

On the Hunt with Beppe and Luna

I meet Giuseppe Marengo - Beppe - the truffle hunter, and his dog, Luna, in the municipal parking lot at the foot of the hill leading to the castle at Grinzane Cavour, a small town not far from the city of Alba. Months earlier I had reached out to tour planner Anna Savino, asking her to connect me with a trifulau (or truffle hunter) working in Alba and the Langhe. My goal, I told her, is to see firsthand the cooperative work of man and dog. Before contacting Anna, my little bit of internet research revealed a lot of faux truffle tours, the kind where the trifulau will plant truffles and stage a mock "find" so that tourists can go home satisfied they had witnessed a hunt. I wanted to avoid the engineered excursion and the large groups, if possible, in favor of the real deal. I wanted to participate in a hunt.

"You may find a truffle," Anna wrote back, "or you may not, but Giuseppe will show you exactly how he works."

That is all I want from my time in the countryside around Alba: an authentic hunt.

Alba is Piemonte's white truffle hub, a must-stop for any traveler to the northwest of Italy, especially in the weeks between mid-October and Christmas when the truffles are bountiful after late summer rain and early autumn heat. Several varieties of truffles, the underground-growing cousin to the mushroom, are found across Italy, but this most prized white variety, the *Tuber Magnatum Pico*, grows well in the dense forests surrounding Alba. So well, in fact, that just days before I arrived, the Fiera del Tartufo - a month-long celebration of the truffle - kicked off. Every weekend through mid-November, truffle vendors, exhibitors, food producers, expert lecturers, chefs and food obsessed travelers gather to examine, discuss, and either sample or take home a piece of Alba's truffle industry.

In season, at every restaurant in town, diners will be offered a shaving of truffles on most of the region's dishes: on the carne cruda, the tajarin, the risotto. For those seeking food experiences, the allure of the truffle is easy to explain: its pungent, heady aroma elevates the simple Piemontese cooking. But these few slivers added tableside will also greatly increase the price of a meal, and I would like to understand the work behind putting this very expensive food on the plate.

The castle at Grinzane Cavour is the perfect place to begin the hunt for Alba's white truffle. A museum to the region's Barolo wine heritage, the fortress also serves as home to the annual International Truffle Auction; wine and truffle central, if you will. I was slightly anxious about finding the morning's meet up spot. I had been doing only so-so with my driving and following the directions of the borrowed GPS loaded with European maps. I was also nervous about recognizing Giuseppe until I remembered he would probably be the only person pacing the parking lot with a dog in tow. And I was right.

Beppe is a good-looking man with a gentle, almost shy smile and curly dark hair threaded with some silver. He introduces himself with a caveat about his English language skills. Perhaps this is why he looks tentative. I'm sure it is better than my Italian, I tell him as I reach out a hand for his dog to smell. Luna is curly-haired too, a mass of shaggy, cream-colored fur, as friendly as her

master but not the least bit shy. She takes stock of me with her nose. Once satisfied she turns tight circles in the way-back of the small white Renault. It is clear she knows we are bound for the hunt and she is ready, antsy.

Beppe drives us from Grinzane, through Diana d'Alba, and out to the hilly countryside of the Langhe, the area below the Tanaro River. Nebbiolo grapes grow up the high lee sides of the hills in front of us, but on the slopes below the vineyard plantings are shady, dense forests. On the low ground are rows and rows of young hazelnut trees. Beppe parks and points to the path we will take through the grove while Luna paces quietly at his feet. "But first, your shoes are no good," he says, turning his attention to my gear. I look down at my feet. The boots I thought would be perfect for a hike - lightweight, flexible, and full of support - will only get wet when it comes time for us to cross the stream, he explains.

We're crossing a stream? Apparently so.

