



“In search of black diamonds”

New farmers - Episode of January 31, 2018

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This article is the written transcription of the interview “In search of black diamonds”.

Not many people know that in Roccafluvione, in the province of Ascoli Piceno, just a few kilometers away from Monte Vettore, close to the seaside, there is one of the biggest producers of winter black truffles in the world. The food that was once considered to be for noblemen only, is today available to all of us, thanks to specific truffle-cultivation techniques. Here, we will learn about Emidio’s story, who, along with his family, continues to enhance the predisposition of these lands, where the climate is softened by the equal distance from the Adriatic sea and the mountains. These lands are perfect for the production of this precious mycelium.

Emidio Angelozzi, 55 years old, is a fifth generation truffle-hunter, he was initiated into the world of truffle-harvesting by his grandfather Zenobio. After dropping out of university, he chose, since he was a boy, to devote himself to this profession, with the help of his brother Zenobio and his father Giuseppe. At the very beginning, truffle production was almost exclusively spontaneous and abundant. Thereafter, because of the widespread agricultural lands’ desertification, the production slowly decreased and, today, truffle-cultivation requires precise production systems. Emidio’s company employs 16 workers and covers about 100 ha among the lands of Roccafluvione, Venarotta and

Palmiano, where white truffles, winter and summer black truffles are produced.

“This should be a truffle-mark. Here it is”. **Which one? This mark on the ground?** “This mark on the ground is caused by the growth of truffles”.

Does that mean that truffles, while growing, push the ground? “Yes.

Let’s see if there is a truffle”. **Here it is!** “My day starts very early in the mornings, as it used to be before, when we would go looking for truffles. I wake up

very early, usually around 4:00/4:30 a.m. and I go to sleep very early too, I am in bed by 9:00/9:30 p.m. I check my e-mail box, the e-mails that come from the other side of the world where people have already been up for hours. Then, as soon as the sun is up, I go harvesting truffles, sometimes for a few hours, depending on truffles’ ripening stage, on the season, and I often carry on harvesting the whole day. In the evenings we talk together, we discuss, we think about what we have done during the day and what we will have to do later. During the day, I sometimes carry my mobile phone, and sometimes I do not, as I often talk to my dogs”.

What do you talk about with your dogs? “I talk about my days, it seems that they understand me, they listen and never argue with me!”

Emidio, your ancestors understood the value of truffles as a real business, even though truffles were considered to be a type of residual agriculture and did not have much value.

How did that happen? “My ancestors began harvesting truffles with the help of pigs, hoes and prods. Those were the tools my ancestors would use to help themselves, as they initially used truffles for consumption. Truffles would add flavor to peasant dishes; only then they started selling them in the nearby city of Ascoli Piceno, to the city’s noblemen. That was not a real trade, it was for the most part bartering. Then, the most important aspect that changed truffles’ trade arrived with the postwar period, because of the depopulation of our lands and consequent movement towards Ascoli Piceno”.



What happened? What made things change?

“Villages were abandoned by farmers who went looking for jobs to Ascoli Piceno’s industrial hub and truffles were freely accessible in all those lands which were initially penalized by other agricultural crops. Truffles were therefore only present in grazing lands, in the boundaries of croplands and, little by little, they invaded our lands.

Indeed, truffles are defined as a pioneer species and, in those years, the production increased at an enormous rate.

Meanwhile, the economic miracle was taking place, other companies were rising up in Italy, trade started off inside and out of the country, the number of truffles was increasing more and more, and their price quotations were tripling every year, truffles no longer represented an additional type of economy but an alternative one.

This one is a First Choice selection truffle, since it is slightly irregular in its shape, that depends on the type of soils and ecotypes, factors that play a role in making truffles more or less round. With regard to all those little lobes, since they fall during the truffle-shaving process, their slices are not regular. This is a First Choice truffle, an Extra selection truffle; however, it has been attacked by an external agent and I would assume that it is due to water shortage, since the truffle has a cracking on its external part and you can see the afterward scarring. This is a First Choice truffle because its shape is more or less flat, even if regular. So the more regular its shape, the higher its quality”.

How has the way of harvesting truffles changed? “It is really different. When I was a child, a boy, and anyway, following the choice I made, to be a truffle-hunter and carry on that tradition, we would even leave at nights and harvest for up to 20 hours, and it was really exhausting.



