

Truffle a treasure in Croatia



Photos by Suzanne Morphet/Special Contributor

Olive oils of Croatia's Istrian peninsula are second only to those of Tuscany, proud locals claim.

Continued from Page 1K

across the Adriatic Sea, but the cost of living is much lower. Restaurant meals, for instance, are about half what they are in Italy.

In Livade, it's impossible to take truffles too seriously when our schedule is packed with fun: food and wine tastings, cooking demonstrations, a truffle-hunting demo and a truffle auction.

First, I want a proper introduction to the infamous fungus, and there's no better place in Croatia — or perhaps the world — than Restaurant Zigante. It was restaurant owner Giancarlo Zigante who found the world's largest truffle, a beefy 2.8 pounds, in 1999. His restaurant specializes in serving fresh truffles when available.

Freshness is imperative. On the restaurant's exterior wall there's a bronze plaque stating *Tartufo vero* (fresh truffles). It signifies Restaurant Zigante's status as part of a group of restaurants in the region that offer fresh truffles.

The truffles we're enjoying were probably harvested last night. They keep for a week, refrigerated in a paper bag.

White truffles — *Tuber magnatum pico* — are best eaten raw, which explains why our waiter is grating the cleaned but otherwise unprepared truffle over my plate of venison carpaccio.

He uses a special tool that creates wide, paper-thin slices that meld beautifully with the meat. The next dish, grated truffle over fresh tagliatelle with melted butter, couldn't be simpler, yet the flavors are extravagant.

Each course of our four-course menu features white truffles, with the last dish the most surprising: vanilla ice cream with truffles. It's, well, different.

"You either like them or you don't," says Tanja Prodanovic, marketing manager for Restaurant Zigante, adding that "the truffle has to be the king," with other ingredients playing second fiddle.

After lunch, we wander over to a grassy field to watch a truffle-hunting demonstration. A middle-aged man with a large paunch stands with two midsize dogs. On his command, they immediately start sniffing the ground. A truffle had been planted there earlier; within seconds the older dog, Jackie, is digging at the precise spot.

The hunter rewards her with a biscuit, then digs up the truffle for himself.

My guide, Antonio Giudici, explains that truffle hunters work at night, when the scent of the truffles is most intense. Because of the prices white truffles command — more than \$4,000 per kilogram last October — hunters are secretive. "A hunter will never tell you where he found truffles or how many he found," Giudici says, "and the dogs don't talk."

Under the festival's big white tents, people sip local wine and dip cubes of bread into extra-virgin olive oil. Truffles of various sizes are displayed in baskets or behind glass. I ask if I can hold one; it feels stone-cold and heavy for

its size.

There are other agricultural products on display too — cheese, honey, prosciutto and lots and lots of olive oil, some mild, some spicy. The Istrian peninsula is agriculturally rich; Istra Gourmet, the 2011 guide to the wine and gastronomy of the region, lists 136 olive growers and 110 winemakers. It's easy to take a self-guided tour if you have a car; oil producers and wineries open to the public are well-marked on roadsides.

"Istrian olive oil is now second in the world to Tuscany's," local journalist Sandro Petruz told me proudly the previous day when I was touring Rovinj, a medieval town on Istria's west coast.

Even without its agricultural riches, Istria would be worth a visit. Towns and cities go back centuries; cobblestoned Rovinj is achingly pretty with its pastel-colored houses, while Pula has one of the best-preserved Roman amphitheatres in the world. Draguz is known for its frescoed churches and hilltop views.

Offshore, the Brjuni islands offer something completely different: a safari park with exotic animals that were given to Josip Broz Tito by visitors when he ruled the former Yugoslavia after World War II and had his summer residence here.

Back at the festival, an auction has begun. A glamorous blonde parades by carry-

If you go

Livade is about a three-hour drive from Zagreb, Croatia's capital.

The annual Livade Days of Truffles Festival begins the first weekend in October and continues every weekend until mid-November. See istra.hr for information about the area.

ing a silver platter with a single truffle, about the size of a walnut and weighing just 20 grams. The auctioneer starts the bidding at 100 kuna, about \$20 at the time.

After a short but intense bidding war, it sells to a man from Slovenia for 300 kuna. He beams and invites everyone back to his country for an upcoming sausage festival.

That night I stay at the historic Hotel Kastel in the ancient hilltop town of Motovun, overlooking Livade. From here, I can see the thick green forest that hugs both sides of the Mirna River and is home to most of the region's truffles.

Early the next morning, the sky is a lovely pink as I stroll the town wall. Suddenly, the pre-dawn peace is broken by the barking of dogs from the direction of the forested valley below. No doubt, some dogs are returning from a long night's work. For gourmands everywhere, I hope it went well.

Suzanne Morphet is a freelance writer in Victoria, British Columbia.



