

FOOD & DRINK

# Buried treasures and earthy delights

Joseph Connolly has truffles with everything at Sackville's, London W1

Increasingly, London is chasing the money. It is true that the capital has never been backward in this regard, but the impulse is most evident in recent restaurant openings – and goodness, you can hardly blame them. Because overheads are ruinous, unless we are talking about a self-consciously vile and deeply uncomfortable dive in a so-called up-and-coming hellhole serving fricasseed chitterlings to hipsters and creatives who are happiest sitting on a plank.

This inexorable upward spiral is apparent in a new place just off Piccadilly, in Sackville Street. Its name is Sackville's – which, although as prosaic as it is possible to imagine, does have the virtue of not being abstruse or whimsical. The modest exterior is smart and grey (all new restaurants have to be grey: the outcome of a recent Act of Parliament) and flanked by a pair of bay trees in Versailles boxes.

Inside, it is amazingly tiny – a mere slip of a corridor leading to the ubiquitous open kitchen fronted by an elevated counter, and a highly optimistic row of stools. Dull parquet floor, dark and naked tables, leather and velvet banquettes...

and bare brick walls covered in a motley of curious little swivel mirrors. The water glasses are green and knobby and altogether far too reminiscent of a citronella wasp trap.

The menu has "City boys" written all over it – so a Mayfair location, across town from the Square Mile, is a rather strange choice of site. It's basically beef, beef, meat and beef... with the USP of truffle. You see? Blokey and expensive at a single stroke: a siren call to expense accounts everywhere.

The truffle, of course, is a wondrous thing. The great gastronome Brillat-Savarin dubbed it the "diamond of the kitchen" – a frankly useless image, actually, because it looks like a toad. It is exemplified by the white variety from Alba in Italy, which is prized beyond rubies – quite literally: ounce for ounce, a white truffle will cost a zillion times more than your cheapo rubies.

Once knew a chap who left England for Piedmont solely to exploit the Alba truffle's financial potential. He acquired a sow that was brilliant at sourcing the truffles, but then immediately devoured them (like a pig). It's obvious why: they contain a compound that is a dead ringer for the sex pheromone in boar saliva, as simply everyone is aware. So he got a hound instead, which also



8A Sackville St, London W1S 3DF. 020 7734 3623; sackvilleslondon.com  
Three courses with wine: about £75 per head.  
Pictured: left, tournedos Rossini; below, Périgord truffles

were so expensive because they were served with shavings of truffle. Wrong – that comes in at an extra 30 quid. Well, blimey. But the wagyu rump (£38) did arrive with a couple of slivers. And how was it? Large, creamy – due to its extensive marbling – and rare, as requested. My guest's eyes were closed, seemingly in ecstasy. "So tender. The knife just sinks in. Superb flavour. You don't have to cut it – you could just suck it." Mercifully, he didn't.

My poussin, too – although a little underdone – was full of truffly flavour. Chips were first class: crispy... and truffly. Excellent grilled Portobello mushrooms were... truffly. Bread? You'll never guess. A côtes du Rhône didn't have any truffle in it – but you wouldn't have known, because truffle, you see, vanquishes all before it.

Then I had a chocolate fondant burger, because I wanted to know how good so bad a joke could be. Very, as it turned out – a nice warm and gooey fondant between two beige macarons, so as to vaguely resemble a Wimpy. My guest had brie with – in a daring departure – truffle. Alas, it was mortuary-cold: you could have bounced it off the wall.

Then a neatly packaged condom was placed beside me. Oh no, hang on, it's not a condom at all: it's the bill, folded up small in a sealed and weensy envelope. Why? No idea – we are in restaurant-land, and it is a wacky place.

As we were leaving, my guest and I were clucking our tongues and palates, as if to assimilate – or be rid of – a pervasive flavour. We bore it with stoicism, though: he's got his truffles, and I've got mine.

Joseph Connolly's A-Z of Eating Out (Thames & Hudson) is available from Telegraph Books.

## THREE OF A KIND TRUFFLES

**The Harrow**  
Roger Jones hunts his own UK summer truffles, and serves them with white fish or sliced over carpaccio.  
**Little Bedwyn, Wilts SN8 3JP; theharrowatlittlebedwyn.net**

**Prime Burger**  
Posh fast food in Euston and St Pancras stations: the truffle cheeseburger is a steal at £8.95.  
**prime-burger.co.uk**

**La Lanterna**  
Giorgio Alessio sources white truffles from his native Piedmont.  
**33 Queen St Scarborough, N Yorks YO11 1HQ; lanterna-ristorante.co.uk**

ate the truffles and then was promptly sick.

A fellow came to our table bearing three truffles beneath a glass dome and averred that they were from Croatia, which is on the same latitude as Périgord (home of the finest black truffles). He is wearing white gloves – the first I have known to do so since Mickey Mouse. All the mains are – well, blokey and expensive – so my guest and I (for the sakes of both stomach and wallet) decided to forgo a starter and charge right in to baked poussin (for me) with foie gras butter and "truffle seasoning".