"Don't worry," he adds, and he sizes up my feet with a glance and pulls the smallest pair of Wellington boots from a box of boots he keeps in the back seat of his vehicle for ill-prepared hikers such as me. I exchange my own boots for his, and immediately I'm sorry to have to leave mine behind. My feet, the size of a middle-schooler's, rattle around inside the borrowed wellies despite the clean pair of liners Beppe has also given me. I stomp around in the boots and decide it's not such a problem as we start our easy stroll into the woods. In fact, as I enter the hazelnut groves I begin to feel like landed gentry surveying the homestead, natty in my charcoal gray belted trench, slim cut jeans, muddy country boots, and shaggy dog trotting at my side.

As we walk, Beppe, Luna, and I, Beppe talks truffles and hunting:

The hunter usually comes out in the dark of night to avoid being spotted and having his favorites spots poached by other hunters. Because of the high prices truffles can command, truffle hunting is very competitive.

The truffle dog is trained to be quiet on the hunt for the same reason.

Some trifulau choose hounds but Beppe prefers Luna's more traditional breed, the Lagotto Romagnolo. He believes this breed is less likely to be distracted on the hunt by the scent of small animals.

He feels any dog might be trained to hunt for truffles, though, even my own two who, I assure him, rarely listen to me. He still thinks it is possible.

Luna began her training at six to nine months by learning to recognize the scent of truffles and then by finding truffles Beppe had hidden for her in his yard. Praise and rewards reinforced what she learned.

Pigs were once the scent animal of choice but they tend to try and eat the truffles they find. Dogs' noses are also quite sensitive, the dog is easier to train, and dog has a long history of working with man.

A dog's nose has fifty to sixty times the amount of scent receptors that a human's nose has, and this is why they will be able to detect the scent of something hidden underground.

The truffle fungi are much like mushrooms except that they grow underground, near the roots of established trees. In this area, Truffles will be found near the hazelnut, the poplar, the linden, the oak. Often the biggest white truffles will be found around the oldest oak trees.

Beppe chooses to speak to Luna in the Piemontese language, the dialect of the area, a curious hybrid of Italian and French owing to the region's very French roots.

As he speaks commands to her, he hits the trees with the stick he carries, the thing I'd thought was a simple bentwood walking stick. The noise keeps Luna focused, reminds her of her purpose.

We enter a different grove of trees - poplar trees, young spindly things - and Beppe smacks the trunk of one with the stick. The sudden noise makes me jump. "Poplar," he tells me. "These are planted trees."

"So a tree farm?"

"Yes. Tree farm. Truffles will not grow here. Must be in old forest."

"I see."

Beppe stops at the edge of the plantation. "Now we are going in to look for the truffles. Are you strong here?" he asks, and flexes his biceps.

I smile. Strong there, I am. "Yes."

"And here?" With his right hand he pats his chest where his heart lives. "Strong enough to walk," I answer, again with a smile.

Beppe nods. "Good. We start now. We are going up there."

I follow his raised walking stick with my eyes to a place off in the distance, a dense wood halfway up the side of the closest hill, not as high up as the vineyards, but still steep. We're really climbing, I tell myself. Like: Really. Climbing. Ever vain, I'm dressed more for a photo spread in Country Life or Horse and Hounds. My boots, the borrowed boots, are too big. What has my curiosity gotten me into?

"Yes," I answer, still looking up. I can't meet Beppe's eyes in case he reads some hesitation in them. Anyway, "yes" is the only answer at this point. I would be an idiot to back out now, to give in to my uncertainty. "I'm ready."

"Good. Now that we start," Beppe continues, "I tell you this. I only work with the dog now. Later we can talk and I will answer what you ask. But now I must get Luna stimulated for the truffles. She must listen just to me. Okay?"

"Okay." "Then we go." And we're off.

Here is the river Beppe promised we would be crossing. There are the stepping stones through it. He gets to the far side and extends his hand to help me across, and we step into the denser, older trees. Rap! goes Beppe with his stick on tree trunks as we hike along. "Old poplar," he whispers, acknowledging that he shouldn't really be talking to me at all at this point, so as not to confuse the dog. Rap! "The oak." Again with the stick, again speaking under his breath. "Nocciole." He looks to make sure I understand.

"Si, si," I say. "Hazelnut."