Before the day would start we would change dogs and carry on harvesting throughout the whole day. Today, in cultivation, you can handle truffle-harvests the way you want, there is no competition, you can avoid bad weather conditions, but at that time, we would go anyway, even if it had snowed or rained. You would go before somebody else did and therefore it was very, very difficult. The province of Ascoli Piceno includes a natural and diversified environ-

ment, ranging from a mountainous landscape to rolling hills, up to the flat areas of the Adriatic coastline. Agriculture is therefore diverse, and cereals, truffles and chestnuts are found in the inner side of Ascoli Piceno; then heading up to its valley, there are olive trees and grapevines, nurseries are found along the coast. The areas for cereals cultivation have reduced a lot, because of their low prices in the agricultural industry, on the other hand, olive growing is increasing, viticulture is improving in terms of quality with the replacement of old vineyards in favor of new varieties. But, most importantly, truffle growing is expanding significantly”.

Emidio, at what level can truffles be found? “Truffles are found above ground, the ones that are found at the surface of the ground are the very first ones to create themselves, if weather conditions are ideal, with very frequent rain, mild temperatures, then truffles’ development can be considered successful. Their level goes from 0 cm to 20/25/30 cm in the ground.

Here, can you see? The soil is very soft and has been softened by either truffles mycelium or by us. First of all, the truffles mycelium works better when the soil is soft and the shape of truffles is very regular, more rounded, therefore their value is much higher”.



Tommaso Ciriaci is an agronomist for Confagricoltura Ascoli Piceno and Fermo Provinces. *Roccafluvione is a very important place when it comes to truffles, over the years, they have given traditional agriculture a hard time. How did those aspects eventually survived and, most of all, what are the characteristics of this mycelium?*

“Initially, truffle-cultivation was not uniquely considered to be a type of agricultural activity, indeed truffle harvestings would be confined in

“natural plantations”, which were nothing more than abandoned woods. Through the years and experience, people realized, through studies and research, that truffles could have been managed just like other agricultural activities. From there, the activity of a truffle-hunter, - that is to say - the profession of those who would harvest truffles and sell them, has transformed itself into a proper activity of growers who would plant truffle-trees and grow truffles. It turned out that truffles, that practically are fruiting bodies or fungi, come from the interaction of the fungi itself, which live in the ground and interact in a symbiotic way with the roots of some tree species. Trees pass on sugar to fruiting bodies, whereas fruiting bodies allow trees to absorb nutrients that otherwise they would not be able to absorb. That remarkably widens the soil surface that truffle-plants are able to colonize and, through this interaction, they gain mutual and beneficial advantages; that has allowed plants’ mycorrhizal in an artificial way (that is to say to fill roots with fungi mycelium) and eventually led to truffle-cultivation”.

Are there any economic funding projects for farmers for the implementation of truffle-plantations?

“The rural development program by le Marche region has financed the implementation of new truffle-plantations and, overall, the upgrading of agricultural farms, so funding include both truffle-plantations and any necessary equipment for agricultural activities, the renovation of buildings to use as laboratories or shops. The area, so the municipality of Roccafluvione, is within what is called “the seismic crater”. Le Marche region, in order to allow the recovery of those areas, has earmarked additional funding to the one already intended for the 2014-2020 programming period. This is a moment where agricultural farms of the area need to make the most of the opportunities that le Marche region is providing them with, a good reason to start again with a new boost”.

How often do these plants get pruned?

“These oak-trees get pruned once per year, the period that goes from December to February, when



plants are at rest. By cutting their branches, you can control their roots. Plants need water and the more roots go deep into the ground, the harder things are for the truffles' mycelium, which cannot function and grow, since it is stuck to the roots of truffle-trees”.

You have made a very precise choice for your company and decided to market solely and exclusively fresh truffles.

“95 % of our business is made of fresh truffles, the rest is made of frozen and truffles in brine. We have refused the production of truffle-flavored products, that is to say all those products which are very widespread today and have nothing to do with real truffles; since there is supposed to be 3% of truffles in those products. In reality, these products do not contain truffles at all”.

What does this mean? What is this all about? “It is about **bis methylthio methane**, a chemical molecule, which is added to products and truffle-oil (1%), sauces (4%) and those products have a faint odour of truffles, but there is only a very little presence of real truffles in them. These products' costs are extremely low and I would say that they exploit the image of truffles”.

“Once truffles are harvested with the help of our dogs in our plantations, they are brought into the company and all different steps are carried out. The first step is truffles washing, then the selection process starts and truffles are sharpened, selected and prepared for next phases. Only truffles with good consistency are sold, according to their different selections (Extra, Super Extra, Pieces selection). The ones that are less consistent are sterilized in autoclave and placed in jars, these



products only contain water and salt. Giant jars are re-opened and truffles are placed in glass jars or smaller cans, depending on customers' requests, labelled and sold to final customers”.