Because he had never had it before, my guest wanted wagyu. This is not a dog owner's command to his apparently disconsolate pooch, but a breed of Japanese cow that is lovingly massaged and fed upon lager and delicacies – quite possibly truffles – and generally lives a far better life than you ever will, matey. I thought the steaks

OUR RATING  
**7/10**

Beef, beef, meat and beef – with the USP of truffles. A siren call to expense accounts everywhere



Our guide to the best British pubs. This week: *Irwell Works Brewery Tap*, Lancs

Ramsbottom is a quirky place in the West Pennines, a dozen miles north of Manchester. They have a steam train, the East Lancs Railway, running through; the annual Old English Game Cock Show; a festival of chocolate and another of jigsaws; not to mention the World Black Pudding Throwing Championships, a rerun of the Wars of the Roses in which Lancashire black puddings are hurled at piles of Yorkshire ones.

The town has more than its fair share of good pubs, the Irwell Works Brewery Tap, opened in 2011, being the latest. The former Irwell Steam, Tin, Copper and Iron Works, c1888, has been transformed into a brewery downstairs, with a splendid pub upstairs. This latter is a one-room affair, with a hop-festooned bar and a large balcony outside for smokers, romantics and connoisseurs of urban landscapes. There's a bird's-eye view from here down on to a car park, with rolling moors in the far distance spiked with slowly churning wind turbines.

We're here for the beer and there are at least eight downstairs-brewed cask ales on offer. You can lighten the load by drinking from one-third-of-a-pint glasses, or even free pre-tasting with a smaller glass that looks like a large test tube.

A Scots gentleman next to me claimed that, where he came from, the name for this glass was a pony. This provoked one of those wonderful amiable pub arguments where no one really knows what they're talking about. "A pony," said someone, "is Cockney for a fiver."

Someone else said, no, it was £500; a further opined £25 ("aka: a Napoleon. Napoleon Bonny..."). The barmaid settled the discussion by saying firmly that they, the bar staff, called it a shot glass.

I took a few shots from the glasses, sniffed and sipped appreciatively, then jettisoned all organoleptic conclusions and went for the beer with the silliest name: Costa Del Salford (4.1% abv), first brewed for a pub perched over the dubious waters of the Irwell a few miles down river, where it serves as the frontier between Salford and Manchester.

Fitzpatrick's Temperance Bar is in Rawtenstall, a few miles away: surprisingly, several of its drinks are on offer here. But the Irwell Works mixologists are bent on subtly undermining the Temperance ethos – gin with rhubarb and rosehip was one suggestion. I politely turned down the idea. Instead, I tried Iron Plate Lancashire Stout (4.4%), billed as "a meal in itself, brewed from an old Irish recipe". Remember that old industrial Lancashire was half Irish. It was a very fine stout.

The kitchen is a work in progress and the food is minimalist (pies, sausage rolls, crisps, nuts). The fellow next to me ordered "a large sauvignon and a pork pie, please".

Arthur Taylor

Irwell Street, Ramsbottom, BL0 9YQ (01706 825091; irwellworksbrewery.co.uk)



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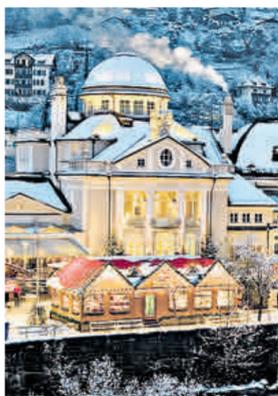
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A winter city break in Italy offers the chance to experience the Italian take on festive celebrations, enjoy superb dining and visit some of Europe's most distinctive Christmas markets.

As the UK's leading Italian travel company, Citalia can tailor-make your perfect getaway. Its experts all have first-hand experience of destinations and hotels, so you're sure to receive the best advice. What's more, Citalia's concierges – on hand to help once you're there – live in Italy. They'll give you the inside track on hidden gems, from restaurants to artisan workshops for unique Christmas presents.

"Venice is a perfect shopping destination," says Citalia destination expert Luca Giannotta. "For centuries, it has been a centre for lace and glassmaking. There's also an excellent Christmas market on Campo Santo Stefano that's worth visiting for the festive atmosphere around the Campo's little wooden houses and you'll be amazed at the beautiful nativity scenes."

In Florence, Immaculate Conception Day on 8 December marks the start of the Christmas season and celebrations begin with the illumination of the Christmas tree in Piazza del Duomo. This is also where you'll find the most famous of the Nativity scenes that spring up all over the city, with intricate, life-size terracotta figures. At Piazza Santa Croce, Renaissance architecture makes a spectacular backdrop for the Christmas market known as the Mercato Tedesco di

### WHERE TO STAY

Citalia expert Luca Giannotta recommends...

**City Hotel, Merano**  
A modern hotel in a top location close to the Old Town

**Hotel Helvetia & Bristol, Florence**  
A 19th-century building in the heart of the city facing Piazza Strozzi, this is one of the Leading Hotels of the World

**Hotel Londra Palace, Venice**  
A Relais & Chateaux property overlooking the Venetian lagoon and close to St Mark's Square

Natale. Luca says: "There are around 50 wooden huts selling European delicacies and handicrafts."

Merano is a destination that will be less familiar to many, but the fashionable resort has attracted aristocrats, intellectuals and writers for centuries. Tucked into the high mountains of South Tyrol, where you'll hear as much German as Italian spoken, it's a true winter wonderland. Five ski areas are within easy reach, and the town is famed for its thermal spas.

"The Merano Christmas market is one of a kind," says Luca. "You'll find authentic South Tyrolean crafts and delicacies, plus kids' activities at the house of Goldy, the market mascot. And at this altitude, you'll usually get a genuine white Christmas, with a light dusting of snow."

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Winter wonderland From left to right, snowy Merano; decorations at a Brixen's Christmas market; stalls selling traditional treats

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