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GIANCARLO ZIGANTE: ISTRIA'S KING OF TRUFFLES



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On November 2, 1999, a white truffle or Tuber Magnatum Pico, the most prestigious of underground "mushrooms," forever changed the life of Giancarlo Zigante, born on June 23, 1950 in Plovanija, in the northwest corner of Istria, not far from the common border of Italy and Yugoslavia (now on the border of Croatia and Slovenia). On that fateful day in 1999, Zigante, a retailer of fresh truffles, formerly an artisan who made moulds for the pharmaceutical industry, with his German hound named Diana, uncovered in the woods outside the central Istrian town of Buje the largest white truffle ever found. Entered into the Guinness Book of Records, it weighed 1.3 kilos (2 pounds, 14 ounces). Zigante named his discovery "Millennium" and had it cast in bronze before eating the original as the main dish at a dinner he offered to around 100 guests. His goal for this very generous deed was to attract international attention so as to promote truffles and his beloved Istria.

During a recent press trip to Croatia, courtesy of the Croatian National Tourist Organization in New York, Lucy Gordan, Epicurean-Traveler.com's Rome Bureau Chief, interviewed Mr. Zigante at his namesake restaurant, in Livade, a small town below the charming medieval walled town of Motovum in central Istria, now the headquarters of Mr. Zigante's food processing business, his world-famous restaurant, and his relatively new bijou hotel, which he intends to expand.

Your first memory of truffles?

GZ: Since I'm Istrian, truffles have always been key in my memories of food.

When did you taste your first truffle?

GZ: I was around ten years old. My mother made an omelet with a white truffle someone had given to my father.

How old were you when you started to hunt for truffles?

GZ: In 1971. I was 21 and wanted to make some extra money.

Was it a family tradition?

GZ: No, it was completely my idea.



interior of Zigante's restaurant

In Europe black and white truffles are found in southern France, Italy in Piemonte, in Tuscany, in Umbria, in the Marche, and in Molise, and here in Istria; what's the difference between them?

GZ: The season for finding white truffles in Italy and in Istria is from September to November. The black truffle can also be found in the fall and winter. The Istrian white truffle has a much stronger perfume and a more beautiful formation than its Italian "cousin."

**I've read they're also found in China; is that true?**

GZ: Yes, but only black ones and they're a different species from the European black truffle. They don't smell the same either. In fact I think the Chinese black truffle is odorless.

Why is Istria so important for truffles?

GZ: The grey clay soil of central Istria, the humid and shady woods near the river Mirna, and the mild climate without dramatic temperature changes provide ideal growing conditions for truffles. In Istria depending on the year we can find between 10-20 tons of white truffles annually.

In Istria besides the *Tuber Magnatum Pico*, or white truffle, we can find three types of black truffle: *Tuber Aestivum Vitt*, *Tuber uncinatum*, and *Tuber melanosporum*. Again depending on

the year we can find around ten tons of them.

Are truffles aphrodisiacs?

GZ: Yes.

A short history of truffles?

GZ: The ancient Sumerians, Greeks, and Romans knew about this culinary treasure. In

the Middle Ages people believed that only witches ate them. During the 1700s, at the royal court in Turin, because as I mentioned Piemonte in northwest Italy is the only other location where white truffles are found, truffle hunts were organized to honor visiting dignitaries. Another interesting anecdote: the British Romantic poet Lord Byron kept one on his desk to stimulate his imagination. More modern lovers of white truffles include Winston Churchill, Joe DiMaggio, Marilyn Monroe, Pope John Paul II, and fashion designer Valentino.

How did you react on November 2, 1999 when with your dog Diana you found the largest white truffle ever discovered? It weighed 1.3 kilos (2 pounds, 14 ounces).

GZ: I was overwhelmed, overjoyed. It was incredible. I couldn't believe my eyes. It's cited in the Guinness Book of Records.

Before that unforgettable day what was your profession?

GZ: From 1976 to 1990 I was an independent businessman. I made moulds for "pressing" pharmaceutical products. I had four employees. In 1990 I switched careers and opened a new company called Agromet Ltd. that dealt exclusively with the sale and export of fresh truffles. In order to make truffles available during the whole year, in 1997 I opened Zigante Tartufi Ltd. which processes truffles and makes truffle-based products. In 2000 we opened our first retail store here in Livade and now have stores in several Istrian cities: Buzet, Buje (near where I found "Millennium"), Motovun, Groznan, and Pula. We should be opening another shop soon in Moscow. We process more than six tons of truffles annually. In 2001 we opened the first Istrian truffle fair. It takes place every year during October and November. A year later we opened this restaurant, which since 2005 is considered one of Croatia's ten best restaurants and has had a rating of 16 points and two toques in Gault Millau. In 2007 we opened a guesthouse with three luxurious rooms, though we hope to expand this number, for guests who want to participate in truffle hunts. To contact us click on www.zigantetartufi.com.

Before and after that day in 1999 how much did the next largest truffle you found weigh? What about another truffle hunter you know?

GZ: White truffles seldom weigh more than 500 grams. The next largest white truffle I've ever found weighed 600 grams. To this day I've found a total of about one ton of white truffles, *Tuber Magnatum Pico*, all together. My record year was 1986 when I found around 125 kilos. In 1982 I found six kilos in one day. I knew another truffle hunter who had found a white truffle of 1.250 kilos before I broke his record.

