

A NEW WAY TO SAVE AN OLD TREASURE

Piedmont's precious white truffle is among the most sought after delicacies in the world. But with the truffle-producing forests of the region now under threat, a campaign has been launched to help guarantee the future of this culinary treasure. **Words by Josephine McKenna and photos by Susan Wright**



CARLO MARENDA IS STROLLING along a leafy path with his lively dogs, Emy and Buk, in a landscape ablaze with autumn colours in the heart of the Langhe region in Northern Italy.

Spectacular vineyards coloured orange and crimson crisscross the surrounding hills and shouts can be heard from the grape pickers below as they clip grapes from the neat rows of vines that deliver Italy's top red wines.

With a whistle, Carlo orders his dogs into the woods in search of one of the world's culinary treasures, the highly-prized white truffle, which in 2016 sold for €450 per 100 grams (or \$AUD650).

"Piano, piano," 34-year-old Carlo yells at his dogs as they race up the muddy slope a few kilometres outside the town of Barolo.

But his canine companions are distracted today and return with

nothing. So he will rise at 4.30am the following morning, rouse the dogs and try again.

"Truffle hunting is not a job, it is a passion, a sickness," he tells. "You are living with nature in a very powerful way. I feel at one with nature and my dogs."

There are 4000 truffle hunters – called *trifalau* in local dialect – in this part of Piedmont. Like the gold diggers of years gone by, they are driven by their obsessive search for the elusive aromatic *funghi* and are reluctant to share any secrets about where they find their prize.

The stakes are high when you consider the world's largest white truffle, which weighed in at 1.89 kilograms, was sold by Sotheby's in New York for \$US61,250 (\$AUD80,000) in 2014.

But these days the truffle hunters' passion is under siege.

Forests are suffering from the ferocious spread of imported trees and plants that are ravaging the natural environment; suffocating oaks, poplars and other trees that enable the white truffle to flourish in the rich, damp soil.

The hunters are also seeing the size of their woodlands shrink as hazelnut groves and vineyards are extended for lucrative commercial production.

"In the last 30 years we have lost 30 per cent of the forest because they've added new vineyards and nut trees," Carlo says.

The truffle hunters have another worry too. The forest floor is no longer being cleared by farmers who once collected wood for their fires or domestic animals such as pigs and goats that kept the undergrowth under control and made access to the truffles easier for the dogs and their owners.



Carlo Marena with his dogs Buk and Emy on a hunt for white truffles.



National Centre for Truffle Studies president, Antonio Degiacomi (left), is behind the crowd-funding campaign launched at the 2016 Alba Truffle Fair.



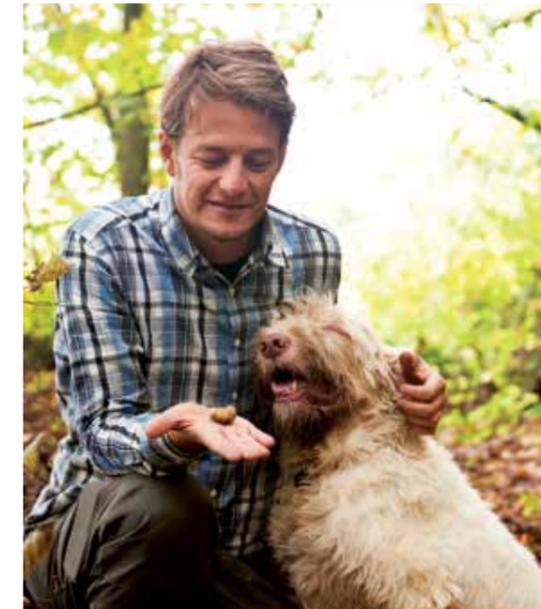
Truffle hunters sell the precious local white truffle during the annual Alba Truffle Fair.



The magnificent display of autumn colours in the Langhe district of Piedmont.



Edmondo Bonelli in his greenhouse with seedlings grafted with truffle, to help replenish the local forests.



Concerned about the fate of Carlo and the other *trifalau*, the National Center for Truffle Studies in Alba has launched a crowd-funding campaign to raise €50,000 and help preserve six distinct truffle-hunting areas in Piedmont.

