue sky. The street is paved with dark, irregular stones. A person is visible in the distance on the street.

"A white truffle can fetch up to 2,000 Euros a kilo, making truffle-hunting a very lucrative business"

The rising sun bursts over Učka Mountain, flooding the autumn landscape of rolling hills with the first magical rays of morning sunlight. I hear the din of a tractor in the distance and know this is my neighbour Mario making his way to the spot of our early morning rendezvous. Sure enough, his old tractor makes an appearance around the bend of the road, and I spot his two dogs perched on the trailer. He turns off the ignition and the dogs leap into the forest with excited yelps. Dressed in the bright blue work clothes common here, and carrying a small spade, Mario motions for me to follow. We head into the deep woods, branches cracking underfoot, on the hunt for the white truffle.

When, just the day before I had asked him how the truffle season was coming along, he had tugged on the deep pocket of his work jacket, revealing several knobby white truffles, still covered in dirt. He handed me one and its pungent scent hit me as I lifted it to my nose. Strange and earthy, the heady smell is unlike anything else I know; a combination of moist earth and dried mushrooms, with a hint of something almost putrid, and even sensual, but undefinable.

This ugly, smelly tuber with the somewhat pompous name of *Tuber Magnatum*, is one of the world's most expensive and highly-prized delicacies. Growing in very few regions of Europe, it only makes an appearance from mid-September to mid-January, while the more common and much less pungent black truffle is available all year



Clockwise from above: Mario with his truffle hunting dogs. Some of the natural truffle treasures they discovered. A Croatian dish receives the finishing touches — slices of locally-grown truffle.

round. A white truffle can fetch up to 2,000 Euros a kilo, making truffle-hunting a very lucrative business. Mario told me that years ago, when this corner of Europe was part of Yugoslavia, he had unearthed a particularly large white truffle that he sold in Italy, fetching a hefty sum that he used to build his house. Today there are about 800 registered truffle hunters in Istria scouring its forests for the elusive, but highly valuable white truffle.

As we walk and the sky above the trees brightens, Mario explains why such an early start is required: “The dogs are hungry and keen to hunt, their sense of smell peaks in the early morning and we have to find the truffles before the others do!”, he adds as his dogs scurry through the dense foliage sniffing the ground in anticipation. It’s Lara, the older and more experienced dog that takes the lead, with younger Diana following close behind.

All truffle hunters have two dogs for this reason: the younger dog learns from the older dog; and two highly-sensitive noses are better than one.

We struggle to keep up with them, bending back branches to make our way through, and trying not to lose our footing as we descend the sharply sloping forest floor. “Now you see why this is such a tough job,” Mario chuckles, “especially for an old man like me.” We’ve been trudging through the woods for a long time before Lara suddenly starts digging furiously at the base of a tree. Mario rushes to the spot and takes over, tossing the dogs a handful of dry dog food before digging away delicately with his spade. “If there’s a white truffle down there somewhere,” he explains, “I have to get to it before



the dogs do, and try to preserve its shape.” The shape determines the price it will fetch, as well as its pungency. He pulls out a small, lumpy mass, sniffs at it, and laughs triumphantly.

It was in the forests below Motovun, Istria’s most photographed hilltop town, that the world’s largest white truffle weighing 1.31 kg was unearthed in 1999, according to the Guinness Book of World Records. Today the record holder, Giancarlo Zigante, has a well-known restaurant in the village of Livade with a multi-course truffle-tasting menu. But locals love to eat them simply, with a traditional type of Istrian pasta called fuži.

While the white truffle season announces the start of autumn, it’s during the last few sunny days before winter sets in that olives are ripe and ready for harvest. Like the grape-picking season, the olive harvest is when family, neighbours, and friends all lend a hand. The more the better, because olives are hand-picked — the best way to maintain their quality.

I was happy to oblige when our neighbour Pino needed extra hands. His olive grove is perched on the southern slope of a hill that’s been terraced so that each row of trees gets maximum sunlight. Spreading a wide net on the ground to catch the olives, we use small plastic hand rakes to scrape at the branches and pull off the olives, or simply pluck them off with our bare hands, working one branch at a time. The trees are relatively young, just over a decade old, and thanks to careful pruning, the branches grow outwards rather than upwards so they’re easy to reach. With six of us working together, it doesn’t take long to strip a tree of its fruit, after which we squat on the ground and gather the olives into plastic crates, carefully separating any leaves and twigs.

The sun is setting once the picking and sorting is complete, and we’ve transferred the olives to mesh bags. We head straight to the oil mill. Ideally, olives should be pressed within 24 hours to ensure freshness and preserve their nutritional value as much as possible. It’s a short drive to the local oil mill, which works around the clock during the harvest season. The mesh bags bulging with the fresh crop are stacked onto a large scale and weighed: it reveals that we picked 245 kg of olives that day. The weight is important, since this determines the cost of milling.

Once loaded into the large Italian press machine, the olives are washed and any leftover debris like leaves or twigs are separated. The olives then move into another compartment to be crushed into a paste. The final stage of the three-step process is centrifugation: this separates the oil from the press at a temperature below 27 degrees in order to ensure that the oil is “cold pressed” and as a result, of the highest quality.

When the first drops of oil finally started to pour from the spout, I’m surprised by its vibrant yellow-green colour, like the colour of pea soup. I use a small plastic cup to catch a sample of this freshly-pressed olive “juice” and lift it to my lips. The taste is a revelation: exquisitely fruity and peppery at the same time, it’s nothing like any other olive oil I ever tasted.

Hand-picked, pressed locally, and unadulterated, Istrian extra virgin olive oil has been gaining international



Left: The award-winning olive oil. Rich pickings.

recognition for its high quality, winning several awards at international competitions. Istria has even been named “Best Olive Oil Region” in 2016 and 2017 by the prestigious Flos Olei olive oil guide.

Olive oil tourism is also growing. Thanks to an initiative by the local tourist office, special signs lead the way to local producers on Istria’s many “olive oil routes” where visitors can sample and buy this “liquid gold”, another of the region’s many gastronomic treasures. 🍷