I've always read about male truffle hunters; do women hunt for them too?

GZ: Yes.

Can anyone who wants to hunt for truffles in Istria or do you need a permit?

GZ: You need a permit.

Besides hunting truffles, you are the owner of a namesake hotel and restaurant, considered one of the ten best in Istria, and a truffle processing and export business. What aspect of your work do you enjoy the most?

GZ: Exhibiting my fresh truffles.



patio dining at Zigante's

The least?

GZ: When I figure out that I'm dealing with someone dishonest.

Your work ethic?

GZ: Top quality above everything else.

Your wife and your three children collaborate with you; how do you divide your responsibilities?

GZ: My oldest son Adriano is the managing director and in charge of finances. My younger son Marino who helps Adriano with the finances is in charge of production. My daughter Antonella is in charge of human resources.

The names of some VIP clients who have eaten at your restaurant?

GZ: Stjepan Mesic, the President of Croatia; Formula One race car drivers Mario Andretti, who was born here in Motovun; Michael and Ralph Schumacher; and Bernie Ecclestone [President of Formula One] and his Croatian wife Slavica.

You are the most important exporter of Istrian truffles; where do you export to? Can you give me some figures and statistics?

GZ: Yes, I am the world's number one exporter of Istrian truffles to the USA. Among our American clients are the Harvard Club in New York and Lidia Bastijanich, who was born in Istria near Pula, and her son Joseph. Every year we export 700 kilograms of fresh truffles abroad; about 10% go to the USA, another 10% to Italy and the rest to Germany, Slovenia, Sweden, Belgium, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Japan among others.



Stjepan Mesic, former President of Croatia (left), with Giancarlo Zigante

I've read that Italians come here to buy Istrian truffles, which cost less than Italian ones, and take them back to Italy, pretending that they are Italian and so sell them at a much higher price than they paid for them here in Istria. Are there Croatian laws which protect Istrian truffles on the international marketplace?

GZ: Unfortunately, there are no Croatian laws to protect Istrian truffles on the international market. Nevertheless, of course, we experts can easily tell the difference between Istrian and Italian truffles.

How much do fresh truffles cost?

GZ: The best-known white truffle market worldwide is in Alba in Italy's Piemonte region. It's busiest in October and November. A white truffle weighing 1.6 pounds sold there on November 8, 2009 for \$150,000 during the 79th White Truffle Festival. In 2001 white truffles sold between \$1,000 and \$2,000 a pound; in 2009 they were being sold for

over 10,000 euro a kilo. The record price ever paid for a white truffle was set in December 2007, when a casino owner from Macau named Stanley Ho paid \$330,000 for one weighing 1.5 kilo.

What do you believe is the reason for your success?

GZ: Hard work and my constant involvement in every aspect of my businesses.

How many truffle hunters work for you? Are some women?

GZ: Around 1,000; some are women.

Up to now we've talked about Giancarlo Zigante, the truffle magnate, but my readers and I would like to know you better as a person. For example, what are your favorite dishes?

GZ: I have too many favorite dishes to list here, but I love to try new dishes as well, or old recipes cooked with new inventiveness. At my restaurant we change the entire menu three or four times a year so my guests can try new dishes.



Duck with black truffle shavings

photo by Lucy Gordan

Speaking of your restaurant, the first in Croatia to specialize in an Istrian truffle-based menu, I've just had a magnificent lunch here. It's March so there are no white truffles on the menu. I ordered "Carpaccio of scallop with marinated shrimp tails on a season salad and green apple with black truffle *Melanosporum*"; "caramels filled with goose liver served in green asparagus sauce and celery mouse with black truffle *Melanosporum*";

"Duck breasts served on baked white asparagus with black truffle *Melanosporum*," and truffle ice cream. What are your favorite dishes served here?

GZ: Caramels (pasta shaped like candies) filled with goose liver served in green asparagus sauce and celery mousse with black truffle *Melanosporum* that you ordered, Frogfish tail served with extra virgin olive oil, fresh herbs, spring potatoes and black truffle *Melanosporum*, and all our home-made pasta cooked to order.

How many kilos of fresh truffles do you serve here every year?

GZ: Approximately 300 kilos.

Your favorite wines?

GZ: Istrian wines like Mlavazija, Terano, and Refoško, but I also enjoy tasting top foreign wines from all parts of the globe.

A dish you don't like?

GZ: I'm a gourmet. I love to eat well so I don't like badly-prepared food.

Chefs are known for having collections of motorcycles, of fast cars, or of watches.

What about you?

GZ: Different species of olive trees and their fruits. I also produce an excellent olive oil.

Have you ever published a book?

GZ: No, but I'm thinking about it and intend to.

What chefs or other business magnates like yourself do you admire?

GZ: I admire anyone who works honestly and very hard to create something of his or her own, who want to leave a mark and make a difference.

If you hadn't become a world-famous truffle hunter and such an important truffle magnate, what other profession would you have chosen?

GZ: Producer, industrialist of agricultural machinery and tools.

An incomplete goal?

GZ: To make Istria the number one truffle destination in the world.

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Lucy Gordan is an award-winning travel writer and cultural journalist living in Rome, where she is Epicurean-Traveler.com's Bureau Chief. She can be reached at gordan@attglobal.net. Her website is www.lucygordan.com. Links to other recent articles by Lucy Gordan:

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