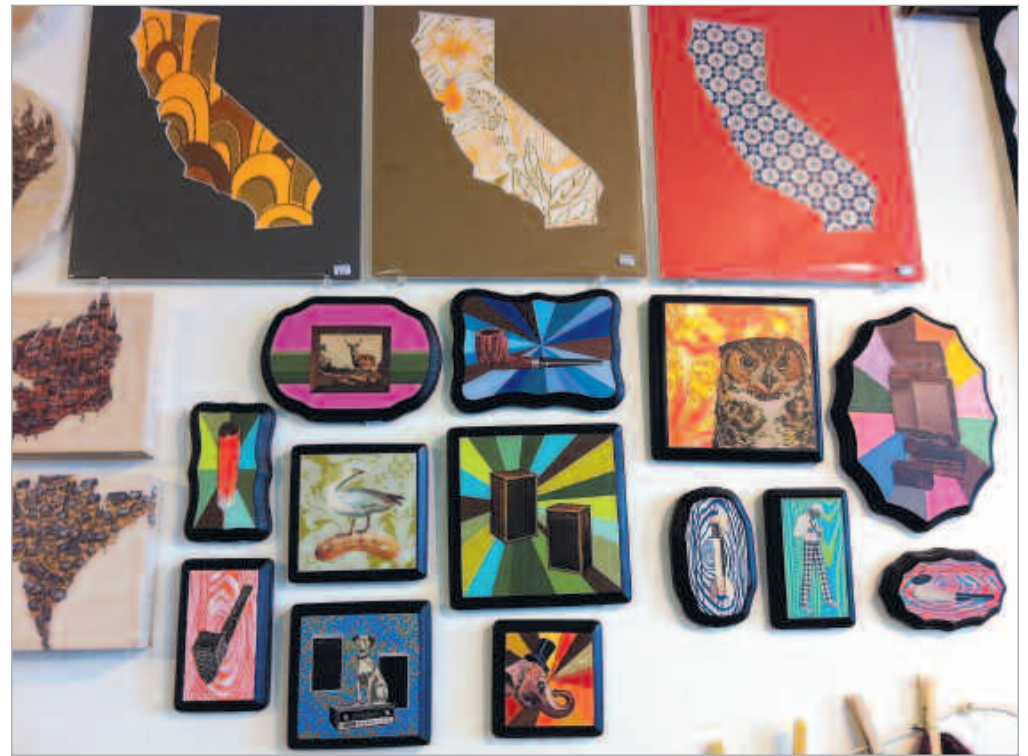
An auctioneer encourages bids for a walnut-size white truffle at the truffle festival in Livade.

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SPOTLIGHT



Photos by Cheryl Ng Collett/Special Contributor

A sampling of the artwork available at Urban Bazaar, a San Francisco shop specializing in local and fair trade arts and crafts.

A handmade haven in San Francisco

By **CHERYL NG COLLETT**
Special Contributor

SAN FRANCISCO — In the textured neighborhood of San Francisco's Inner Sunset District lies Urban Bazaar, a genuine pearl dropped from Etsy heaven.

Owned by artists Brandi Chalker and Briana Bers, the unassuming store supports the work of local and fair-trade artisans, and crafters of handmade accessories, jewelry and home decor.

This is not your usual patchouli-scented crafty store. It is a haven of carefully procured products that capture the essence of local San Francisco.

The organic line of Roman Ruby Botanicals soaps (\$10), bath salts (\$8) and body lotions (\$13) will transport landlocked Dallasites back to Ocean Beach or Union Square in a single, sweet whiff.

Wooden art pieces (\$30-\$100) by landscapist Dave Marcoullier feature the dazzling San Francisco skyline melded with the beauty of nature.

"His original designs are routed into hardwoods and are unfinished to keep the natural grain of the wood at the forefront of his designs," Chalker says.

How about Bike Tire Belts (\$32) by Julien Jarborska of Rebicyclist, or recycled Singha



Fair trade bells are among the imports sold at the Inner Sunset District shop.

beer-can wallets (\$24) from Thailand, for something functional with an emphasis on fun?

Urban Bazaar also carries a plethora of apparel, baby onesies, colorful screen-printed tea towels, festive ornaments and Indian saris, as well as postcards and books at affordable prices.



Roman Ruby Botanicals soaps come in scents named for neighborhoods like Ocean Beach and Union Square.

Urban Bazaar

The Inner Sunset District is easily accessible for tourists, with Golden Gate Park to the north, Ocean Beach to the west, the San Francisco Zoo to the south and Haight-Ashbury to the east.

After shopping, waltz next door and savor a delectable pastry or bun from Arizmendi Bakery, a worker-owned cooperative.

Urban Bazaar, 13719th Ave., San Francisco; 415-664-4422. Shop online: urbanbazaarsf.com

"We both think that everyone deserves to own quality, handmade things, and that you shouldn't have to be rich to afford things that aren't mass-manufactured," Chalker says.

Cheryl Ng Collett is a Dallas freelance writer.

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