

My life in food



This week: **Chris Lee**

Truffle is our little long-haired dachshund, but there is a reason we chose to name our brown-eyed bundle of mischief after a food item – I simply love truffles. Many of our customers (wrongly) think we named Truffle after the chocolate confectionery.

Enough of the pooch – I want to talk about my passion for the fungi. If you're in any doubt that I love it, look at the current offering at The Bildeston Crown. A shaving of truffle works its way across all the menus. On the Nibbles menu we have a deluxe toastie of Serrano ham, truffle cheese and tomato. For a starter I recommend the wild mushroom soup, black truffle and ricotta ravioli. To ramp up the Red Poll burger to deluxe, we serve it with foie gras, truffle mayo and fries. Even the vegetarian mains get a makeover when we serve truffle arancini with parsnips and Parmesan, and make a side dish a star, adding truffle to our cauliflower cheese.

What fascinates me about the truffles? Well, I love the fact they can't be cultivated and grow naturally. Although strongly flavoured, they are also neutral and go with practically everything. As an ingredient, I put truffles up there with the likes of caviar, ducks' liver or lobster. They elevate a dish to a different level, a new taste dimension.

Truffle has been my favourite ingredient since the very beginning of my career working at the Windows restaurant at the Hilton, Park Lane. I can still smell and see that dish – veal cutlet with truffle croquette, green beans and confit shallot. I can almost taste it.

My all-time favourite truffle dish is a sweetbread and oxtail ravioli, which I first tasted six years ago at Hotel Le Grand Chalet in Gstaad. Hayley and I recently made a return trip to Switzerland and I was so pleased that it was still on the menu. On a recent trip to Reims and Le

Chateau Les Crayères, I ordered celeriac soup with truffle foam. It was sublime, but at 96 Euros, I'm not sure that it will stay in my holiday food memories for long – at least not for the right reason.

Truffle is expensive, with the Italian Alba, the king of truffles, commanding prices in excess of £3,500 a kilo. Not surprisingly truffles are not widely available and of course seasonal. I would recommend you go online to either wiltshiretruffles.com or trufflehunter.co.uk. To store, cut the truffle in half and put one part in a jar of risotto rice for superb results. I would put the other piece in a bowl of eggs for three days. Truffle permeates the egg and you will have the most amazing omelette. Be a little wary of truffle oil – make sure it is blended with 50% olive oil for a subtle flavour.

If the thought of truffles makes your mouth water but you don't see it as a home ingredient, then a date for your diary is May 25 when we will be celebrating all things truffles with a five-course menu, starting with a velouté and ending with cheese served with truffle-infused honey. For the £70 per head price, diners will also enjoy a tasting of wine, carefully selected to match each dish.

Whichever you choose, to cook at home or to eat with us at The Bildeston Crown, I hope you enjoy truffles as much as I do.



Below: Chris Lee's leek and potato soup
Picture: ARCHANT

Leek and potato soup with truffle (serves four)

Ingredients

1kg leeks – the green separated from the white and both parts finely sliced
500g diced potato (Maris Piper variety is good for this)
1 large onion – thinly sliced
550ml of good quality vegetable or chicken stock
8 leaves of large leaf spinach
125g butter
Black truffle to serve

Method

Sweat the onions in the butter being careful not to colour.
Add the diced white leeks and simmer for two minutes.
Add the potato and stock.
Simmer until the potato is soft.
At this stage add pinch of salt to season.
Remove from the stove and add the green leeks and spinach.

Blitz with a blender and pass through a sieve so that it is velvety smooth.
Chill on a flat tray to keep the colour.
When ready to serve, reheat and garnish with generously sliced truffle.
At The Bildeston Crown we also serve with a wedge of char-grilled leek and an oyster beignet.

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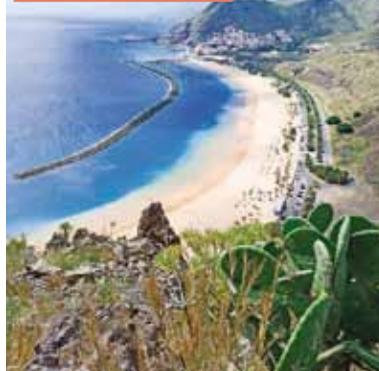
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