We start climbing and the well-worn paths disappear. To advance up the hill we must walk in switchbacks, zigzagging like old mountain trains. Fortunately Beppe is urging Luna on and too busy to see me struggle to keep up or hear my labored breath. I hold some branches back with my hands. Others, the ones I miss, swat me in the face. I am wearing a scarf made of finely woven wool, and I've rubbed up against some tall bush that has peppered it with flea-sized black burrs. I am warm, overdressed for the unseasonable day and perspiring in the humidity. Ahead of us, Luna stops and raises her snout, sniffing the air. Beppe stops. I stop. I take advantage of the respite and start to unwind my scarf to cool down.

"Ah," Beppe says and points to my throat. "The mosquito."

I swipe the pest away and tuck my scarf back in place. Better too warm than too bitten. Luna takes off again, swishing across the mulch on the forest floor, and we resume walking behind.

"Luna!" Beppe calls. The dog is a few feet ahead of us, again stopped in her tracks. "Vai, vai, Luna! Vai, Lunetta!" With each "Vai!" - a word I understand to mean "Go!" - Beppe raps a tree trunk. Luna looks at him once, confirming permission to go, and then she goes, off like a shot, her nose to the ground. We sprint after her, Beppe nimbly, me not so much in my oversized boots. In the middle of my fumbling, Beppe turns to beckon me on with some urgency. Luna, it seems, is onto something.

In an instant the energy has changed. The dog abandons her serpentine, random searching and moves in a swift, straight line to a large oak tree. Her tail wags with purpose, her nose to the ground.

She has found something.

Boots be damned, I grab some low hanging branches and use them like tow ropes, pulling myself uphill for the last few feet.

When I arrive at the oak with Beppe, we find Luna whimpering, her body quaking with excitement. She can barely contain herself as she awaits permission to begin digging. Beppe allows it and she digs with frenzied but single-minded purpose. After a few seconds Beppe halts her. His voice drops low; it is now honeyed with praise. "Good, Luna. Good, Lunetta." He gives

her treats and moves her out of the way so he can complete the digging by hand. "Now we are close to the truffle," Beppe explains, "she must stop so she does not break it."

Luna settles and Beppe crouches down and begins to carefully push aside some surface dirt with his fingers. I squat down alongside him and watch. After a few careful scrapes at the earth, a small mound in the earth begins to emerge. Beppe stops and rests back on his heels. As soon as he leans back, I smell it, the aroma emanating from the ground. It surrounds us. It is like rich, damp soil. Like mushrooms. Like garlic. Like extremely pungent sulfurous garlic. There is a truffle under this earth, by God, and Luna found it.

As the truffle's perfume begins to fill the air around us Luna becomes impatient again. She wants another go at the dig. Beppe holds her off with one hand and reaches for his hefty digging tool with the blunted end. I watch as he shows me how to expose the lump, gently working away the dirt around it without damaging any of the truffle's surface. He can tell already it is a white one, the prized one, a misshapen globe about the size of a golf ball. Using the tool he begins to lever it out of the ground gently, letting me finish the job. It is the first and last time I will handle a whole white truffle. A few minutes later, Luna will find a black truffle of equal size. I will hold that one for a few seconds, too.

"The white will bring 50 euro," Beppe tells me as I snap his picture with the day's haul. "The black only five." Luna is at Beppe's side as he speaks, and after he pockets the truffles he reaches down to tousle her fur. An hour has passed since my initial shock at seeing the hill we were about

to climb. My trepidation is forgotten, all worth it because of our find. Besides, what have I got to complain about? For the past hour I've had fun. For Giuseppe and Luna, it is work.

We're strolling now just on the fringe of the forest, and the foot of the vineyard lees, about to head back to the truck, back to Grinzane, back to my car. "The dog will work well for only an hour," Beppe says. "And then she is too tired."

We praise her again. She's done well today, Luna has, time to give her a break. Between now and January, she and Beppe will be out almost every night and even some mornings, like this one, hunting the truffles, supplementing a livelihood with precious truffles so the rest of us may enjoy, and they will do it one hour at a time.

©Jane A. Ward