In the first few weeks alone the campaign raised more than €10,000 and drew interest from around the world.

Carlo was introduced to truffle hunting as a child. But his latest commitment began with a promise when a veteran hunter named Giuseppe Giamasio asked him to save the forests and left him his two favorite dogs when he died.

"I had the good fortune to get to know Giuseppe, an old *trifalau*, one night in the forest and after lots of mistrust at the beginning I became his friend," Carlo says.

"More than 60 percent of the *trifalau* are more than 60 years old," he adds. "They want to take care of the forests but they can't. Giuseppe asked me to protect them."

By chance Carlo met Edmondo Bonelli, a 35-year-old environmental consultant, who shares his desire to save the forests for future generations.

A year ago they founded a website called 'Save the Truffle' in what they call "a renewed vision" to protect the ecosystem and build greater biodiversity. "We understood each other immediately," says Edmondo, as he points out the damage to another area of woodland called Bernardina, which is just outside Alba.

"We said we must change course," he says. "We cannot go on getting angry, we

can transform this anger into something useful, something positive. So we decided to do something."

As the late afternoon sun filters through the trees, Edmondo reveals how local tree species like the oak and the linden are under threat from imported species like the Robinya and the *Ailanthus altissima*, better known as the Tree of Heaven.

"They are invasive," says Edmondo. "They have come from other parts of the world and grow in a very aggressive manner preventing our species from growing and developing."

"The truffle can only grow in a natural environment undisturbed by man or invasive vegetation. This is why we are working for the truffle and to save the environment."

Carlo and Edmondo began working with some of the region's wine producers and talking to truffle hunters. Then the National Centre for Truffle Studies decided to launch the crowd-funding campaign 'Breathe the Truffle' at this year's International Alba White Truffle Fair.

"The idea came from the two young guys, then little by little we sought to give the project life," says Antonio Degiacomi, the centre's president.

"There's a lot of curiosity and interest. But anything important cannot be done in five minutes. You have to know how to take it forward with perseverance and tenacity."

In 2014 the winegrowing areas of the Langhe, Roero and Monferrato regions were given World Heritage protection

by UNESCO and now local officials have joined with other truffle-growing regions across Italy to seek UNESCO cultural recognition for their beloved truffles.

Antonio says this has reinforced the need to save the forests and his organisation is building communication between truffle hunters and property owners on how to manage the land and plant new trees.

"It is beautiful to see this new sensibility that we are beginning to see between the hunters, landowners, administrators and organisers," adds Antonio.

"We are continuing to promote the truffle but we have to turn our attention to the environment and safeguard the future."

He says a portion of the annual fees paid by the truffle hunters will be paid to landholders to help maintain woodlands and to plant new trees.

"We can't on the one hand raise interest in truffle consumption and on the other reduce production," he says. "We have to be proactive."

Every year Alba comes alive when the streets are overtaken by the truffle fair. Food lovers and curiosity seekers come from across Europe, the US, Asia and Australia to buy a tiny nugget of gastronomic pleasure or at least add a shaving or two of the delicate white truffle to tajarin pasta or tartare.

"It's a war machine here," quips one bystander as visitors line up for a pasta dish and glass of Barolo at the fair, for less than €20.

The pungent smell of the truffles permeates the main hall as the white truffle is displayed in all shapes and sizes and merchants sell cheeses, oils and even honey mixed with a dash of the fungus.

"Here you can smell 120 perfumes of the white truffle of Alba," says Liliana Allena, the president of the Alba fair. "You can buy truffles certified by the judges. Every Saturday and Sunday they verify the truffles and put them out there for sale in the market."

Around 500,000 people visit Alba and the surrounding region during the fair which runs from the beginning of October to the end of November and more than 70 per cent come from outside Italy.

Liliana is also backing the crowd-funding campaign which she says is critical for protecting the trees and the woodland where the truffles lie beneath the soil.

"This project was born out of a will to change people's collective consciousness," says Liliana. "So that everyone is more aware and more responsible about the environment. We have to make this contribution to make sure this white truffle, the jewel of our land, is still present in our territory in 20 years."