Emidio, why are truffles so expensive? “Truffles are very expensive, in years like the current one in particular, with a very prolonged drought, which has deeply damaged the three productions (white truffles, summer and autumn black truffles) and truffles cost at least three times more than their usual prices. On average, what are their prices, let's take winter black truffles as an example. Winter black truffles cost € 120,00 per gram, white truffles cost € 450/500 per gram”.

What are you doing now? “All I am doing is removing the truffles' aesthetic defects”. ***I can see that you touch and squeeze them.*** “Yes, I am checking that truffles have not been reached by worms or flies. I also feel their consistency with my hands. Then, we make a selection according to truffles' shape, so this is a Super Extra truffle, this one can be considered to be an Extra selection truffle”.

How am I supposed to know when a truffle is good? “Well, this can be considered to be a good truffle since its external part, “peridio” is well-defined and dark; and the internal part, the truffle-pulp, known as “gleba”, has a kind of contrast with its black and white veins, well-defined, typical of its variety, winter black truffles (*Tuber melanosporum Vittadini*)”.

Emidio, you have been a truffle-hunter for many years now, but what was the emotion for you, to the point of deciding to continue the profession you had learnt from your grandfather, in short, from your relatives? ” In contrast with my father’s will, who kept on telling me: “where do you want to get to in life, without a proper job, a pension one day?”, as it used to be said at that time, I really did this profession with a desire to do it, to have fun. Then, in those years, the '80s / 90s, the years that perhaps were, in my opinion, the best years from an economic point of view of the Italian economy; prices kept on increasing, reaching exorbitant price quotations; I could make, in a single day, what a factory-worker would earn in a month. Therefore, the commercialization of truffles came later, so without languages, knowledge, I started travelling the world. Everything else came later”.

What does a modern and new farmer mean to you?

“It means being able to produce natural and organic quality, like it used to be done by our ancestors in the past, by making use of modern technology, without invading or changing natural areas”.

What can you find in the smell of truffles in your opinion? “The smell of truffles? I can recognize its smell even if mixed in different varieties. I can even recognize them to the touch, you know? We were used to touching truffles at nights”. **Was, perhaps, truffle-hunting much more emotional when you did it as a child, than today?** “Yes, it was. From hunters, men had to become growers, that happened to us too with truffles”. **So, do you feel a bit nostalgic?** “Yes, I totally do. There was much more charme before”.

Today, are you starting to do online sales. You would have never thought to reach your clients anywhere in the world in this way before. “Yes, I would have never thought, I had never fully agreed with that idea since I do not belong to the generation of technology, I am 55 years old and my generation did not live the age of the internet and mobile phones and, therefore the possibility to sell my products anywhere, through the internet, that “window facing the world”. I did not expect that, I would not have imagined it”.



What do you wish for your children, who have not experienced the genuine emotion, the charme of truffle-hunting you felt yourself? “I wish that they will not do this profession for money, but only moved by passion, as I did. It feels to me that it is already like that”.

“Alessandro, have you prepared the label for the United States?” “Yes, I have”. “Ok, because I need enough time to have it printed and sent by tomorrow”.

The Recipe “*Spaghetti alla carbonara scomposta gentile e tartufo nero*”

of **Tonino Scipioni**
Ristorante Donna Rosa
Roccafluvione

Ingredients **for 4 people:**

- Spaghetti 320 gr
- Cheek lard 150 gr
- Pecorino cheese 25 gr
- Parmesan cheese 25gr
- Eggs (2 whole, 4egg yolk)
- Winter black truffle 40 gr
- Salt and black pepper
- (version with Summer Black truffle 60 gr)



I am going to show you how to make a dish that includes almost all the products that our lands produce: the “carbonara gentile scomposta”. It is called “gentile”, that is “kind”, because we do not use only pecorino cheese but also parmesan, in order to let truffles’ natural aroma overcome any other ingredients. It is called “scomposta” because eggs will not be mixed right away, but they will be used as a “background” of the pasta nest, which will contain some “guanciale” (cheek lard) and winter black truffles.

The cheek lard is cut into julienne strips, which need to be melted into a pan first with some pork lard, as our farmers used to do in the old days. For a single dose of 100 grams of pasta, break an entire egg and only a yolk. Add some parmesan cheese, some pecorino cheese, some freshly ground black pepper and a sprinkle of grated truffle. Blend all the ingredients together and put the mix aside. Once the pasta is ready, cook it in the pan where we previously cooked the pork cheek; at this point, once pasta is stir-fried and we are ready to plate it, take the egg that we prepared before and place it at the bottom of the plate. Then make a nest with the pasta and place it on top of the egg. Next, add some crunchy bacon and truffles, previously cut into julienne strips. I prefer julienne strips because I love to feel the taste of truffles in my mouth the moment I bite them with my teeth and their aroma explodes.

Buon appetito!