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## Truffle Prices Surge as Greenback Skids

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Bad tidings for the city's gourmets: This year's trufflemania, which just kicked

off its three-month run at leading city restaurants, comes with a dose of financial heartburn.

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The collapsing greenback, coupled with a sharply rising euro, is leading to record wholesale prices for the long-awaited white truffles. In some instances truffle lovers are going to have to pay double what they paid a year ago for this Italian delicacy.

"This year's truffles are going to be as expensive as hell," a co-owner of the Four Seasons restaurant, Julian Niccolini, told me, citing the euro and a shortage of top-grade truffles due to unfavorable European weather (hot and lacking sufficient rain).

He's not kidding about ballooning truffle prices. Among his restaurant's clientele, truffle lovers are already feeling the pinch, being forced to ante up \$250 for a portion of fettuccini with a sprinkling of truffles. Last year, that same dish went for \$125.

The price is also headed much higher for one of the classic Four Seasons truffle dishes — baked potato laced with truffles. In recent years, that spud went for \$200. This year, tack on a 25% increase, to \$250.

For the life of me, I can't imagine anyone shelling out \$250 for a baked potato, but as Mr. Niccolini explains it: "If you had to pay the price I do for truffles, you would understand."

Last year at this time, the city's restaurateurs paid, on average, between \$1,300 and \$1,700 a pound for truffles. This year, their truffle purchases are largely running in a range of \$2,400 to \$2,500 a pound, with some going for as much as \$3,000 a pound.

"The euro is killing us," the proprietor of the Upper East Side Italian eatery Sistina, Giuseppe Bruno, tells me. He notes, too, that international competition is heating up for acquiring truffles, with a growing number of European and Japanese restaurants getting into the act. This development is also said to be adding to the price spiral.

The end result, Mr. Bruno says, is that his customers "are going to have to pay the most ever for truffles. We have no choice." Last year, his truffle-sprinkled appetizers and full portions went for \$50 and \$90,

respectively. This year, it's \$60 to \$65 and \$150.

Higher prices are also evident at such Italian dining delights as Il Nido, San Domenico, and Il Postino. Il Nido's manager, Emilio Bagnoli, sums up the situation: "Truffles have become so terribly expensive. How can you not raise prices?"

With truffles selling at such astronomical prices, one might think restaurants are making a killing on them. Not so, I'm told by Nicola Civetta, owner of Primavera, the city's premier Italian power dining spot. "Because of their high costs, truffles are more of a prestige item than a big moneymaker," he says. "But we've got to carry them because many customers absolutely demand them."

Due to the exchange rate, the shortage of top-quality truffles, and his restaurant's much higher costs (\$2,500 to \$3,000 a pound), Mr. Civetta says Primavera has been forced to boost its truffle prices this year to \$79 for an appetizer portion and \$135 for a full portion. Last year, the respective prices were \$55 and \$95. Given the weather changes in Italy, the best truffles — fragrant, aromatic, firm, and pungent — will probably not hit the city until next month, Mr. Civetta says.

As a result, some top restaurants, among them Daniel, Jean Georges, Café Boulud, and Le Grenouille, are not yet offering them. Le Cirque tells me it will start offering them today. If that's your pleasure, add an extra \$100 to the price of a plate of risotto or pasta sprinkled with truffles.

Desserts are also available with truffles. Take tiramisu which, on its own, usually runs between \$15 and \$20 in most restaurants. BLT Market, a hot new spot on the West Side, will soon offer it with truffles for \$100.

If you're game for one of the city's ultra-special truffle dinners, extravaganzas are planned, but bring a thick wallet along with your taste buds.

One of the most expensive truffle events, a November 8 dinner and auction at Gustavino's, replete with truffles from three of Italy's most prominent truffle towns and assorted fine wines, is being sponsored by the James Beard Foundation. Chefs from a number of the city's leading Italian restaurants, namely Felidia, Becco, and Esca, will be on hand to talk about the latest truffle happenings. The cost: \$1,000 for foundation members and \$1,250 for the general public. If you're interested, hurry: A third of the 300 available reservations have already been booked and a sellout is expected.

A sellout, as usual, is also projected for San Domenico's annual truffle dinner and auction on November 19. The dinner at the popular Central Park South restaurant, featuring 10 dishes with white truffles and a selection of wines, runs \$300. The restaurant's owner, Tony May, acknowledges that a \$300-a-person tab for dinner isn't cheap, but then again, he says: "Our truffle costs, which are out of sight, have never been so high."

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